

'Momentary Glimpse'

Final Report of the conference The Legacy of Omar Khayyam
(6-7 July 2009, Leiden University)

The conference was intended to highlight not only Khayyam as a mathematician, philosopher and astronomer, but also the reception of Khayyam in various literary traditions. It was very successful, in terms of academic achievement and of networking and establishing new projects in the future.

The opening in the Music Hall (aan het IJ) in Amsterdam was especially successful, with a peerless performance from Het Nederlands Kamerkoor, singing a wide range of classical Western and Persian compositions based on the quatrains of Omar Khayyam. This impressive opening affected the programme in the following days, especially because of the fruitful cooperation with the musicologist Professor Rokus de Groot (University of Amsterdam).

The first day began with the key note address of Dick Davis (Ohio State University, USA) with the intriguing title "Too good a poem to be faithful?" in which he discussed "the notion of 'fidelity' implied in Chesterton's remark, and whether it applies to FitzGerald's Rubaiyat." After giving a background of translated literature in English in the nineteenth century, and various English views on literary translations, Davis gave a meticulous exposition of the way the spirit and the sentiments of Khayyam's poetry were transmitted into English poetry in the nineteenth century through Edward FitzGerald's adaptations of the quatrains. Presenting the challenging idea that Khayyam as a poet never existed and that the poems attributed to him belong to other poets, Dick Davis opened a very informative and enthusiastic discussion.

Khayyam's reception in various literary traditions

Presenters outline the reception of Khayyam in the Netherlands, Russia, Turkey, in Arabic-speaking countries, India, and Iran. One panel was devoted to the reception of Khayyam's quatrains in Dutch. The first speaker was Hans de Bruijn (Leiden University) with his paper entitled "Persian quatrains in Holland." De Bruijn explained how, from the nineteenth century onwards, Persian quatrains became fashionable in Dutch poetry. After briefly referring to two great Dutch poets Pieter Cornelis Boutens (1870-1943) and Johan Hendrik Leopold (1865-1925), De Bruijn concentrated on their common source, an anthology of Persian quatrains in two parts published in 1906 under the titles *Golzâr-e ma'refat* and *La Roseaie du Savoir* respectively. The author of these Persian and French anthologies was a Persian, Hoceÿne-Azad, who was a physician at the provincial Qajar court of Isfahan. He traveled to London and Paris, but later settled in Paris, where he concentrated on European and Persian poetry. De Bruijn gave a vivid picture of Hoceÿne-Azad's life and how he tried to introduce treasures from Persian literary tradition to the western public. The next speaker was Marco Goud (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) with the paper "Khayyam's impact on modern Dutch literature," which offered an invaluable overview of Khayyam's reception in modern Dutch literature, covering Dutch translators such as Chris van Balen (1910), J.H. Leopold (1911), Willem de Mérode (1931) and several other poets. Goud's focus was on P.C. Boutens (1913), who was fascinated by Khayyam's quatrains all his life. Another contribution investigating the Dutch reception was by Jos Biegstraaten (Chairman of Dutch Omar Khayyam Society), who presented a paper entitled "How Omar Inspired Dutch Visual Artists." As the title indicates, the author discussed the work of four Dutch artists who were inspired by Khayyam's quatrains: Willem Arondéus (1894-1943), Ger Gerrits (1893-1965), Siep van den Berg (1920-1998) and Theo Forrer (1923-2004). The final contribution was by Dick van Halsema (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) who offered an interesting paper with the title "Bitter Certainty: J.H. Leopold on Omar Khayyam." In his paper, Van Halsema discussed how the poet Jan Hendrik Leopold (1865-1925) focused on philosophy between 1900 and 1906, seeking to solve the problem of human loneliness. He studied Stoa, Epicurus, Spinoza, Descartes, Hume, and Kant closely, and then, in 1904, he found Omar Khayyam. As Halsema writes, "Omar's poetry and his view of life offer Leopold exactly what he is looking for after having returned from philosophy disillusioned. In Omar, Leopold recognized the ultimate uncompromised acceptance of the meaninglessness of human existence. The only certainty

given to man is the momentary glimpse. Its result is no less than the justification of art, an art without symbolic pretensions."

