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KHAYYAM, OMAR III. IMPACT ON LITERATURE AND SOCIETY IN THE WEST

The first scholar outside Persia to study Omar Khayyam was the English orientalist, Thomas Hyde (q.v.; 1636-1703). In his *Historia religionis veterum Persarum* (1700), he not only devoted some space to the life and works of Khayyam, but also translated one quatrain (*robāʿi*) into Latin. The first quatrain in English was published in 1816 by Henry George Keene (1781-1864) in the famous magazine *Fundgruben des Orients/Mines d'Orient*. Although the founder of the *Fundgruben*, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (q.v.; 1774-1856), translated a few of Khayyam's poems into German in 1818, and Sir Gore Ouseley (q.v.; 1770-1844) into English in 1846, Khayyam was to remain relatively unknown for some time (Dole, I, pp. ix-xv).

In 1859, the London bookseller Bernard Quaritch published the first edition of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. The translator, Edward FitzGerald (q.v.; 1809-83) had 250 copies printed anonymously, of which 40 copies were for his own use. He distributed copies among a few friends, but although some advertisements tried to draw attention to the poem, it remained "spectacularly unsuccessful" (Decker, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv). In 1861, the booklet ended up in Quaritch's remainder box, where it was offered for a penny a piece. No copies were sold until Whitley Stokes, a Celtic scholar, bought one in 1861. He came back to buy additional copies, one of which he gave to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

From Rossetti, the poem found its way to Algernon Swinburne and George Meredith, both of whom sang its praises and passed on their enthusiasm to other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. The latter showed the book to John Ruskin, who, in 1863, wrote a letter to the still unknown translator/author of the *Rubáiyát* in which he declared that he had never read anything so glorious to his mind than this poem and begged for more. The Pre-Raphaelites were fascinated by the *Rubáiyát*. So it was that Swinburne wrote his *Laus Veneris* in the Omarian stanza (1866), and Morris and Burne-Jones wrote out and illuminated a copy on vellum, which was given to Burne-Jones' wife, Georgiana, in 1872. It was also through Burne-Jones that the young Rudyard Kipling discovered the poem. The poem's rise in fame is described in detail by Carl J. Weber (pp. 17-31) and John Arthur Arberry (pp. 23-30). In the 1890s, the popularity of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* had risen to great heights, not only in Britain, but also in America.

In America, the poem had been introduced by Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1908), the renowned scholar and man of letters. When he visited England in 1868, Georgiana Burne-Jones showed him her husband's copy of the *Rubáiyát*. Norton got hold of a copy of the second FitzGerald edition (1868) and brought it to the attention of American friends, including James Russell Lowell and Ralph Waldo Emerson (q.v.). In 1869, he published a laudatory article in the *North American Review*. The article aroused the interest of many fellow Americans and also drew the attention of readers in England. Many people wanted to own a copy of the poem. A pirated printing of the 1868 edition appeared in Columbus, Ohio, in 1870, and, in 1872, FitzGerald had a third edition printed by Quaritch. This found its way to many admirers in America where, as in England, there was an increasing interest and demand for the work. A further impetus to the book's popularity came from the artist Elihu Vedder, whose *Rubáiyát* edition, in an attractive cover and embellished with 56 drawings, caused a sensation when it was published in 1884. The exhibition of the original drawings at the Arts Club, Boston, drew up to 2100 visitors a day. The book sold out in six days and was reprinted several times (Soria, pp. 183-86). Other editions were reprinted many times as well: "Competing editions cropped up like dandelions all over the literary lawn" (Weber, p. 30). As John D. Yohannan points out, the adoration of FitzGerald and the epicurean vein that runs through his translation "produced the true agents of the fin de siècle cult of the *Rubaiyat;* namely, the Omar Khayyam Clubs of England and America" (Yohannan, pp. 202).

In 1892, admirers of the poem founded the Omar Khayyám Club of London. Mr. Justin Huntly McCarthy, who had published his own *Robāʿiyāt* version in 1889, was elected its first president. Similar clubs were founded in other places but, with the exception of the American club, left almost no traces. The main activity of the members of the London club was (and still is) gathering twice a year to dine and to commemorate Omar, Fitz (as he is called as a term of endearment), and the *Rubáiyát*, in more or less serious and comic rituals. The London club issued two books, in 1910 and 1931 respectively, with contributions by its members: poems praising Fitz and Omar, pictures of menus, miscellanea, and lists of members and guests. Among these can be found many famous names: scholars, literary men and artists such as Edward Heron-Allen (q.v), Edmund Gosse, Andrew Lang, Thomas Hardy, Max Beerbohm, Lawrence Alma Tadema, Arthur Rackham, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, Aldous Huxley, and W. B. Yeats, to name but a few (*Book of the Omar Khayyám Club*, I and II, pp. 211-20, 168-81). Membership was originally restricted to men, but from 1910 onwards women were allowed to attend special dinners as guests.

