



FITZGERALD, EDWARD

FITZGERALD, EDWARD (b. 31 March 1809; d. 14 June 1883; [Figure 1](#)), British translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (London, 1859), as well as Jāmī's *Salāmān o Absāl* (*Salāmān and Absāl: an Allegory, Translated from the Persian of Jāmi*, London, 1856) and 'Aṭṭār's *Manteq al-ṭayr* (*Bird Parliament*, first published as "A Bird's Eye-View of Farid-uddin Attar's *Bird-Parliament*"; Fitzgerald, 1903, VII, pp. 255-312). The first of these is by far the most famous translation ever made from Persian verse into English, and it had a considerable influence on the development of late Victorian and Edwardian British poetry as well as the awakening of a much wider interest, in English speaking countries and Europe, in Persian literature than had previously been the case.

FitzGerald was born into a wealthy Anglo-Irish family. In early childhood he lived at the family seat, Bredfield Hall in Suffolk, about which he later wrote what he considered the best of his few original poems. His name was his mother's (Purcell was the name of his father, who had taken his wife's name in deference to her superior social position and considerable wealth). His parents were more or less estranged during FitzGerald's childhood and he saw very little of his mother; she was notorious for being largely indifferent to her children (Martin, pp. 31-34). As an adult he seems to have regarded her with a mixture of admiration (she was one of the richest women in England and strikingly beautiful), fear, and intense dislike. The occasional misogyny detectable in some of his writings can perhaps be traced to this cause. He was educated at King Edward VI Grammar School in Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk,



and Trinity College, Cambridge. He did not shine academically at Cambridge but it was there that he made friends with Alfred Tennyson, who would become the foremost poet of Victorian England, and William Makepeace Thackeray, later to be one of its major novelists. He also became friends with Thomas Carlyle, the Victorian essayist and historian. After graduating he returned to Suffolk, where he lived out the rest of his long life. Though he lived very simply and hated ostentation, he was cushioned by his family's wealth from the necessity of earning a living and occupied himself with various literary projects including translations, an anthology of aphorisms, the occasional literary essay, the compiling of lists of dialect words, and the editing of others' poems (including those of the two Suffolk poets Bernard Barton and the much better known George Crabbe). He married Lucy Barton, the daughter of Bernard Barton, (1856) but the couple separated within a year; FitzGerald made generous financial provision for his wife on condition that they never meet (Martin, p. 200). In later life he was more or less a recluse and was known to the inhabitants of Woodbridge, the town closest to his last very modest home, as a harmless if occasionally cantankerous eccentric; their nickname for him was "Dotty" (Victorian British slang for "Crazy"). He kept up a voluminous correspondence, both with his famous literary friends and with many lesser known figures, and his letters are among the finest Victorian examples of the genre.

There was clearly a homoerotic element in some of FitzGerald's friendships: this is the probable reason for the fiasco of his marriage; his wife later wrote of her husband's propensity to become infatuated with "any embryo Apollo" (Martin, p. 44), a circumstance which came to be of fortuitous significance for his eventual interest in Persian poetry as it was an important factor in his involvement with Edward Byles Cowell (1826-1903), who taught him Persian. In general his male friends fell into two broad categories; they were either literary figures like Tennyson, Thackeray, and Barton, or handsome men who were considerably younger than FitzGerald—the "any embryo Apollo" of his wife's phrase—and who tended to live a life of strenuous outdoor activity. Two such relationships were particularly important to him: The first was with William Kenworthy Browne, a country squire who spent much of his time hunting (he died as a result of a fall from a horse) and, after Browne's death, with Joseph (Posh) Fletcher, a Lowestoft fisherman whose features, FitzGerald said, reminded him of Browne's. It is unlikely that either of these men can have offered FitzGerald any kind of intellectual companionship, but in 1844 FitzGerald met Cowell, a young linguist. Cowell (who was then eighteen,



FitzGerald was thirty five) combined the young, virile good looks FitzGerald felt so drawn to with a brilliant linguistic ability and a keen interest in literature; he had contrived to learn Persian as a schoolboy and had published his first translation, of a *g̃azal* by Ḥāfez, at the age of sixteen (Martin, p. 138).

