DELPHI CLASSICS

Omar Khayyam

Poetical Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

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Omar Khayyam

(1048-1131)

Contents

عمر خیّام

Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

Omar Khayyam

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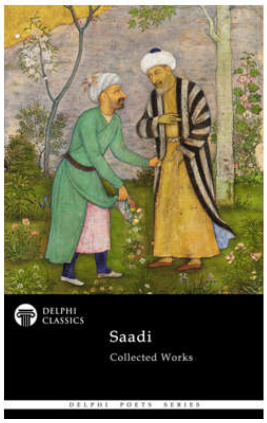

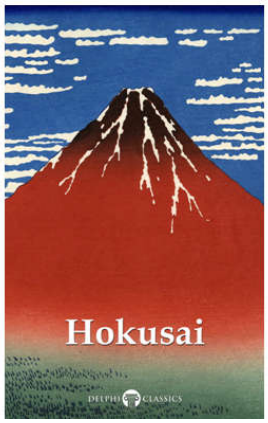

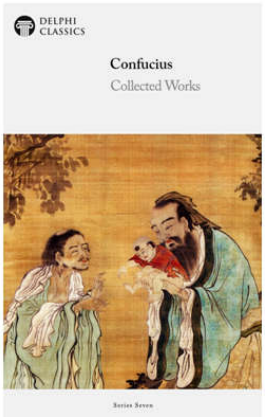

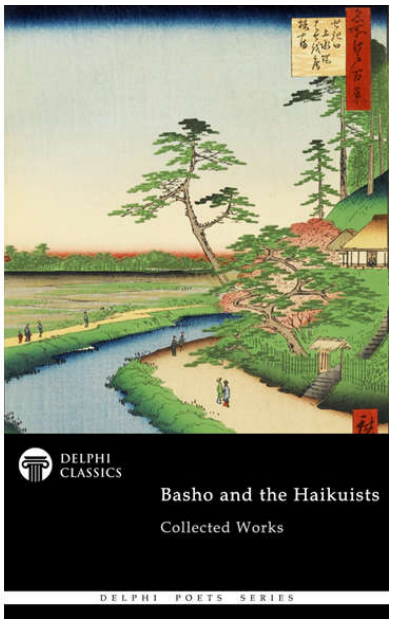

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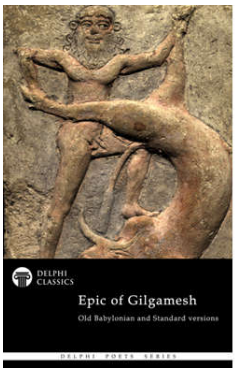

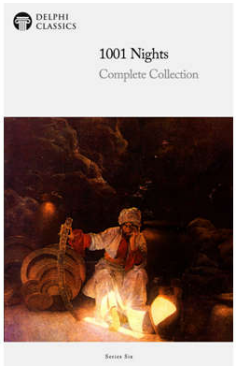

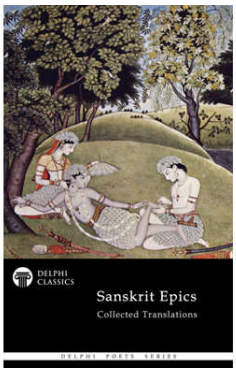

NOTE

When reading poetry on an eReader, it is advisable to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines of poetry to display correctly.

The Life and Poetry of Omar Khayyam

Nishapur, a city in Razavi Khorasan province, Iran — Omar Khayyam's birthplace

Brief Introduction: Omar Khayyam

Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) was a Persian polymath, known for his contributions to mathematics, astronomy, philosophy and poetry. Born in Nishapur, the initial capital of the Seljuk Empire, he lived around the time of the First Crusade. As a mathematician, he is most notable for his work on the classification and solution of cubic equations, wherein he provided a geometric formulation based on the intersection of conics. Khayyam also contributed to a deeper understanding of Euclid's parallel axiom. As an astronomer, he calculated the duration of the solar year with remarkable accuracy, as well as designing the Jalali calendar, a solar calendar with a precise 33-year intercalation cycle, providing the basis for the Persian calendar that is still in use after nearly a thousand years. There is also a tradition of attributing poetry to Khayyam, written in the form of quatrains. These verses became widely known to the English-reading world in a translation by Edward FitzGerald (*Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, 1859), which enjoyed great success in the Orientalism of the *fin de siècle*.

