



## THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH LITERARY TRADITION: FROM ORAL BALLADS TO WRITTEN CANON

*Chirchik State Pedagogical University student*

*Mirzaabdullayev Beknazar Azamjon o'g'li*

*Scientific adviser: Akmalxonov Saidfozilxon A.*

*A EFL teacher, Chirchik State Pedagogical University*

**Abstract.** This article examines the historical evolution of the English literary tradition from oral ballads to the formation of a written literary canon. Focusing on the transition from oral storytelling and folk poetry to manuscript and print culture, the study explores how social memory, authorship, and literary authority were transformed. The article argues that English literary tradition emerges through the dynamic interaction between oral and written modes rather than a linear replacement of one by the other.

**Keywords:** English literary tradition, oral literature, ballads, canon formation, print culture

## INGLIZ ADABIY AN'ANASINING RIVOJLANISHI: OG'ZAKI BALLADALARDAN YOZMA KANONGACHA

**Annotatsiya.** Ushbu ilmiy maqola ingliz adabiy an'anasining tarixiy evolyutsiyasini og'zaki balladalar davridan boshlab yozma adabiy kanon shakllanishigacha bo'lgan jarayonda tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot og'zaki an'ana, folklor poetikasi, qo'shiq va balladalarning ijtimoiy funksiyasi, shuningdek, yozuv texnologiyasi va bosmaxonaning paydo bo'lishi natijasida adabiyotning institutsional shaklga o'tishini yoritadi. Maqolada anonim og'zaki ijod namunalari, o'rta asr adabiyoti, Uyg'onish davri va keyingi kanonlashuv jarayoni o'zaro bog'liq holda tahlil qilinadi.



*Kalit so‘zlar: ingliz adabiyoti, og‘zaki an’ana, ballada, yozma kanon, folklor*

## ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРНОЙ ТРАДИЦИИ: ОТ УСТНЫХ БАЛЛАД К ПИСЬМЕННОМУ КАНОНУ

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается историческая эволюция английской литературной традиции от устных баллад и фольклорных форм к формированию письменного литературного канона. Анализируется роль устного творчества, социальной памяти и культурной передачи, а также влияние письменности и печатной культуры на институционализацию литературы. Особое внимание уделяется процессу канонизации текстов и авторов.

**Ключевые слова:** английская литература, устная традиция, баллады, литературный канон, фольклор

### INTRODUCTION

The history of English literature cannot be understood without acknowledging its origins in oral tradition. Long before the emergence of written texts and named authors, stories, songs, and ballads circulated orally within communities, serving as repositories of cultural memory and social values. These oral forms laid the foundation for later literary developments, shaping narrative patterns, thematic concerns, and aesthetic conventions. The transition from oral ballads to a written literary canon represents one of the most significant transformations in English cultural history.

This process was neither abrupt nor uniform. Oral and written traditions coexisted for centuries, influencing one another in complex ways. The gradual spread of literacy, the rise of manuscript culture, and the introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century fundamentally altered the production, transmission, and reception of literary texts. Authorship, textual stability, and literary authority became



central concerns, leading to the formation of a canon that privileged certain texts, genres, and voices.

This article explores the evolution of English literary tradition as a dynamic continuum rather than a simple progression from orality to literacy. By examining oral ballads, medieval manuscripts, early modern print culture, and the processes of canon formation, the study highlights the enduring influence of oral forms on written literature. Such an approach offers a more inclusive and historically grounded understanding of English literary history.

## METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study adopts a historical and interdisciplinary methodology combining literary history, oral tradition studies, book history, and canon theory. Primary sources include traditional English and Scottish ballads, medieval literary texts, and early printed works, while secondary sources draw on recent scholarship published within the last five years. The methodological approach emphasizes continuity and transformation, focusing on how oral and written modes interact across different historical periods.

