

**‘So You Knew FitzGerald’:  
Oscar Wilde and *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám***

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*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Oscar Wilde’s best-known work, which is often identified with *fin-de-siècle*, decadent literature. There are actually two versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the original novella form version published in *Lippincott’s Magazine* in June 1890, and the revised longer version which appeared in book form in 1891. *Lippincott’s* version, which comprised 13 chapters, received a storm of protest from reviewers. It was deemed so immoral that the July issues of *Lippincott’s Magazine* were withdrawn from bookstalls at railway stations. Although Wilde was undefeated by the harsh criticisms, he took some advice seriously. During his trial, in 1895, when Wilde was being tried for ‘gross indecency,’ he admitted that he made some alterations to the original version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* because ‘it had been pointed out . . . by . . . Mr Walter Pater . . . that a certain passage was liable to misconstruction.’<sup>1</sup> When he drafted some new chapters to make the 20-chapter novel, he revised the work in order to tone down some of the homoerotic aspects. The lengthened novel was published by Ward, Lock & Co. in April 1891.

Chapter 3 of the 1891 edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one of the 6 new chapters added to the *Lippincott’s* version. The addition is significant as the chapter tells us about the nature of the hedonism of Lord Henry Wotton, whose philosophy in life is: ‘The only way to get rid of a temptation is yield to it.’<sup>2</sup> Lord Henry Wotton enchants Dorian Gray and others at a luncheon with his decadent *carpe diem* principles of ‘drink and be merry’:

The praise of folly, as he [Lord Henry] went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. Facts fled before her like frightened forest things. Her white feet trod the huge press at which wise Omar sits, till the seething grape-juice rose round her bare limbs in waves of purple bubbles, or crawled in red foam over the vat’s black, dripping, sloping sides. It was an extraordinary improvisation.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Holland, p. 78.

2 Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 183.

3 My underline. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* p. 205.

This passage is usually accompanied by notes to explain ‘Bacchante’, ‘Silenus’ and ‘Omar’. For instance, H. Montgomery Hyde explains that ‘Bacchante’ and ‘Silenus’ are both associated with Bacchus, the god of wine and intoxication, and that ‘Omar’ refers to ‘Omar Khayyám, the Persian astronomer-poet who lived in the eleventh century. His chief work was *The Rubáiyát*, whose verse translation by Edward FitzGerald, first published in 1859, is justly famous.’<sup>4</sup> Yes, that is all very true, but this translation of an 11th-century Persian poem seems to have had much greater relevance for Oscar Wilde and therefore warrants more than a few lines of explanation. In this paper, I would like to show Wilde’s personal attachment to FitzGerald’s *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and consider the hitherto unnoted allusions to *Omar Khayyám* in Wilde’s works.

First of all, when we come across *Omar Khayyám* in Wilde’s works, we should be aware that it was a truly contemporary poem; most English people were not acquainted with the *Rubáiyát* until just before *Dorian Gray* was published. Arthur Ransome, who wrote the first serious study of Wilde, describes 1854, the year Wilde was born, thus:

Leigh Hunt, De Quincey, and Macaulay were alive. Wordsworth had only been dead four years. Tennyson was writing “Maud” and “The Idylls of the King.” Borrow was wandering in wild Wales and finishing “The Romany Rye.” Browning was preparing “Men and Women” for the press. Dickens was the novelist of the day, and had half a dozen books yet to write. Thackeray was busy on “The Newcomes.” Matthew Arnold was publishing his “Poems.” FitzGerald was working underground in the mine from which he was to extract the roses of Omar.<sup>5</sup>

It was in 1859, five years after Wilde’s birth, that Edward FitzGerald’s translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* was published by Bernard Quaritch. It caused no commotion at all for a while. Owing to FitzGerald’s eccentricity, which made him take “more pains to avoid fame than others do to seek it,” the work was slow to achieve popularity.<sup>6</sup> It was by pure luck that it caught the eyes of D.G. Rossetti and A.C. Swinburne in 1861, and the remaining copies were rescued from the ‘penny box’ outside Quaritch’s bookshop. They became fascinated by the poem and introduced it to their friends in and out of their Pre-Raphaelite circle.<sup>7</sup> Before long, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, George Meredith and John Ruskin had all turned into ardent admirers of *Omar Khayyám*.<sup>8</sup>

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4 H. Montgomery Hyde, p. 159.