It was Cowell who taught FitzGerald Persian, and Kayyām's translator thus came to the language through friendship and shared literary interests, rather than by any of the more usual means for a person of his time and background (formal academic study, or membership of the Indian Army or Indian Civil Service). FitzGerald never sat for a Persian exam in his life, nor did he ever go anywhere near the country; the furthest east he ever traveled was to Paris, and that only very briefly (Martin, pp. 64-65).

The literary/linguistic side of their relationship began with Cowell teaching FitzGerald Spanish and suggesting he read Calderon. With his young friend's encouragement FitzGerald also began to write, and in 1851 he published a quasi-Platonic dialogue, *Euphranor*, in which he contrasted the two types of manhood he admired (the athlete and the intellectual) and concluded that the ideal, produced by an ideal education, would be an individual who combined the most attractive traits of both. In 1852 he published *Polonius: A Collection of Wise Saws and Modern Instances*, an anthology of aphorisms, some original but most culled from his very wide reading. This interest in aphorism, in concisely epigrammatic and memorable language that felicitously illustrates a general maxim, was one of the major reasons for FitzGerald's later receptiveness to Khayyam's poetry.

In 1853, FitzGerald's Spanish lessons with Cowell bore fruit and *Six Dramas of Calderon, Freely Translated by Edward FitzGerald* appeared. These translations are significant in that they point the way to FitzGerald's habits when he began translating from Persian. The word "freely" in the title indicates his readiness to recast the authors he translated in the interests of what he called a "readable" version (Terhune, II, p. 66). Significantly, the word "readable" recurs frequently in FitzGerald's letters whenever he discusses his translations, whether from Spanish, as here, or from Persian, or later on from Greek. His concern was to make the authors he is interested in attractive to the Victorian reading public, and in order to do this he is quite ready to rearrange, recast and generally domesticate them to Victorian expectations. His instinct for the aphoristic is also present in his translations, and many of his revisions consist of drastic cuts in order to bring home what he takes to be the essence of the matter. It is apposite to remark here on FitzGerald's habit of buying



pictures and cutting them down and retouching them (Martin, p. 124), as also his editing of others' poems, which generally consisted in his cutting away what he thought of as inessential in order to reveal more dramatically what he took to be the best moments. In all these activities—retouching others' paintings, editing others' poems, translating others' literary works—we see how necessary the stimulus of another mind was for FitzGerald, and this is also true of course of the other literary activity in which he excelled, that of letter writing. The practice of literature for FitzGerald was an extension of his capacity for friendship, and it is no coincidence that virtually all his writings were the direct result of others' (usually Cowell's) encouragement, as well as being based on already extant works to which he could then respond.

Cowell began to teach FitzGerald Persian in December of 1852. The first extended text they studied together was Jāmī's *Salāmān o Absāl*, a version of which became FitzGerald's first published translation from Persian (1856). FitzGerald retained a great affection for this translation, preferring it to his much more successful *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, and the reason is undoubtedly because he had actually worked through the Persian with Cowell. As he himself frankly wrote to Cowell, "Should I care much for it if I had not had the pleasure of poking it out with you in the original?" (Terhune, II, p. 189) and he called the printing of his version, "a little Monument of our Studies together" (*ibid.*, II, p. 160).

Salāmān and Absāl is written mainly in blank verse, though separate stories within the frame tale are put into trochaic tetrameters (the so-called "Hiawatha meter"). There is no warrant in the Persian for this metrical variation. As in his versions from Calderon, FitzGerald cuts heavily. The sections where he seems most engaged are those that deal directly with the poem's philosophical allegory; here he translates freely but fully. Passages of sensuous description on the other hand are often severely curtailed. Most interesting is his clear predilection for sections involving allegorical and metaphysical reflection; he registers their poetic intensity and attempts with some success to convey it. This metaphysical concern would seem to be one of the reasons for his later sympathy with Khayyam.