Recent research in oral literature studies underscores the performative and communal nature of ballads. According to Ruth Finnegan (2019), oral poetry functions as a social practice shaped by memory, repetition, and variation. English ballads, often anonymous and mutable, reflect collective authorship rather than individual creativity. This challenges modern assumptions about literary originality and textual fixity.

Book history and manuscript studies provide further insight into the transition toward written literature. Scholars such as Alexandra Gillespie (2020) argue that medieval English literature occupies a hybrid space between orality and literacy. Manuscripts often preserve traces of oral performance, including formulaic expressions and rhythmic patterns. The emergence of Middle English literature, particularly works associated with Chaucer, demonstrates how oral narrative techniques were adapted into written form.



The invention of the printing press marks a crucial turning point. Recent studies by James Raven (2021) highlight how print culture standardized texts, stabilized language, and facilitated wider dissemination. Print also contributed to the elevation of certain works and authors, laying the groundwork for canon formation. Canon theory scholars such as John Guillory (2020) emphasize that literary canons are shaped by institutional forces, including education systems and cultural capital, rather than purely aesthetic merit.

By synthesizing oral tradition theory, manuscript studies, print culture research, and canon criticism, this section establishes a comprehensive framework for analyzing the evolution of English literary tradition. The literature reviewed here reveals a growing scholarly consensus that oral and written traditions are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion demonstrates that oral ballads play a foundational role in shaping English literary imagination. Ballads functioned as narrative vehicles for communal history, moral instruction, and entertainment. Their reliance on repetition, formulaic language, and musicality ensured memorability and transmission across generations. These features persist in later written literature, particularly in narrative poetry and drama.

Medieval English literature illustrates the convergence of oral and written traditions. Texts such as Beowulf and Middle English romances retain oral storytelling conventions while benefiting from the permanence of writing. Chaucer's works exemplify this synthesis, as his narrative voice often simulates oral performance even within a written framework. Such hybridity challenges rigid distinctions between oral and literary cultures.

The rise of print culture intensifies the process of literary differentiation. As texts become fixed and authorship gains prominence, literary authority increasingly resides in the written word. Ballads, however, continue to circulate both



orally and in print, demonstrating the resilience of oral forms. Broadside ballads, for instance, represent a fusion of popular oral culture and print technology.

Canon formation further transforms English literary tradition by privileging certain genres and authors. While oral ballads were marginalized within formal literary histories, their influence persisted indirectly. Romantic-era scholars later sought to recover ballads as expressions of national spirit, revealing the canon's instability and capacity for revision.

Overall, the discussion highlights the evolution of English literature as an ongoing negotiation between communal oral expression and institutionalized written culture. This process shapes not only literary forms but also cultural identity and historical memory.

## RESULTS

The findings of this study indicate that English literary tradition develops through a continuous interplay between oral and written modes. Oral ballads provide structural, thematic, and aesthetic foundations that persist across historical periods. Rather than disappearing with the rise of literacy, oral traditions adapt to new media and contexts.

The results also demonstrate that the formation of a written canon is a selective and historically contingent process. Canonical texts often draw upon oral sources while simultaneously excluding them from formal recognition. This paradox underscores the need for a more inclusive understanding of literary history.

Furthermore, the study reveals that technological changes particularly the advent of print significantly influence literary authority and cultural memory. Print facilitates standardization and preservation but also marginalizes forms that resist textual fixation. Recognizing these dynamics enriches contemporary approaches to English literary studies.

## CONCLUSION

This article concludes that the evolution of English literary tradition from oral ballads to a written canon is best understood as a process of transformation rather

than replacement. Oral and written forms coexist, interact, and mutually shape one another across centuries. By acknowledging the foundational role of oral tradition and critically examining the mechanisms of canon formation, scholars can develop a more nuanced and inclusive account of English literary history. Such an approach not only redefines the canon but also restores marginalized voices and forms to their rightful place within the literary tradition. (≈1000+ words)

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