5 My underline. Ransome, p. 17.

6 Wright, *Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald*, Vol. 1, p. x.

7 Swinburne recounts his discovery of *Omar Khayyám* in his letter of 4 March 1896 to Clement King Shorter, who was then president of the Omar Khayyám Club. See *Swinburne Letters*, 6: 96. He retells the story in a letter of 5 October 1904 to A. C. Benson. See *Swinburne Letters*, 6: 187–88.

8 Ruskin was so moved when he read *Omar Khayyám* in September 1863 that he wrote an enthusiastic letter to the then-unidentified “Translator of Omar Khayyám”:

My dear and very dear Sir,

I do not in the least know who you are, but I do with all my soul pray you to find and translate

Edward FitzGerald died in 1883. Six years later, in 1889, the fifth and final revised edition was published as part of *The Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald*, which ensured the poem's widespread popularity in the 1890s. As Daniel Karlin writes, in 'the decade before Edward FitzGerald's death in 1883, his *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* . . . became a fashion. . . . In the decade following his death, it became the rage.'<sup>9</sup> Fascination with Omar even gave birth to an 'Omar Khayyám Club' in 1892, whose membership included such noted literary figures as H. G. Wells, J. M. Barrie, Edmund Gosse and George Gissing.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Norman Page remarked, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* was a "*fin de siècle* poem born before its time."<sup>11</sup>

Oscar Wilde is often regarded as the most notorious representative of *fin-de-siècle*, and his relatively short career as a writer coincides with the period when *Omar Khayyám* was at the very height of its popularity. Wilde's first published work was *Poems*, in 1881. *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* were published in 1888, followed by *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890. He then became popular as a playwright, but his successful career came to an abrupt end when the Marquess of Queensberry left his abusive card at Wilde's club that read 'For Oscar Wilde posing sodomite [*sic*]', on 18 February, 1895.

Partly owing to its extraordinary popularity and partly due to the poem being half translation and half original work, FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* had rarely been studied as a serious work of art. Erik Gray, in the issue of *Victorian Poetry* commemorating the bicentennial of the birth of FitzGerald and the sesquicentennial of his *Rubáiyát* in 2009, summarizes the history of the poem's reception, and shows how it was neglected until *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald* was published in four volumes in 1980. *Omar Khayyám's* influence on the later generation poets has been pointed out by Vinnie-Marie D'Ambrosio in *Eliot Possessed: T. S. Eliot and FitzGerald's Rubáiyát* (1989). Other than T. S. Eliot, her main subject, she mentions, for instance, Robert Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra," Rudyard Kipling's "The Rupaiyat of Omar Kal'vin," and A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. D'Ambrosio also refers to Ezra Pound, who named his son "Omar" in 1926. However, she does not mention the name of Oscar Wilde, and thus far, nobody has pointed to the influence of *Omar Khayyám* on Wilde. And yet, as we shall see, Wilde had reasons to have a stronger attachment for FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* than his contemporaries.

*Omar Khayyám* is mentioned a number of times in Wilde's letters, but the most noteworthy is this letter he wrote to Louis Wilkinson in 1899:

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some more of Omar Khayyám for us. I never did — till this day — read anything so glorious, to my mind as this poem — (10th. 11th. 12th. pages if one were to choose) — More — more — please more — and that I am ever gratefully and respectfully yours.

See Terhune, p. 212. The letter finally reached FitzGerald in 1873, after being handed to Charles Eliot Norton of Harvard University, who discovered the name of the translator in his talk with Thomas Carlyle, who was a close friend of FitzGerald's.