Eight years after the foundation of the London club, the Omar Khayyám Club of America was founded. In 1900, on the 31st of March, FitzGerald's anniversary, Eben Francis Thompson, Nathan Haskell Dole, and others held the first session of the club in Boston. The club was formed "on the basis of good fellowship as well as Oriental learning, with good fellowship as the predominant feature" (*Twenty Years*, p. 7). Just as in London, members of the club had drawings made for the menu cards of their dinners, often in an elegant Art Nouveau style. The character of the American club differed from the London club. Its members did not only pay attention to Khayyam's poetry in FitzGerald's rendition, they also explored a more scientific approach to the subject. They published their own translations, printed beautiful and costly books and contributed to meetings with lectures on the philosophical and mathematical aspects of Omar Khayyam. The club passed into oblivion around 1930, but from its publications, most notably *Twenty Years of the Omar Khayyám Club of America* (1921), one can appreciate its many contributions.

In the chapter "The Cult of the *Rubaiyat,*" Yohannan describes how the Omar cult developed in England and America, and produced an anti-cult to combat it (Yohannan, pp. 199-244). He gives a lively account of this strife. But Omar Khayyam, introduced to the public in the form FitzGerald had shaped him into, was not only the hero (or anti-hero) of scholars, men of letters and artists;

for “Omaritis” had taken hold of businessmen, schoolgirls, and soldiers as well. Especially in America, we find a real “Omar craze.” In Ambrose Potter’s *Bibliography*, published in 1929, we find not only a long list of books and articles pertaining to Omar Khayyam, but also an enumeration of him in different arts and in commercial advertisements: music, drama, films, dances, bookplates, and also tobacco, cigarettes, cigars, fountain pens, coffee, chocolate, perfume, toilet soap, pottery, post cards and crossword puzzles, deriving their name and attraction from the old Persian poet (Potter, p. 205). Omar Khayyam had become an everyman’s poet. Eminent men of letters, like Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, and Arthur Quiller Couch, had borrowed FitzGerald’s quatrains in order to turn them into parodies. After them countless versifiers made their own *Rubaiyat*s, in which almost every subject that moved people could be parodied (Biegstraaten, p. 33). The Omar Khayyam craze began to fade away in the 1920s.

No doubt Omar Khayyam had the greatest impact on literature and society in countries where English was spoken. Among the writers who were deeply influenced by FitzGerald’s Khayyam were T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (D’Ambrosio, passim). But Omar Khayyam was translated and discussed in other countries as well, especially in France and Germany. In his bibliography in 1929, A. G. Potter (pp. 133-58) listed 114 versions of Omar Khayyam’s *Robāʿiyāt* in 25 languages, of which 18 versions are in French and 37 in German. And an endless stream of editions and translations was to follow in the years after 1929.

In France, Omar was introduced by F. Woepcke, who published *L’Algèbre d’Omar Alkhayyàmì* in 1851. In 1867, J. B. Nicolas published *Les Quatrains de Khèyam,* containing 464 quatrains in Persian and French, with extensive comments and notes. Although FitzGerald rejected the Sufi interpretations of Nicolas, the translation of the latter was an important source for his 1868 rendering. Nicolas’ work has been reprinted and translated many times. After Nicolas, many scholars and translators published their own versions of the *Robāʿiyāt*, among them Charles Grolleau, Franz Toussaint, Claude Anet and Mirza Muhammad [Qazvini, q.v.], Arthur Guy, A.-G. E’tessam-Zadeh, and Mahdi Fouladvand.

In his translation, *Rubaijat von Omar Chajjam*, Henry Nordmeyer mentions 31 translations of the *Robāʿiyāt* in German from 1881 to 1963 (Nordmeyer, pp. 102-4). Among the translators we find well-known figures, such as Friedrich Bodenstedt, Graf Adolf von Schack, Friedrich Rosen, Hector Preconi, Hans

Bethge, and Christian Herrnhold Rempis. Rempis, a professor at Tübingen University, founded a German version of the English and American Omar Khayyám clubs. The German club had its own publishing company, Verlag der Deutschen Omar Chajjám-Gesellschaft, where Rempis issued his translation, *Omar Chajjam und seine Vierzeiler*, in 1935. After the Nuremburg laws of 1935, Jewish members of the club were no longer able to take part in its activities, and the club was dissolved in 1937. In Nazi Germany, Khayyam was out of favor. As Rempis stated in 1960, "Omar Khayyam's attitude towards life was not particularly compatible with Nazi doctrine." It was only after the end of the war that the reprints and new translations of Omar Khayyam found their way to German readers (Gittleman, pp. 189-93).

Although the impact of Omar Khayyam on the literary and social scene did not hold the fascination it had at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, there remains to this day a lively interest in his life, philosophy, and poetry. Freethinkers, pictorial artists, composers, choreographers, and poets all over the world were inspired by his work. Mostly, they were influenced by FitzGerald's renditions.

There even appeared a new club in The Netherlands in 1990: Het Nederlands Omar Khayyám Genootschap (The Dutch Omar Khayyám Society). Members gather twice a year and organize plenty of activities. So far the club has published four *Jaarboeken (Year Books)* in Dutch, printed by the "Avalon Pers," a private press belonging to one of its members. It was also responsible for two exhibitions on Omar Khayyam, one in The Hague Museum of the Book, and the other in the Library of Leiden University (Aminrazavi, pp. 275-77).

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