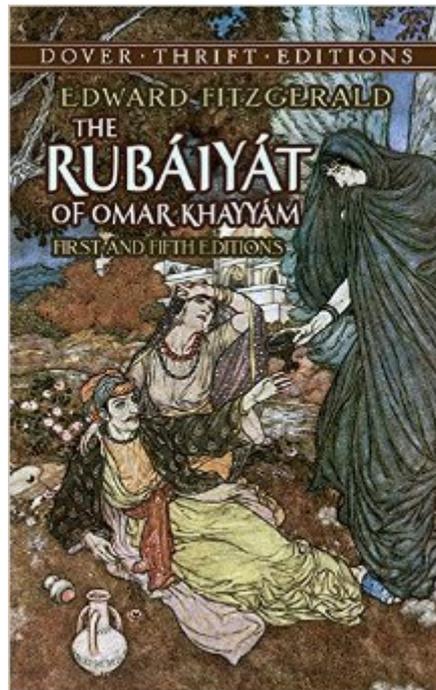


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The Rubáiyāt Of Omar Khayyām : First And Fifth Editions (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

Omar Khayyām (1048–1122) was a Persian mathematician, astronomer, and a philosopher who was not known as a poet in his lifetime. Later, a body of quatrains became attached to his name, although not all were his works. These verses lay in obscurity until 1859, when Edward FitzGerald (1809–1883), an English country gentleman, published a free adaptation of this Persian poetry. After its discovery by D. G. Rossetti and others, the verse became extremely popular. Essentially a hedonist and a skeptic, Omar Khayyām, through FitzGerald, spoke with both an earthy and spiritual freedom that stirred a universal response. As a result, the Rubāʿiyāt became one of the best-known and most often quoted English classics. The fifth edition, published posthumously in 1889, was based on FitzGerald's handwritten changes in a copy of the fourth edition, and is traditionally printed with the first edition.

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Customer Reviews

"The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam" translated by Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs is available in two Penguin editions. This edition (ISBN 01400595447) comes in a larger format with 32 beautiful colored illustrations of Persian miniature paintings from the 16th and 17th century, and an essay on the history of the miniatures that points out the influence of Chinese painting on Persian graphic arts (an interesting subject in itself). The other edition is the Penguin Classics edition (ISBN 0140443843), which is identical to this edition but lacks the illustrations and the essay on Persian

graphic arts. The illustrated, larger sized edition is definitely worth the slightly higher price, in my opinion. A reader who is familiar with FitzGerald's classic "re-creation" - "translation" is a term that is too weak in this context - will be surprised at the defiant materialism of Omar Khayyam's quatrains in Avery's literal translation stripped of the poetic spark of FitzGerald's work. For example, while the Victorian gentleman Edward FitzGerald chose to translate Omar Khayyam's praise of simple joys and poetry in his famous "A Book of Verses underneath the Bough, / A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread - and Thou / Beside me singing in the Wilderness - / Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!", Peter Avery gives us not only a more literal translation (#98) but also a much more worldly (and spicy) version of the same theme: If chance supplied a loaf of white bread, Two casks of wine and a leg of mutton, In the corner of a garden with a tulip-cheeked girl There'd be enjoyment no Sultan could outdo.

It is somewhat ironic (one might say "tragic") that chooses to lump reviews of multiple translations into each version of a book; in the case of the Rubaiyat, the two prevailing translations--FitzGerald's, and Avery and Heath-Stubbs'--could not be more different. As a general reader not terribly knowledgeable about Persian literature, I struggled before deciding on which version to read; influenced by the leading reviewer on this page, I read the FitzGerald version with illustrations by Dulac and the introduction by Byatt. As a reader and occasional translator of a foreign language myself (although Japanese, not Persian) I was hesitant to read a version (one hesitates to call it a "translation") this old and this famously derided for its looseness with the original work by Omar Khayyam. And yet after comparing the two translations, I am glad that I read FitzGerald, for two main reasons. First, true to his intention, FitzGerald accentuated the spirit of the original over the literal translation/transliteration of the original. The delightful impishness of Khayyam and the melancholy ephemerality of his Rubaiyat is wonderfully captured. FitzGerald made this artistic choice consciously, stating that "better a live sparrow than a stuffed eagle" ... although this modesty downplays the beautiful lyricism and Victorian elegance of his version. Second, for better or for worse, this is the version that most captivated--and influenced--the world outside of Persia, including writers from Browning and Tennyson to O. Henry and Borges to Agatha Christie and Stephen King.

With death dominating the news, due to the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, and the inevitable linkage to the Middle East, I decided that a useful counterpoint would be a review of a very famous celebration of life that also originated from the same region. When Europe was in its *Dark Ages*, the late 11th and early 12th centuries, a polymath shined in Persia (modern-day Iran).

Omar Khayyam was a mathematician and astronomer, and wrote numerous treatises on mechanics, geography, mineralogy, and an extremely influential one on algebra. His "Rubaiyat" demonstrates that he was much more than what might be dubbed "a Middle Ages nerd." The Rubaiyat is a series of quatrains (four lines of verse). Fittingly enough, Khayyam opens with the beginning of the day, or, as he phrases it much more poetically: "And Lo! The Hunter of the East has caught The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light." Woven throughout this work is the very transient nature of life | that we must make the very best of every day that we have been given. He states that sentiment, well, much more memorably: "Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring; The Winter Garment of Repentance fling; The Bird of Time has but a little way; To fly-and Lo! The Bird is on the Wing." I had long admired the Gertrude Bell, and her willingness to explore the Middle East around the commencement of the 20th century. She too had a poetic "eye" for the desert regions, and described them lovingly in *The Desert and the Sown: Travels in Palestine and Syria*.

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