FitzGerald reissued *Salāmān and Absāl* in 1879, having rewritten much of the text. The many changes are instructive, in that they almost always take the English further from the original Persian. As with the Khayyam quatrains it is clear that, once FitzGerald had satisfied himself as to the literal meaning, as soon as the work began to live in his mind as an English poem this reality



became paramount, and the Persian gradually receded. In the case of the Khayyam translation the process happened before the first edition of the English poem was printed, though it is traceable in FitzGerald's letters on the subject to Cowell (e.g. Terhune, II, pp. 280-81).

In 1856 Cowell left to take up an academic post in India; his parting present to FitzGerald was a copy he had made of a manuscript, in the Bodleian Library Oxford, of quatrains by Omar Khayyam. From Calcutta he sent FitzGerald a copy of a second manuscript. FitzGerald began to read and translate from the poems, reporting to Cowell on his progress in frequent letters, and asking many questions concerning scansion, possible errors in the texts, syntactical difficulties and so forth (e.g. Terhune, II, pp. 234-35, 275, 279-83, 285-89). The translation was clearly his way of being close to his absent friend and mentor (see for example the opening of his letter of February 1857 to Cowell, *ibid.*, II, p. 252.)

The late 1850's were the most momentous period of FitzGerald's life: his mother had died in 1855; his disastrous marriage and its breakup occurred shortly after Cowell left; he worked on the *Khayyām* translations while he was temporarily without a home (he was staying with his friend Kenworthy Browne) and sorely missing Cowell (Martin, pp. 205-7.) This sense of emotional crisis—of estrangement from sources of possible happiness, and of a momentary general loss of direction in his life—was undoubtedly a factor in the extraordinary concentration of pathos and complaint that FitzGerald was able to infuse into his Khayyam translation.

FitzGerald fundamentally changes the formal status of Khayyam's poems; these are discrete entities in Persian, but FitzGerald strings them into a continuous narrative. As he wrote to Cowell, "I see how a very pretty *Eclogue* might be tessellated out of his scattered Quatrains" (Terhune, II, p. 294); FitzGerald's quatrains take the reader through the day of a quietist skeptic whose solace for the sorrows of the world is the *carpe diem* pleasures of drinking and like-minded companionship. Inserted into this narrative is the Episode of the Pots in which pots brood on the inscrutability and apparent injustices of fate. FitzGerald emphasizes the religious skepticism he found in Khayyam and rejects all notions of a sufi interpretation of the poems. The sexual ambiguity of the *sāqī* (the cup-bearer) of Persian poetry is also undoubtedly a factor in the translation; no women are mentioned in the poem, the "angel shape" (stanza XLII, 1st. edition) is male, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the companion invoked (the "Moon of my Delight," stanza LXXIV,



1st. edition) is meant, at least privately, as male.

The success of FitzGerald's translation, as English poetry, comes partly from his adoption of the Persian rhyme scheme (aaba), and from his relatively rigid metrical habits. Metrical regularity is used to convey a sense of ineluctable law, while the returning final rhyme functions as a last emphatic underlining of the insight offered. The sense of inescapable certainty this gives the verse is used to convey a content of great metaphysical uncertainty, and this, together with the work's surface exoticism for a Victorian audience, largely accounts for the very distinctive and paradoxical atmosphere of the poem; FitzGerald is saying with absolute conviction that no convictions can be absolute.

FitzGerald's frequent and often radical departures from Khayyam's text have received a great deal of attention. The issue is thoroughly explored in Edward Heron-Allen's *FitzGerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, with the Persian Originals* (London, 1899). He concludes that "forty-nine [of FitzGerald's quatrains] are faithful and beautiful paraphrases of single quatrains to be found in the Ouseley (i.e., Bodleian) or Calcutta MSS., or both. Forty-four are traceable to more than one quatrain" while others have their origin in verses by Ḥāfez (two quatrains) and 'Aṭṭār (two quatrains). Three (dropped after the second edition) appear to be FitzGerald's original work and to have no source in Persian (Heron-Allen, pp. xi-xii). When considering this question it is as well to bear in mind FitzGerald's intention, which was to produce what he took to be a "readable" version of a Persian poet, i.e., one that would appeal to a Victorian audience. In this he was triumphantly successful, and his *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, has been estimated to be one of the, if not the, best selling books of poetry ever to appear in English (see e.g., the brief survey of editions in FitzGerald, 1997, p. xiii). He did not claim to be producing a literal crib (he left that kind of thing to Cowell), and it is certainly true that no other translation from Persian into English verse succeeds so well in conveying aspects of the tone and atmosphere of the original; it is also true that interest in Persian literary studies in the West increased enormously as a result of FitzGerald's work. Easy though it is to fault his scholarship it seems, in the light of this achievement, somewhat churlish to do so.

