The Word on the Street

UC Santa Barbara’s English Broadside Ballad Archive

By Eileen Conrad

Long before there was News of the World, People magazine, and CNN, and centuries before celebrity gossip focused on Lady Gaga, Prince William, and Kate Middleton, there was a form of storytelling that raved today’s tabloid journalism with its reliance on sensationalism. They were English broadside ballads, printed stories of the day that were set to popular music.

The highly ornamental ballads were the most distinguished form of print in England between 1500 and 1800. Produced by the mill for the masses, they cost next to nothing—a halfpenny to a penny—and satisfied the public’s hunger for gossip, scandal, lurid tales, news, and entertainment. The street literature of the period became a commodity of mass communication, somewhat akin to the National Enquirer.

“Music was everywhere at the time,” explains Patricia Furnerton, professor of English and director of UC Santa Barbara’s English Broadside Ballad Archive. “A day wouldn’t go by without singing. It was part of life. When you hear these tunes you realize they fit perfectly with manual labor, such as a cobbler hammering or a weaver at a loom. People would sing while walking down the street, in market, and together in the evening.” The ballads were printed on one side of a single sheet of paper (hence the name “broad-side”) with eye-catching woodcuts, a familiar tune title, and an alluring poem. Often composed by anonymous women, the woodcuts were printed on the walls of houses, bookstalls, and alehouse-rooms, quickly memorized, and sung aloud.

“In courses, we had been teaching high culture, a miniscule part of what was being printed,” Furnerton notes. “I wanted to expand our knowledge base to find out what was available to people on the street, who had bare literacy, because 90 percent of Renaissance culture was not aristocratic.”

Accessing original broadsides proved challenging. They were printed on cheap degradable paper, and because of their fragility, ballads had become carefully guarded treasures at libraries both here and abroad.

With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the campus, Furnerton and a team of experts working closely with UCSB students have made these extraordinary aural and cultural artifacts publicly available for the first time in a prize-winning multimedia digital archive.

When complete, the campus’s English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) will include all extant broadsides produced during their heyday. There are narrative stories, some horribly gruesome, sent to lovely tunes that serve to counterpoint to their insecurity. Embellished tales of love and loss, vice and virtue, sex, money, politics, tragedy, class, magic, royalty, folklore, and marriage are among the popular themes.

Each broadside appears in its original form with a detailed transcription in modern print that preserves the look of the original document. The site also provides background essays. A catalog of woodcut impressions is nearly complete.

So far, 400 ballads have been posted on the Web site, including the Samuel Pepys collection at Magdalene College, Cambridge, the largest in existence, and the Roxburghe Ballads in the British Library, which until now had been unavailable for public viewing. Cataloging of the Euing collection at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, and 600 early broadsides from the Huntington Library in Pasadena is under way.

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the University of Texas, Dallas recently received partners in this long-enduring project by supporting the scholarly activities of two assistant professors, former UC Santa Barbara doctoral students who serve as EBBA project managers.

“EBBA is extraordinary as a scholar to stumble across something that is so multifaceted and appeals to so many people,” says Furnerton. “I owe my success entirely to my talented team, particularly to our students.”

To view the online collections and listen to recordings of the street ballads, visit the project’s Web site http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu.