

FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE

The studies of the British culture cannot stand apart from the research of its important product – folklore. The folklore and folk customs of England developed over a long chain of centuries. Some ancient customs were passed from Celtic to Germanic generations and further on. Invaders and settlers brought with them their own beliefs, which mixed with older traditions.

The main system of values, beliefs and traditions of British nations is mostly reflected in the ballads and fairy tales. The old ballads make up a very valuable part of poetical literature. Ballads are a rich source of data connected with history, social life, feelings and values of the people living on the British Isle.

Although the subjects of ballads vary considerably, some major classes of the ballad can be distinguished— among them the historical and heroic such as Beowulf, King Arthur songs and Robin Hood cycle.

Beowulf is an Old anonymous English heroic epic poem. Its creation dates to between the 8th and the 11th centuries. It is long, as there are 3183 lines, devoted to brave and strong hero who fought for the good of his people, killing two monsters.

Beowulf has been adapted a number of times in cinema, on the stage, and in books.

Another old recorded ballad in the English language is the legend devoted to King Arthur who was a legendary British leader of the late 5th and early 6th centuries. According to medieval histories he led the defense of the Celts against the Saxon invaders. The magical sword Excalibur, his castle Camelot, and the Lady of the Lake also play great associated with King Arthur. In Arthurian legend King Arthur had a round table so that none of his knights, when seated at it, could claim precedence over the others.

Countless new legends, stories, revisions, books, and films have been produced in Europe and the United States about King Arthur and his Round Table (the film with R. Geer)



Other ballads printed in the late 15th or early 16th centuries are devoted to “Robyn Hood”. Robin Hood is a heroic outlaw in English folklore, and, according to the legends, was also a highly skilled

archer, assisted by a group of fellow outlaws known as his “Merry Men”. Traditionally, Robin Hood and his men lived in Sherwood Forest, wearing Lincoln green clothes.

Robin Hood became a popular folk figure in the medieval period as the one who was fighting with the unscrupulous sheriff. Robbing the rich he gave everything to the poor. The earliest Robin Hood manuscript is “Robin Hood and the Monk” (1450) kept in Cambridge University. The first printed version is “A Guest of Robyn Hode” (1475).

Robin Hood continues to be widely represented in modern literature, films and television.

Like ballads English Fairy Tales circulated in England in oral form. One of the oldest printed fairy tales in England was Tom Thumb. In this fairytale a childless poor couple asked Magician Merlin to give them a son even if he were no bigger than his father’s thumb. Tom Thumb met many adventures. The last of them was being eaten by a fish which was then caught for King Arthur’s table. Tom became a knight and when he died was mourned by the whole Arthur’s court.

The English fairytales were mostly humorous ones, except for the more magical Three Heads in the Well. Later Victorian collectors found some other oral examples, including Tom Tit Tot and Cap o’ Rushes from Suffolk, the Small-Tooth Dog from Derbyshire, and the Rose Tree from Devon.

In the 18th century English fairy tales were published mainly by French Perrault. Selections from these were quickly translated and cheaply printed. Such fairy tales as Cinderella, Bluebeard, Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, Frog Prince, Red Riding Hood, Snow White, and The Little Mermaid were totally absorbed into English culture, staged and made into numerous films.

Theatre

Theatre was introduced to the UK from Europe by the Romans. In the middle Ages it was mostly in a street form, concentrating on dance and on the themes such as Saint George and the Dragon and later on Robin Hood. The plays were retelling old folklore stories. The groups of actors were travelling from town to town performing not only for money but also for hospitality. There were also religious plays on Christian themes performed at religious festivals.

The difference came during the reign of Elizabeth 1 in the 16th-17th centuries. The flowering of English drama is associated with William Shakespeare, of course.

William Shakespeare wrote about 40 plays that are still performed in the theaters all over the world.

His plays include tragedies, such as Hamlet (1603), Othello (1604), King Lear (1605), Romeo and Juliet. There are also famous comedies, such as A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1594-96) and The Twelfth Night (1602). Among his plays there are popular historic plays, such as Henry 1V.

The Elizabethan age is sometimes nicknamed “The age of Shakespeare” for the amount of influence he held over the era.

During the years after the Revolution headed by Cromwell the theater was practically closed. It was resumed under Charles II. A lot of new authors and professional actors and actresses appeared who attracted the audiences (at the time of Shakespeare all female roles were played by boys). There even appeared a woman playwright Aphra Benn.

In the 18th century Restoration comedy was replaced by sentimental comedy and by overwhelming interest in Italian opera.

A restoration and an interest in theatre of drama came in the 19th century with the plays by the Irishman playwright George Bernard Shaw and English playwright Oscar Wilde.

The Irish playwright Bernard Shaw (1856-1900) wrote a great number of satirical, witty and psychological plays that became well known not only in Britain, but also all over the world, including Russia. Among Shaw's best-known plays are *Heartbreak House*, *Saint Joan* and *Pygmalion*, based on the Greek myth about a sculptor who carved a statue of a woman and fell in love with her. The adaptation of *Pygmalion* is a very popular musical "My Fair Lady", successfully staged in Broadway and many European theaters.

Today the West End in London has a large number of theatres, particularly centered on Shaftesbury Avenue. There are over 200 theaters in Britain: 40 of which are situated in London's West End. The most famous British theaters are The Royal Opera and Royal Ballet, both based at Covent Garden, the National Theatre and the Barbican Theatre.

The National is a part of the South Bank Arts Centre, located near the River Thames. The Centre contains three theatres, cinemas, an art gallery, and concert halls. The diamond of the National is the 1,160-seat Oliver Theatre, named after famous actor and director Laurence Olivier. The Royal Shakespeare Company performs at the Barbican in London and in Shakespeare's birthplace Stratford-upon-Avon.

A prolific composer of the 20th century Andrew Lloyd Webber dominated the West End for a number of years, and his musicals travelled to Broadway in New York and around the world. Important modern playwrights include Alan Ayckbourn, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Arnold Wesker.