



KHAYYAM, OMAR X. ARABIC TRANSLATIONS OF THE

Although the Arab and Persian literary traditions have been in close contact for centuries, Khayyam only came to the attention of the Arabs as a noteworthy poet at the turn of the 20th century. Before the modern period, one can point to several references to Khayyam in Arabic anthologies and other literary texts, and these have provided extremely valuable material for the study of the literary history and reception of his poetry. However, most mention of Khayyam in the earlier Arabic sources is primarily as an astrologer, mathematician, and philosopher. Khayyam also wrote poetry in Arabic, but this too, along with other pre-modern references to him in Arabic, are described elsewhere (see above, KHAYYAM ii).

The early decades of the 20th century witnessed the rise in Arabic literature of various literary trends such as Romanticism and Symbolism, motivated by a keen orientation westward. A whetted appetite for translations from English and French played a seminal role in shaping the literary production of this period and in directing the Arab poets' and writers' negotiations with their literary tradition. It was at that moment of attentiveness to western literary imports that Khayyam, through Edward FitzGerald's (q.v.; 1809-1883) English translation, was re-introduced into Arabic as a major world poet. Thus, FitzGerald's English translation is the site of the first major encounter with the Persian poet in the modern Arab world, leading to a century of fascination with Khayyam, his life, his representations, and his elusive quatrains. To date,



more than fifty-five translations of the *Rubaiyat* have been published in Arabic, including eight translations into different Arabic dialects (Alsulami, p. 79).

The modern engagement with Khayyam as a poet was launched by Jerji Zaydān's response to a query by As'ad Afandi Salim about the FitzGerald translation in *al-Helāl* 11, 15 January 1903. The journal continued to receive requests for more information about Khayyam, his biography, and the *robā'iyāt* as a genre, all triggered by FitzGerald's work. Consequently, *al-Helāl* published an extended study on Khayyam authored by the Lebanese 'Isā Eskandar Ma'luf (1869-1956) titled "Khayyam and What the Arabs Knew about Him." It included six quatrains translated from the English that Ma'luf rendered into metered Arabic verse.

Although a number of short translations appeared in various journals and magazines earlier, the first Arabic translation of the *Rubaiyat* in book form was by Wadi' Bostāni (1886-1954), published in Cairo in 1912. Bostāni was an Anglophone Lebanese intellectual, lawyer, and poet, who also worked as a translator for the British consulate in Beirut. While he consulted English, French, and German translations, his primary source text was FitzGerald's translation. Bostāni made no effort to go back to the Persian original, and, in fact, he could not have done so because, as he admits in his introduction, he did not know any Persian at all. Bostāni translated 109 quatrains transforming them into seven hemistich *qeṭ'as*. Like Ma'luf before him, Bostāni adhered to a single meter (*kafif*). The issue of meter later took center stage in the debates around the *Rubaiyat* and their translation into Arabic, as translations are sometimes categorized into metered and unmetered (free or in lineated prose) translations. In 1921, the Iraqi Aḥmad Ḥāmed Ṣarrāf (1900-1985) published a lineated prose translation of the *Rubaiyat*, which was later rendered into metered verse by the poet Moḥammad Hāšemi (1898-1973). Ṣarrāf's translation subsequently appeared in his book entitled '*Omar al-Ḳayyām: 'ašroho, siratoho, adaboho, falsafatoho, robā'iyātoho* (1931). Another prose translation was done by the Iraqi poet Jamil Ṣedqi Zahāwi (1862-1936), who used it as basis for a consequent verse translation he produced himself. Zahāwi published the two versions in a volume titled *Robā'iyāt al-Ḳayyām*, which first appeared in 1928. By then, the *Rubaiyat* had become a space for reflecting on and experimenting with meter in Arabic poetry. Aḥmad Ṣāfi Najafi's (1895-1978) translation in verse, published in 1931, is a good example of such experimentation, for he employed multiple meters and organized his



translated quatrains alphabetically based on final rhyming letter. His translation ultimately employed all the Arabic poetic meters and used all the letters of the Arabic alphabet as ending rhymes.

