

FitzGerald's "Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám" Reconsidered

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***FitzGerald's "Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám": Popularity and Neglect*, ed. Adrian Poole, Christine van Ruymbeke, William H. Martin, and Sandra Mason (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2011 & 2013), 296 pages, £60/\$99 cloth, £25/\$40 paper.**

The subtitle and “unifying theme” of this book, as its preface states, is “Popularity and Neglect,” referring to the decline in interest over the years in FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, especially by “the academic community” but also generally. After reading this informative and eclectic collection of essays, my sense is that a more apt caption would have been its inversion: say “From Neglect to Popularity,” as that is the course covered here and in a developed and comprehensive way, including notes and bibliography, that makes this well-edited work one that no FitzGerald enthusiast or university library should be without.

The occasion behind this publication was the conference held in 2009 at Trinity College, Cambridge – FitzGerald’s college – commemorating the bicentenary of FitzGerald’s birth and the 150th anniversary of his anonymous and small private printing of his first edition of *The Rubáiyát*. From this modest and overlooked beginning, the work’s slow recognition and increasing popularity gradually grew into the literary phenomenon and even craze unseen in not just English but world literature. Since its original printing in 1859, FitzGerald’s version has appeared in eighty languages, including Persian (not mentioned here).

When I was in Tehran during the early sixties, I went into what was then Mebso's bookstore on Shah Reza Avenue in search of a bilingual edition of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* with the text of the original poems in Persian. I was in a hurry then and did not examine my copy carefully. On returning to America, I discovered that the text in Persian was a translation of FitzGerald's version! A work of translation had come full circle in being turned into the language of the original.

How often does that happen, and what accounts for the turn of such a seemingly idiosyncratic literary endeavor into such world prominence, with, in time, its manifold variations and imitations? As Adrian Poole's introduction points out, "Once we start to inquire more deeply into the constitution of popularity and neglect, how exactly, by whom and for whom they are produced and sustained and experienced, we discover all kinds of nuance and complexity" (xviii). This, indeed, is what is demonstrated here.

The examination of the topic begins with Dick Davis's succinct and germinal essay on FitzGerald's version as viewed within the context of past English verse translations. "FitzGerald's," he posits, "is not a national mission; it is a private one. For the medieval and Tudor translator-poets, translation can be seen as a call for the whole clerisy of their time to undergo a kind of cultural conversion; for FitzGerald it is merely that he has found something personal to which he can privately assent, but there is no pressure for anyone else to do so, still less an implicit call for a wholesale cultural reevaluation" (3).

How ironic then that, despite FitzGerald's intent, the outcome was the reverse. But more to the point is that with this statement, Davis – himself a poet and a fine translator of Persian – guides the discourse away from Orientalism as providing any easy answer to what directs poetic motivation. As he further mentions, "The advice 'Choose an author as you choose a friend' was perhaps never more wholly taken to heart by a translator than by FitzGerald in his *Rubáiyát*" (6).

From there the next three essays delve further into the subject of FitzGerald's poem within the context of English literature. Daniel

Karlin's "Much Ado About Nothing in the *Rubáiyát*" examines how acutely conscious FitzGerald was in his wording and references of the literary tradition within which he was working and of his differences with Carlyle and Tennyson in particular. "For Tennyson," he states, "the journey through the wilderness of life is 'barren toil' if it ends in darkness and nothingness; for FitzGerald 'the dawn of Nothing' makes the 'one Moment' we have more precious." Thus, "what FitzGerald does with *nothing* is a paradigm of the way in which his English reading shaped his response to the Persian" (21).

Erik Gray's "Queer and Common" broadens the topic to a discussion of FitzGerald's distinctive truncated use of language as a means of expressing the homoerotic while also obliquely addressing issues of belief "without causing a scandal." FitzGerald, he posits, "deliberately distorts standard English syntax in order to draw attention to the radical negative philosophy that he is propounding" (32).

Clive Wilmer takes this point even further in labeling FitzGerald's version "A Victorian Poem" – "and a seminal one at that" – and one whereby Khayyám's "skeptical and more or less hedonistic view of the world" was "filtered" through FitzGerald to "the era in which Darwin [...] was dismantling old certainties" (46).

This sequence of commentaries, thus, positions the reader for a full discussion of "FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* and Agnosticism," which is the subject of Marta Simidchieva's essay. This, for me, I must confess, was the centerpiece of this volume, both for its erudition and for its consideration of the Persian along with the English. Of the scholars here, Davis and Simidchieva, together with Parvin Loloï mentioned later, are the ones with a close knowledge of the original as well as that of the translation.