In medieval Persian texts Khayyam is usually simply called Omar Khayyam. Although disputed by some, it has often been assumed that his Persian forebears followed the trade of tent-making, since Khayyam means 'tent-maker' in Arabic. The historian Bayhaqi, who was personally acquainted with the polymath, provides the full details of his horoscope: "he was Gemini, the sun and Mercury being in the ascendant." These details were used by modern scholars to establish his date of birth as 18 May 1048.

Khayyam spent his boyhood in his native Nishapur, at the time a leading metropolis under the Great Seljuk Empire, which had been a major centre of the Zoroastrian religion. His full name, as it appears in Arabic sources, was Abu'l Fath Omar ibn Ibrahim al-Khayyam. His gifts were recognised by his early tutors, who sent him to study under Imam Muwaffaq Nishaburi, the greatest teacher of the Khorasan region, who tutored the children of the highest nobility. Khayyam developed a firm friendship with his esteemed tutor during these formative years. After studying science, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy at Nishapur, in c. 1068 he travelled to the province of Bukhara, where he frequented the renowned library of the Ark. In about 1070 Khayyam moved to Samarkand, where he started to compose his famous *Treatise on Algebra* under the patronage of Abu Tahir Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Alaq, the governor and chief judge of the city. Khayyam was kindly received by the Karakhanid ruler Shams al-Mulk Nasr, who according to Bayhaqi, "showed him the greatest honour, so much so that he would seat beside him on his throne."

In 1073 peace was concluded with Sultan Malik-Shah I, who had made incursions into Karakhanid dominions. At this juncture, Khayyam was invited by the Grand Vizier Nizam al-Mulk to meet Malik-Shah in the city of Marv. The polymath was subsequently commissioned to set up an observatory in Isfahan and lead a group of scientists in carrying out precise astronomical observations aimed at the revision of the Persian calendar. This grand undertaking most likely began with the opening of the observatory in 1074 and ended in 1079, when Khayyam and his colleagues concluded their measurements of the length of the year, reporting it as 365.24219858156 days. Given that the length of the year is changing in the sixth

decimal place over a person's lifetime, this is outstandingly accurate. For comparison, the length of the year at the end of the nineteenth century was 365.242196 days, while today it is 365.242190 days.

After the death of his patron Malik-Shah and his vizier (possibly murdered by the Ismaili order of Assassins), Khayyam fell from favour at court and was soon dispatched on his pilgrimage to Mecca. A possible ulterior motive for his pilgrimage, as reported by Al-Qifti, was a public demonstration of his faith with a view to allaying suspicions of skepticism and confuting the allegations of unorthodoxy (including possible sympathy or adherence to Zoroastrianism) levelled at him by a hostile clergy. Next, Khayyam was invited by the new Sultan Sanjar to Marv to serve as a court astrologer. He was later allowed to return to Nishapur, due to his declining health. Upon his return, Khayyam appears to have followed the life of a recluse.

Omar Khayyam died at the age of 83 in his hometown of Nishapur on 4 December 1131 and he is buried in what is now a large Mausoleum complex dedicated in his name. One of his disciples, Nizami Aruzi, relates a story that in c. 1112 Khayyam was situated in Balkh in the company of Isfizari (one of the scientists he had collaborated with while working on the Jalali calendar), when he made a prophecy that "my tomb shall be in a spot where the north wind may scatter roses over it". Four years after his death, Aruzi located his tomb in a cemetery in a then large and well-known quarter of Nishapur on the road to Marv. As it was believed to have been foreseen by Khayyam, Aruzi found the tomb situated at the foot of a garden-wall over which pear trees and peach trees had thrust their heads and dropped their flowers so that his tombstone was hidden beneath them.