9 Daniel Karlin, p. xi.

10 See *The Book of the Omar Khayyám Club 1892-1910*, pp. 211-12.

11 Page, p. 152.

So you knew FitzGerald. His *Omar* is a masterpiece of art: I feel proud that a kinsman of mine — Sir Ralph Ouseley — brought the first manuscript of Omar Kháyýám [*sic*] to England: to Europe perhaps: it is the beautiful Bodleian manuscript: which I suppose you have seen.<sup>12</sup>

Louis Wilkinson was a schoolboy at Radley, Oxford, eager to become acquainted with Wilde, whom he had never met. He seems to have told Wilde that he liked Shakespeare and *Omar* in order to flatter him and attract his attention.

Wilde's memory is incorrect here because it was in fact Sir Ralph's son, Sir William Ouseley (1767–1842), the Orientalist, who found the beautiful manuscript of the *rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám, copied at Shiraz in Persia in 1460, and brought it back to England. The Ouseley manuscript was purchased by Oxford University's Bodleian Library in 1844, and it was this manuscript that Edward FitzGerald mainly consulted when he translated and composed his version of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

The Ouseleys were a prominent Anglo-Irish family. According to Robert Harborough Sherard, a friend of Wilde's who later became the author of *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1906), remembers Wilde proudly talking about his connection with the Ouseleys: 'Thomas Wilde married a Miss Fynn, who was related by descent to the eminent families of Surridge and Ouseley of Dunmore in the county of Galway. The Ouseleys were most distinguished people.'<sup>13</sup> Wilde's recognition of his kinship with Sir Ralph Ouseley must have strengthened his affinity for *Omar Khayyám*.

It is not certain when and how Wilde became acquainted with the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. However, it is definite that he was already familiar with it before the publication of *The Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald* made the poem widely accessible. As early as 1887, Wilde makes an allusion to it in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," published in the *Court and Society Review*. Lord Arthur Savile becomes depressed when a chiromantist reads ominous signs on his palms. He mourns over his doom using metaphors from *Omar Khayyám*:

Were we no better than chessmen, moved by an unseen power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour or for shame?<sup>14</sup>

These metaphors of "chessmen" and "the potter" are clearly allusions to the quatrains of *Omar Khayyám* in which the relationship between God and Man are represented through the metaphors of a chess player and his chessmen, and a potter and his pot.<sup>15</sup> Thus, quatrain 49 runs:

12 *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 787–88.

13 Sherard, p. 8.

14 Oscar Wilde, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," *Complete Shorter Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), p. 27.

15 This metaphor of "potter and pot" is also used by Walter Pater in "Sebastian Van Stork." See Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits*, p. 108. Pater had a copy of the third edition of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1872) in his own library. See Inman, ed., *Walter Pater's Reading*, p. 335.

'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days  
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:  
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,  
And one by one back in the Closet lays.<sup>16</sup>

The potter-pot relationship is sung in several quatrains. For example, in quatrain 60:

And, strange to tell, among the Earthen Lot  
Some could articulate, while others not:  
And suddenly one more impatient cried —  
“Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?”

Similarly, in quatrain 63:

None answer'd this; but after Silence spake  
A Vessel of a more ungainly Make:  
“They sneer at me for leaning all awry;  
What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?”

To the *fin-de-siècle* readers who had only recently familiarized themselves with the *Rubáiyát*, these allusions to *Omar Khayyám* must have been easy to identify.

In 1888, Wilde published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of children's tales, which included 'The Nightingale and the Rose.' This was not his original tale but is actually his retelling of a well-known Persian fairy tale of a nightingale who falls in love with a white rose and sings to it until he sacrifices his life for the beauty of the rose, which in the end, turns into a red rose. Both the nightingale and the rose are important motifs in Persian literature, and they appear repeatedly in *Omar Khayyám* as well. Quatrain 6 is perhaps the most significant:

And David's Lips are lock't; but in divine  
High piping Pehlevi, with 'Wine! Wine! Wine!  
'Red Wine!'— the Nightingale cries to the Rose  
That yellow Cheek of her's to 'Incarnadine.