The first, anonymous, and very small (250 copies) edition of the *Rubaiyat* appeared in 1859; though unnoticed initially, within a few years it had achieved fame among Victorian writers and artists (Rossetti, Browning, Swinburne, Burne-Jones, Meredith and Ruskin were early admirers; see FitzGerald, 1997, p. xxxiv). Subsequent editions appeared in 1868, 1872 and



1879, each involving changes, including the addition and dropping of stanzas and the rewriting of various phrases. A posthumous edition, prepared from FitzGerald's own marked up copy of the fourth edition, was published in 1889.

The third of FitzGerald's Persian translations, the *Bird Parliament* (from 'Aṭṭār's *Manteq al-ṭayr*), worked on intermittently between 1856 and 1862, was his least successful; that FitzGerald probably realized this is indicated by the fact that he did not attempt to publish it. His propensity to cut goes even further than in his treatment of *Salāmān o Absāl*; he cuts so extensively that the poem's structure, on which he commented disparagingly (Terhune, II, p. 252) as he clearly did not understand its details, all but disappears. He changes a great deal, sometimes bowdlerizing perhaps with a view to publication, as when he makes a king a queen in what he takes to be a homosexual story, or when he changes Jesus to "the Prophet" perhaps fearing Victorian reaction to a non-Biblical story about Jesus. His interest in the Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmūd (possibly this too was for homosexual reasons, he refers to Maḥmūd in a letter as "my friend" [ibid., II, p. 254] perhaps because of the Maḥmūd-Ayāz [q.v.] relationship) is apparent, as he translates most references to him and even inserts references where none exist in the Persian. There are some fine passages of English poetry in the translation, notably towards the end (when the birds meet the fabulous bird Sīmorḡ) and in the beautifully rendered brief anecdote of the child sent out on a windy night with a lamp.

After the early 1860's FitzGerald turned his attention from Persian (apart from his revisions of *Salāmān* and the *Rubaiyat*) back to Spanish (he translated more plays by Calderon) and thence to Greek (translations of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, a draft of *The Choephoroi*, and of Sophocles's two Oedipus plays, which he typically compressed into a single drama); as English verse the best of these is the *Agamemnon*. Fitzgerald died in 1883 while visiting his old friend George Crabbe, son of the poet Crabbe, whose works FitzGerald had recently been editing (i.e. cutting).

FitzGerald's reputation, which was at its height around the period of the First World War, has suffered some eclipse. The "orientalist" tenor of some of his remarks on Persian poetry can make for embarrassing reading (he says of reading Schiller after Jāmī, "It is something to get out of the Sweetmeat, Childish, Oriental World back to the Vigorous North!"; Terhune, II, p. 184), and his by modern standards idiosyncratic notions of what constituted fidelity to an author's text have earned him much criticism. The "orientalist" remarks may well in part have been due to his association of Persian with his feelings



for Cowell, and his guilt about such feelings given the extremely repressive Victorian attitude towards homosexuality. When he was actually involved with Persian he was highly receptive to, and appreciative of, what he saw as the literature's distinctive individuality and power (his real enthusiasm for Khayyam's verses is very clear from his letters to Cowell on the subject); and, although notions of translation have changed, his dual achievement in producing one of the most popular English poems ever written, and in drawing non-specialist Western attention to the great riches of Persian medieval verse, remains undiminished.

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