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Representations of Love in Ballads

This spring, I was given the opportunity to be a research assistant for the English Broadside Ballads Archive (EBBA) which has been a goal of mine since my freshman year at UCSB. I've been so lucky to work with Kristy McCants-Forbes and learn so much about 16th and 17th century ballads and how to work with transcriptions and coding! My work with EBBA this quarter was really exciting as I learned how to use XBallad to check and upload transcriptions of ballads, and I helped format the music sheets on our website. Though we never got to image association, I was really happy with the work I did and felt like I accomplished a lot in my research with EBBA. I truly believe that I have fallen more in love with English literature after processing so many of these ballads because the ballads always have such interesting and complex stories within such a small text. Stories from love and prosperity to work and politics, these ballads really depict whole lives and propaganda. As I worked with the British Library's collection of ballads, I noticed that many of the ballads about love and renewal mentioned flowers or herbs. I felt really drawn to the ballads that included some natural element to them and it's interesting to see how those that had more natural elements were often associated with a pastoral story. My research has made me really curious in examining the connection between flowers/ nature and love.

I noticed the recurring themes and images of flowers first within “The Easter Wedding or The Bridegrooms Joy and Happiness Completed, in his kind and Constant Bride” (EBBA 37735) wherein the narrator describes the beautiful pastoral scene. The setting in this ballad is early April as the wedding takes place on Easter morning, and the scene that is described is bright, beautiful, and airy. The narrator goes on to describe the women as “fair flowers in May” thus suggesting that beauty and love are associated with spring. Often in literature, we see Spring as a representation of renewal, birth, and growth which connects to this ballad as the wedding is the beginning of a new family and new part of life filled with love. The floral imagery here is then associated with this idea of love and growth in the pastoral setting.

Through my research, I’ve been able to understand how love is the central theme of so many ballads, and within the time period that these were popular, men woo women left and right, and women were given away as wives. I think that something that is still unclear is why nature is used so much more as representations of love. Is it because of the influence of Shakespeare’s pastoral plays? Or is it because the surrounding nature influenced art as it did for the Romantics? If it were not for the UCSB English Broadside Ballad Archive we wouldn’t have so much evidence about what the focus of life was at that period, but because so many of the ballads are about Spring and love and growth, we can see how integral this stage of life was. Through this research program, I’ve learned to really pay attention to the influence of art and literature on society and vice versa. These ballads often reflected so much of what was integral to 16th and 17th century life, and without really understanding the influence of art and society on each other, you miss so much of the beauty of these ballads. With my new skills I hope to be able to dissect and analyze English literature in much more in-depth ways. Actively engaging with the facts of the text, context, and time period allows you to understand the entirety of the ballad rather than

just what it clearly states. I've been so fortunate and grateful for the work I was able to participate in with EBBA this year, and I can never thank my advisors enough for their help and encouragement to discover new things!