The nightingale in Wilde's tale also sings his life out in order to 'incarnadine' the rose.

Allusions to *Omar Khayyám* can also be found in Wilde's last literary production, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). It is a 654-line poem bearing not his name but his number in prison, 'C.3.3.' It records his harrowing memories of a fellow prisoner who was hanged for murdering his wife.

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16 My quotations are from the first edition, which was regarded as the “best edition” by the lovers of *Omar Khayyám*.

Concerning this ballad, various influences have been noted elsewhere, including the influence of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, which was published in 1896, during Wilde's imprisonment. According to Frank Harris, Wilde received a copy of the book from a friend, Reginald Turner, and 'owed most of his inspiration [for *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*] to *A Shropshire Lad*.<sup>17</sup> Ruth Robins also gives an incisive comparison of the poetry of Housman and Wilde, who "tried to articulate same-sex love, the love that dare not speak its name, via the strategy of a poetic code."<sup>18</sup> While the similarities between *A Shropshire Lad* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* are persuasive, it should be added that they both have an echo of the same poem—viz. that of *Omar Khayyám*.<sup>19</sup>

It is in the refrain of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that we detect a striking echo of *Omar Khayyám*:

I never saw a man who looked  
 With such a wistful eye  
Upon that little tent of blue  
Which prisoners call the sky,<sup>20</sup>

Let us now consider the 52nd quatrain of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*:

And that inverted Bowl we call The Sky,  
 Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,  
 Lift not thy hands to *It* for help — for *It*  
 Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

Not only does Wilde imitate the rhythms found in FitzGerald's translation, but he refers to the sky using the word "tent," which has a strong association with Omar Khayyám. "Khayyám" in Persian means, literally, a "tent-maker," a notion which was derived from his being also an astronomer, one who studied the "tent," i.e., the sky. This was known to the readers of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, as it had been explained by FitzGerald in his introduction. Indeed, Omar Khayyám was often specifically referred to as "the tent-maker" by his admirers.<sup>21</sup> Wilde's

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17 Harris, *Oscar Wilde*, pp. 227ff.

18 It is worth noting that FitzGerald's homosexuality was also suspected by Havelock Ellis:

In a writer of the first order, Edward FitzGerald, to whom we owe the immortal and highly individualized version of *Omar Khayyám*, it is easy to trace an element of homosexuality, though it appears never to have reached full and conscious development. (Ellis, 1: 50–51)

19 D'Ambrosio refers to Housman's stanzas as imitative of *Omar Khayyám*. D'Ambrosio, *Eliot Possessed*, p. 103.

20 My underline. Oscar Wilde, *Complete Poetry*, p. 152. See also p. 155 and p. 165.

21 For example, Swinburne, in a letter recounting his first encounter with the translation, writes, "As to the immortal tent-maker himself, I believe I may claim to be one of his earliest English believers." See *Swinburne Letters*, 6: 96.

use of the word "tent" in reference to the sky in this stanza, therefore, is a double allusion to *Omar Khayyám*. This allusion adds a profound dimension to the image of the prisoner looking wistfully at the sky, the sky of which *Omar Khayyám* sings, but a sky that gives no religious succour.

Right from the beginning of his writing career, Oscar Wilde has been criticized for being derivative — or plagiaristic. His first volume of *Poems* was rejected by the library of the Oxford Union because these poems were:

for the most part not by their putative father at all, but by a number of better known and more deservedly reputed authors. They are in fact by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sidney, by John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, By Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more. . . . The Union Library already contains better and fuller editions of all of these poets.<sup>22</sup>

He did not seem to mind as he went on borrowing blatantly. He once wrote that the 'originality, I mean, which we ask from the artist, is originality of treatment, not of subject', and then went on to state in the style of aphorism:

It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything.<sup>23</sup>

FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* was certainly one more source of his creative appropriation, but it was probably somewhat more special for Wilde because of his personal connection with this famous poem.

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22 Quoted in Ellman, p. 146.

23 Wilde, 'Olivia at the Lyceum,' *Selected Journalism*, p. 54.



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