Khayyam was famous during his lifetime not as a poet, but as an astronomer and mathematician. The earliest reference to his having written poetry is found in a biography by al-Isfahani, written 43 years after his death. This view is reinforced by other medieval historians such as Shahrazuri (1201) and Al-Qifti (1255). The earliest allusion to Khayyam's poetry comes from the historian Imad ad-Din al-Isfahani, a younger contemporary, who identifies him as both a poet and a scientist. One of the earliest specimens of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* is from Fakhr al-Din Razi, who in c. 1160 quotes one of his poems (corresponding to quatrain LXII of FitzGerald's first edition). There are occasional quotes of verses attributed to Khayyam in texts attributed to authors of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but these are of doubtful authenticity, causing some scholars to question the entire tradition of verses ascribed to Khayyam. Hans Heinrich Schaeder in 1934 commented that the name of Omar Khayyam "is to be struck out from the history of Persian literature" due to the lack of any material that could confidently be attributed to him. Five of the quatrains later attributed to Khayyam are found as early as 30 years after his death, quoted in *Sindbad-Nameh* (The Fables of Sinbad). While this establishes that these specific verses were in circulation in Khayyam's time or soon after, it does not imply that the verses were his.

Khayyam wrote in what has since become known as the *rubaiyat* style, a four-line verse form in which the first, second and fourth lines typically rhyme. This structure lent itself to condensed and witty observations and reflections on life, death and the human condition. Many of his poems celebrate the joys of the present moment, while others ponder the mysteries of existence and the passage of time. These themes continue to resonate with modern readers today. Though he flourished a thousand years ago, Khayyam can be seen as a kindred spirit to other poets that explore existential themes. His work encourages reflection and invites readers to appreciate the beauty of the world around them.

His fame in the modern period is a direct result of the extreme popularity of the translation of quatrains into English by the Orientalist Edward FitzGerald in 1859. FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* contains loose translations of quatrains from the Bodleian manuscript. It enjoyed so much success that a bibliography compiled in 1929 listed more than 300 separate editions and many more have been published since. FitzGerald's translation employs a rhyme scheme and is metrical and rather free at times. Many of the verses are paraphrased and some of them cannot be confidently traced to the Persian source material. To a large extent, the *Rubaiyat* can be considered original poetry by FitzGerald loosely based on Omar's quatrains rather than a "translation" in the narrow sense. FitzGerald was open about the liberties he had taken with his source material:

> "My translation will interest you from its form, and also in many respects in its detail: very unliteral as it is. Many quatrains are mashed together: and something lost, I doubt, of Omar's simplicity, which is so much a virtue in him."

Investiture scene of Malik-Shah I, from the fourteenth century book 'Jami' al-tawarikh'. Khayyam entered the service of Malik-Shah in 1074.

Illustration of Khayyam by Adelaide Hanscom, c. 1910

Calligraphic manuscript page with three of FitzGerald's Rubaiyat written by William Morris, illustration by Edward Burne-Jones, 1870s

Edward FitzGerald Translation, 1st Edition Text (1859)

Illustrated by Blanche McManus

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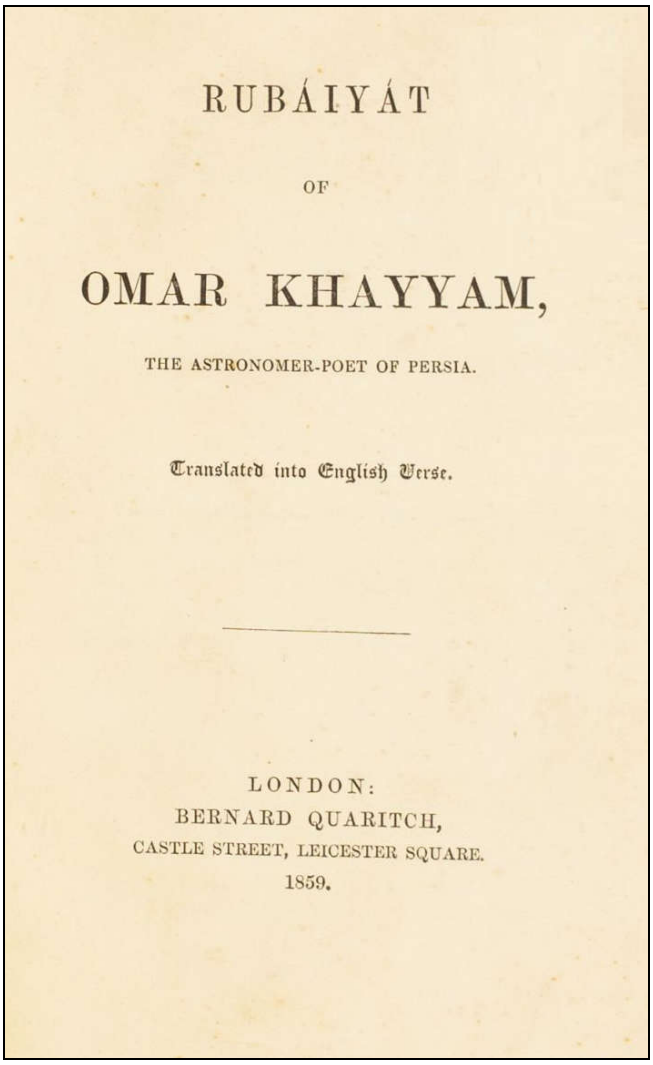