That said, Simidchieva agrees with Davis that, for FitzGerald, Khayyám's poems were "not so much a repository for the wisdom of the past as a rostrum from which to address that present" (57). That, in its essence, is perhaps the main theme of the first half of this book. Where Simidchieva differs from the others is in her focused coverage of the

subject as not just an aspect of FitzGerald's version but its main and unifying component. As she states, "Although the term 'agnosticism' was not in use at the time when FitzGerald was working on his first edition, the *Rubáiyát* is infused with the spirit of it" (65). This is what makes FitzGerald's version such a distinctive aspect of English or Victorian literature.

As for the other essays that follow, they are all delights to read and full of information one only partially knew about. Anthony Briggs's discussion of the "Similar Lives and Different Destinies of Thomas Gray, Edward FitzGerald and A.E. Housman" brings these three poets together in a way that makes one see them as kindred spirits. All three published their major works anonymously and privately and varyingly wrote out of their deep sense of pessimism. John Drew's examination of "The Second (1862 Pirate) Edition of the *Rubáiyát*" calls attention to the history of the actual second printing of FitzGerald's original version in Madras, which is almost universally overlooked, and to the substantial and ongoing promotion of the Irish lawyer Whitley Stokes, who is usually regarded as only the first person to discover the work after buying a copy from Quaritch's remainder box for one penny.

As for Garry Garrard's essay on Edward Heron-Allen, another amateur scholar-lawyer, for my part it is almost a relief finally to come upon a full account of the enormous contribution of this "polymath" and "multidisciplinary savant with a natural gift for languages" (109) to the early study of FitzGerald's version and its reflection of the original. Both Drew and Garrard, in the process, point to the largely unknown role of the East in the wider reception of FitzGerald's poem, which is commonly considered to be that in America. Not so: there was an earlier acknowledgment in British India.

From there the focus shifts to America and to "The Omar Craze," as John Roger Paas calls it. And from this point on, this volume addresses the phenomenon of the growing public interest in FitzGerald's poem and the numerous and various editions that followed. By 1900, Paas states, "Copies of the poem were readily available from publishers both large

and small, as were a substantial number of parodies and a wide range of Omariana, including calendars, cigarettes, figurines, china, silverware, jewelry, watches and flour. Not since the appearance of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) had a literary work found such broad-ranging interest beyond the boundaries of literature" (127). All this aside, FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát*, he adds, "was beyond any doubt the most frequently published English literary work of the twentieth century" (127). The rest of his essay, including illustrations, deals with the major publishing ventures in America and England, revealing that, though "No edition of the *Rubáiyát* could be touted as having been a bestseller like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, or J.K. Rowlings's *Harry Potter*, yet the poem has had an unrivaled history as a steady seller issued by not one or even a dozen different publishers, but over a hundred" (141).

Michelle Kaiserlin widens the social scope of the *Rubáiyát* "craze" in her study of "The Imagined Elites" of the Omar Khayyám Clubs – "or O.K. Clubs, as they came to be known" – which sprouted first in London then spread to Boston in the late- and post-Victorian periods. As she shows in her survey of their activities and interests, these exclusive male clubs were essentially escapist havens or "ritual spaces" for the privileged who engaged in the promulgation of the epicurean "good life" as perceived through the prism of the *Rubáiyát*. She writes: "While Club members grounded themselves in the mythology of FitzGerald, their hero and British 'ambassador' to the East, they distinguished themselves from others in their own culture by the very ability to live as the great Epicurean Khayyám himself, to follow his philosophy as they understood it – to appreciate and indulge in life's carnal pleasures" (155). The famous "early rose-planting ceremony of the London Club" is one example of the 'grounding' of this mythology; others are mentioned. Meanwhile, she adds, "Not only did the men participate in an imaginary world, but they envisioned their Western female counterparts playing roles of their own" (159). The suggestive illustrations from the various clubs' literature amply substantiate this.

In fact, illustrations are a major part of several of these essays and, as such, are a telling component of this book in general. Adam Talib's examination of "Le Gallienne's Paraphrase" eschews the need for any, but his consideration of Richard Le Gallienne's esoteric approach to the *Rubáiyát* addresses the related "phenomenon of pseudo-translation" or "passing off an original work as a translation" (186). Both the pictorial and the literary reconceptions are aspects of the same embellishing process. Le Gallienne, he states, "is interested in FitzGerald's role in inventing the *Rubáiyát* insofar as it validates his own re-creation, through amateur paraphrase, of a quintessentially English literary work" (170). And for that, he did not "consider 'a knowledge of Persian' to be a pre-requisite" (177). Would such an undertaking have been even conceivable without the extrapolations of the "O.K. Clubs"?

