

The Suspicious Copy of Khayyam and Graves

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Abstract: This article explores the intriguing encounter between Robert Graves, a renowned British poet and scholar, and a suspicious copy of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Graves's investigation into this manuscript, believed to be a more authentic or original version of the famous Persian work, raises important questions regarding literary authenticity, translation, and the preservation of ancient texts. Through examining the context of the Rubaiyat's various translations, particularly Edward Fitzgerald's, the article sheds light on Graves's fascination with uncovering hidden truths in historical manuscripts and his deep engagement with the legacy of Khayyam's poetry.

Key points: Rubaiyat, schola, manuscript, role.

Introduction

Robert Graves (1895–1985) was a poet, novelist, and scholar with a keen interest in ancient texts and lost works of literature. Graves was deeply fascinated by the poetic legacy of Omar Khayyam, a Persian philosopher and mathematician whose *Rubaiyat* has captured the imaginations of readers across the world. Among the various versions of Khayyam's work, Graves's encounter with a particular "suspicious copy" sparked his curiosity and led to an exploration of its origins and authenticity. This article delves into the details of Graves's discovery, the manuscript's mysterious provenance, and its significance in the context of Khayyam's work.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

The *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam is a celebrated collection of quatrains (four-line poems) that reflect the poet's philosophical and existential musings on themes such as love, fate, and the fleeting nature of life. Originally written in Persian in the 11th century, the *Rubaiyat* became widely known in the West thanks to Edward Fitzgerald's 1859 English translation. However, Fitzgerald's version is often considered a loose interpretation rather than a direct translation, as it infused Khayyam's work with a romantic and philosophical tone that was distinct from the original.

While Fitzgerald's translation helped popularize Khayyam's poetry, it also led to debates about the accuracy and authenticity of the work's various versions. It is against this backdrop that Robert Graves came to examine a "suspicious copy" of the *Rubaiyat* that claimed to be closer to the original Persian text.

Materials.

The Suspicious Manuscript

The manuscript that caught Graves's attention was believed to be an earlier, more authentic version of the *Rubaiyat*. Dating possibly to the 12th century, it was said to contain a closer rendering of Khayyam's original work than Fitzgerald's famous translation. However, its origins were unclear, and its authenticity remained in question. Scholars had different theories about whether the manuscript was a genuine relic or a later reproduction of Khayyam's poetry.

Graves, known for his intellectual curiosity and rigorous approach to historical texts, was intrigued by the possibility that this manuscript contained more of the poet's true voice. In his research, he sought to understand whether this version revealed aspects of Khayyam's philosophy that had been overlooked or misinterpreted in later versions, particularly the highly romanticized Western translations.

Research and methods.

The Role of Translation and Literary Authenticity

One of the primary questions Graves grappled with was the nature of translation itself and its effect on literary meaning. Graves, like many other scholars, believed that translation was not merely the act of rendering words from one language to another but rather a complex process of interpretation that could alter the essence of a text. As a translator of classical works such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Graves was acutely aware of the delicate balance between staying true to the original and rendering a text in a way that resonated with a new audience.

In his study of the *Rubaiyat*, Graves saw the potential for new insights into Khayyam's work, especially in light of the differing translations over the centuries. Fitzgerald's version, while elegant, was viewed by many as a creative adaptation rather than a faithful translation, and Graves sought to explore whether the *suspicious copy* provided a more accurate reflection of Khayyam's original voice and intentions.

Result and discussion.

Graves's Investigation and Its Impact

Graves's interest in the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, particularly this suspicious manuscript, helped fuel his broader scholarly pursuits in literary history and translation studies. Although he never fully resolved the mystery of the manuscript's origins, his research illuminated several key issues: the role of cultural context in literary interpretation, the impact of translation on meaning, and the ways in which works of literature evolve over time.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the manuscript, Graves's exploration raised important questions about the nature of textual authenticity. Was the manuscript an authentic version of Khayyam's work, or was it another reimagining of the poet's thoughts? Regardless of the manuscript's true origins, Graves's investigation sparked renewed interest in the *Rubaiyat* and the complexities of translating ancient texts.

Conclusion

Robert Graves's encounter with the suspicious copy of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam highlights the ongoing tension between translation and authenticity in the preservation of literary works. Graves's scholarly approach to the manuscript, coupled with his broader interest in ancient texts, underscores the importance of critically examining the origins and interpretations of classic works. The *Rubaiyat*, with its rich philosophical content, continues to inspire debate over translation accuracy and the transmission of ideas across cultures and time periods. Graves's inquiry into Khayyam's poetry remains a testament to the enduring relevance of literature in understanding human experience and intellectual history.

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