RUBÁIYÁT

OF

OMAR KHAYYAM,

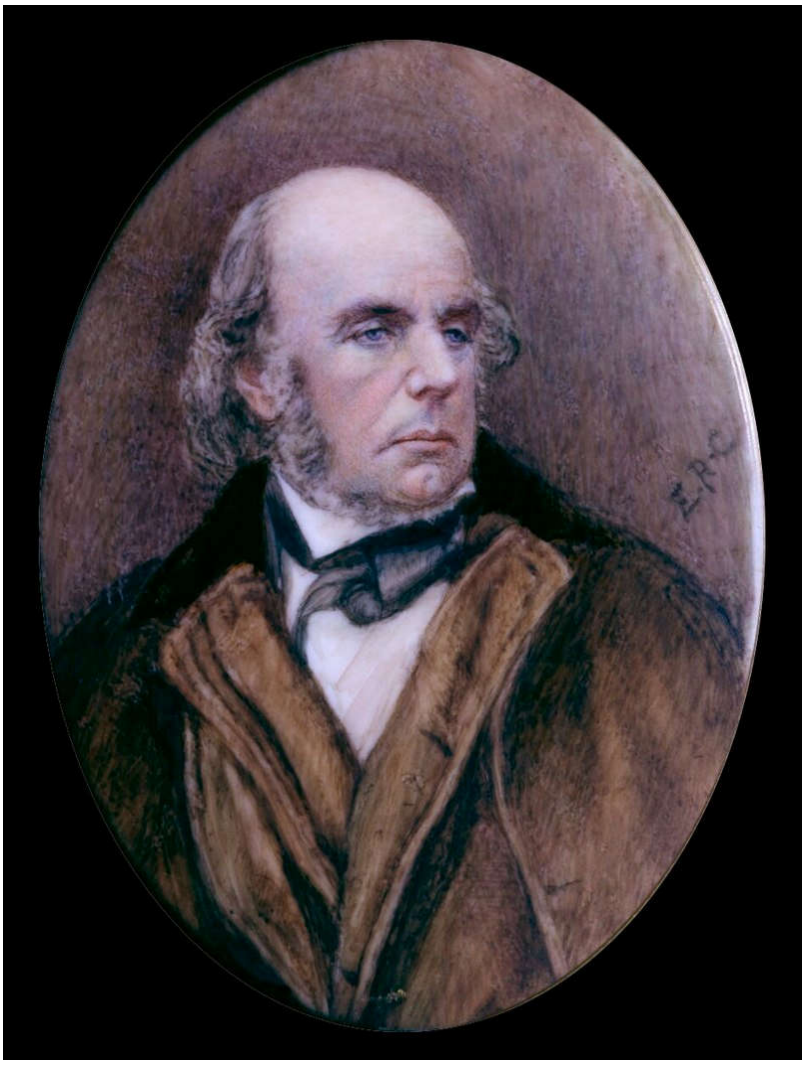
THE ASTRONOMER-POET OF PERSIA.

Translated into English Verse.

LONDON:
BERNARD QUARITCH,
CASTLE STREET, LEICESTER SQUARE.
1859.

The first edition title page of Fitzgerald's translation, 1859

Front cover of the first American edition of Edward FitzGerald's 'Rubáiyát', 1878



Portrait of Edward FitzGerald by Eva Rivett-Carnac, after a photograph of 1873

Illustration by Edmund Joseph Sullivan for Quatrain 11 of FitzGerald's First Version

Illustration by Edmund Joseph Sullivan for Quatrain 51 of FitzGerald's First Version

AND WILDERNESS IS PARADISE ENOW

QUATRAIN XI

End of Sample