Annemarie S. Drury, in turn, considers the output of "FitzGerald's Sceptical American Parodists," which she divides between the "spoof" and the "satirical." Examples of both are cited, partially drawn from the literature of the "O.K. Clubs" and from Carolyn Wells' 1904 anthology of *Rubáiyát* parodies (again with accompanying illustrations), but with a notable difference between the two. Whereas the "spoof" ones, such as "The Golfer's Rubaiyat" and the *Rubáiyát of the Motor Car* (1906) "are connected to FitzGerald's poem mainly by diction" (194), the "satirical" kind, which are here of greater interest, "not only play with FitzGerald's language but also take aim at the ethos" of his poem as it "had come to be celebrated by the turn of the century [...] among British readers" (194). The second kind, she posits, "challenge" that "celebration of the *Rubáiyát* as an exemplary product of cultural fusion" (194) and as an expression of "the imperialist ethos of Late-Victorian Britain" (195). In this sense, the American satirical parodies, including ones by Oliver Herford, James Whitcomb Riley, and Mark Twain, served to "define America in opposition to glum, impractical and fecklessly idealistic Europe" and, "in doing so," contributed to the tradition of American writings from those of Benjamin Franklin to Emerson and Twain himself, who used "opposition to Europe as a tool for creating American

identity" (207). This point is well-taken, especially, as she states, the tone and message of these "skeptical parodies" also influenced modernists such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

Parvin Loloï continues the coverage of the *Rubáiyát* parodies, along with imitations and dedicatory poems, up to the present era. Although an Iranist herself as well as a critic of English translations of Persian poetry, her concern here is not with the original but with "The Vogue of the English *Rubáiyát*" as an ongoing legacy of FitzGerald's poem. Included in her survey are verses from Swinburne's "Laus Veneris (1866) up through Stephen Fry's "The Rubai" in *The Ode Less Travelled* (2007), including ones by G.K. Chesterton, Pound, Dick Davis, John Heath-Stubbs, and the Iranian-born English poet Mimi Khalvati. In reading these, an unfair question comes to mind. Was an opportunity missed, given the writer's background, to explore the Persian parodies? Were there any?

The final essay by William H. Martin and Sandra Mason on "The Illustration of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát*" draws from their book, *The Art of Omar Khayyám* (2007), in which they suggest that "the extensive publication of illustrated editions of the *Rubáiyát* may also have contributed to its continuing popularity" (233). Here they expand on that view "by looking at the longer term evolution of the *Rubáiyát* publishing through the twentieth century" (233).

Accordingly, the focus shifts to "Changing Markets and Taste" and to "The Role of the Publishing Business" in the promotion of the "Omariana craze." In the process, the reader is presented with a concise history, replete with statistics and pictures, of both the commercial aspects and the artistic nuances of major Edwardian illustrators, including Elihu Vedder, Edmund Sullivan, and Edmund Dulac. Others mentioned are Gilbert James, Frank Brangwyn, and the Hungarian-born Wily Pogány, plus later Art Deco contributors. "It is hard to believe," the writers conclude, "That this short poem, however good, would have made such a mark without the work of such artists." In that sense, they add, "the *Rubáiyát* can be seen as being the right product at the right

time, coming to public attention at the moment of the revolution in colour printing” (246).

All these essays, in their sundry ways, are convincing and collectively tell a story that one cannot imagine any single scholar, however eclectic, so fully covering; which, in itself, is a testament to the value of such collaborative editions. That said, however, one also wonders if there is still an omission.

The illustrations themselves give a clue to this. I was personally gratified to see the late Peter Avery, my former mentor at King’s College, acknowledged here. Peter (as he was always called), as a lover of the *Rubáiyát* illustrations and one who included miniatures of his choosing in his own poetic version of Khayyám with John Heath-Stubbs, would, I think, have immediately picked up on it. It is a chapter on hedonism to counterbalance that on agnosticism, as the two are related subjects addressing one issue.

In Victorian Britain, hedonism was almost as uncomfortable a topic as nascent agnosticism. One has only to read the *Principia Ethica* of G.E. Moore – another Trinity man – to get a sense of this. Moore, as a philosopher of the utilitarian analytical school, devotes the central and longest chapter of his major treatise to taking issue with Professor Henry Sidgwick’s support of J.S. Mills’ case for hedonism in equating the pursuit of happiness or pleasure with that for the good, but in doing so he never really advances the argument beyond that parameter. If hedonism is to be a part of the study of ethics, he argues, then its main concern, from the Greeks on, must be directed to the social as well as personal good. This, essentially, summed up the Victorian position. Nowhere in Moore’s or Sidgwick’s arguments is hedonism addressed in its relation to agnosticism.

This to Khayyám and FitzGerald – the recluse of Woodbridge – is the whole crux of the matter. To them, hedonism is not a part of social ethics but a means of addressing a void. What is good or bad, right or wrong, has nothing to do with the situation at hand. We are here for TODAY in the absence of a knowable TOMORROW, meaning not the

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next day but the life after. *Mey noosh*: "Drink wine," meaning not just that but savor it. More: be sustained by it, for this is the only life of which we can be sure. As such, FitzGerald's mid-Victorian version of Khayyám's blasphemous message was a time bomb waiting to explode in the coming century.

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