However, the Arabic translations of the *Rubaiyat* are more commonly divided into direct and indirect translations, depending on whether the translator consulted Persian manuscripts or merely relied on translations into other languages. Of course, FitzGerald remained the major source text for the majority of indirect translations. After Bostāni's translation, several indirect translations appeared, such as those made by 'Abd al-Laṭif Naššār (1895-1972, Egypt) in 1917, Moḥammad Sibā'i (1881-1931, Egypt) in 1922, Tawfiq Mofarraj (d. 1968, Lebanon) in 1947, and Aḥmad Zaki Abu Šādi (1892-1955, Egypt) in 1932 and in 1957.

Aḥmad Rāmi's (1892-1981) translation was hailed as the first direct translation from Persian into Arabic when it appeared in a first edition in 1924 and then in a second revised edition in 1932. Rāmi discovered Khayyam's quatrains via Bostāni's translation of FitzGerald's poem. After graduating from the Teachers Institute in Cairo, where he learned English, Rāmi read FitzGerald in the original English. Like many poets and intellectuals of his generation, Rāmi was deeply influenced by English and French poetry, and especially by English Romanticism. He was a member of the Apollo Group, a collective of poets and writers who published a monthly journal under the same name, consisting primarily of translations of English, American, and French poetry (Hafez). It was FitzGerald and the popularity of his translation that set Rāmi on a quest in search of Khayyam in the maze of the available Persian manuscripts.

Rāmi spent the years between 1922 and 1924 studying Persian at the Institute of Oriental Languages in Paris. He examined different Persian manuscripts of the *Rubaiyat* and became aware of other major poets in the Persian tradition such as Sa'di and Ferdowsi (qq.v.). Thus, when translating Khayyam into Arabic, Rāmi looked in two places as he patched his source text together: the various Persian manuscripts on one hand, and Fitzgerald's English poem on the other, which offered some relief from the elusiveness of the originals.

Rāmi translated 167 quatrains without depending on one manuscript exclusively. However, the role of the Persian manuscripts in his project eventually receded, revealing the influence of FitzGerald's poem as the most detectable in his selection of quatrains and their organization. Rāmi's translation is not arranged alphabetically as most of the manuscripts are,



further attesting to his reliance on Fitzgerald's poem when arranging his translation. Rāmi's translation remains the most celebrated and circulated translation of the *Rubaiyat* in Arabic. It has been reprinted twenty-five times, most recently in Cairo in 2006, commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Rāmi's death.

However, the popularity of Rāmi's translation and the continued demand for it in print are both a result of its adaptation into song by Omm Kolṭum (d. 1975). In 1950, the Egyptian diva collaborated with Rāmi and the composer Riyāz Sonbāṭi (d. 1981) to create the "poem" that she would later sing. Omm Kolṭum personally chose fifteen quatrains from Rāmi's translation, editing them and rearranging them in a manner that fit her voice and musical personality. The final product, Omm Kolṭum's "Robā'iyāt al-Ḳayyām," became the most widespread and well-known Khayyam in Arabic, instantly becoming part of the repertoire of popular Arabic song and consecrating Rāmi's translation (or parts of it) as an Arabic poem in its own right. Omm Kolṭum formulated her selections from Rāmi's translation into a coherent Arabic poem about spiritual redemption with resonant political undertones which spoke to the historical moment of Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s. She incorporated her "Robā'iyāt al-Ḳayyām" into a repertoire of songs that expressed dissatisfaction with the continued British presence and voiced a budding nationalist sentiment (Danielson, p. 113-114).

Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* was received into modern Arabic literature as a colonial text, shaped and validated by FitzGerald's translation. The quatrains were, however, gradually absorbed into the repertoire of modern Arabic poetry, not only through the many translations but also through the adaptations, rewritings, and original works inspired by Khayyam and his verses. Arab writers and intellectuals were preoccupied with Khayyam's personality as channeled through the various rewritings of his quatrains into Arabic, sometimes portraying him as an Epicurean free-thinker and at others as a pious man of God. Each Arabic translation fashioned an image of Khayyam in accordance with the translator's views and convictions. The *Rubaiyat* offered Arab poets and intellectuals a space for negotiating the relationship with the West, the role of tradition in the projects of modernization, the evolving definition of poetry and poetic form, and the catalytic intervention of translated texts.



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