Two presentations were devoted to the Russian reception of Khayyam. Firuza Abdullaeva (University of Oxford) and Charles Melville (Cambridge University) jointly presented a paper entitled "The Russian reception of Khayyam: from text to image." This paper showed the extreme popularity of Khayyam in Russia, even before Fitzgerald's translations were published. The English translation only added to Khayyam's popularity. The authors investigated how different translations of a single quatrain were made and how a large number of images, usually erotic, were made based on these translations. The paper "Omar Khayyam as a Russian poet: a story of translation and appropriation" by Natalia Chalisova (Russian State University) emphasized the contemporary popularity of Khayyam and the ready availability of editions of his quatrains, from large bookstores to tiny book-stalls. Chalisova's examination for this striking popularity were based on three items: firstly, translation history and how different translations in each generation helped to popularize Khayyam; secondly, how a literary forgery acquires national value and prestige (D. Serebryakov "claimed Omar Khayyam for the nation" in 2000 by stating that Khayyam's native town was in Tataria); thirdly, how Khayyam's poetry harmonizes with Russian poetry in form and content.

Sytske Sötemann (Independent scholar) offered the paper "Quatrains of Omar Khayyam in Turkish and Turkish quatrains" in which she showed that although Ottoman poets were deeply influenced by Persian poetry, they avoided composing quatrains, preferring other literary forms. Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884-1958) was an exception, as he tried to master all the forms and genres of Ottoman poetry. In his efforts, Beyatlı translated Khayyam and introduced his poetry to Turkish people. Two papers were devoted to the role Khayyam played in the Arab world. In his paper "Ahmad Rami's Arabic translation of the Quatrains of Omar Khayyam," Jan Just Witkam (Leiden University) examined the translations of the Egyptian poet Ahmad Muhammad Rami (1892-1981) and how his translations were sung by the famous singers Umm Kulthum (c. 1904-1975) and Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab (1907-1991). Asad Jaber (Leiden University) devoted his paper, "'I came like Water, and like Wind I go'" to Khayyam's popularity in the Arab world, focusing on innumerable editions. The Indian reception of Khayyam was covered by A. Rangarajan (Independent scholar) who presented the paper "Attempts at embedding Rubáiyát into Indian Philosophic thought." In this paper, the author concentrated on heretic

religions in India and how Omar Khayyam's philosophy matches the tenets of these religions.

Two papers were presented on the reception of Khayyam in modern Iran. Ali Dehbashi's (Bukhara Journal) "Khayyam Studies in Iran: an Evaluative Survey" offered a substantial discussion about the publications on Khayyam in the twentieth century, showing how a number of authors disapprove of Khayyam's ideas while the majority embrace his philosophy. As Dehbashi pointed out, "1,200 Persian editions of Khayyam's Quatrains, edited by Iranian scholars, have been published to date. What is more, 165 volumes on the poetry and ideas of Khayyam from various standpoints as well as 519 articles in the field of Khayyam Studies are available in Persian." The second paper was by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden University) who in his paper "'Wash me in wine when I go': The Ethics of Khayyam's Quatrains and their Social Implications'" examined Khayyam as a national icon, investigating why Khayyam is regarded as a heretic by a majority of clergy and traditional religious classes, while modern intellectuals, whether secular or religious, regard Khayyam as a free-thinker.

In addition to the reception of Khayyam, several papers were presented studying Khayyam based on his contemporary sources and context. In "Reading the *Ruba'iyat* as 'Resistance Literature,'" Mehdi Aminrazavi (University of Mary Washington) examined the quatrains in the framework of Islamic intellectual history and why Khayyam and several other philosophers such as Fārābī, Avicenna, Rāzī and Bīrūnī were accused of heresy. Aminrazavi considered Khayyam's poetry as intellectual resistance literature, arguing that these Persian intellectuals reacted "to the closing of the Muslim mind by using the poetic license to criticize Islamic orthodoxy. (...) By questioning the underlying epistemological certainty of the theologians, he argued for the futility of such debates. As the following quatrain suggests:

I saw a wise man who did not heed
For caste or creed, for faith or worldly greed;
And free from truth and quest, from path and goal,
He sat at ease, from earth and heaven freed."

Another contribution examining Khayyam and his contemporaries was by Alexander H. Morton (University of London) who in his paper "Some Omarian quatrains from the lifetime of Omar Khayyam" drew attention to an overlooked anthology compiled by Abu 'l-Qasim Nasr b. Ahmad b.

'Amr al-Shadani al-Nishapuri during the reign of the Ghaznavid Mas'ud III (492-508/1099-1115). The contribution of Sunil Sharma (Boston University), "The Birth of a Poet: 'Umar Khayyam in Biographical Dictionaries and Anthologies," offered a very insightful analysis of Khayyam's popularity before he was made famous in the west in the nineteenth century. Sharma examined many Persian poetic biographical dictionaries, including those from the Indo-Persian tradition, showing that these works were important for Khayyam's discoveries in the nineteenth century.

Khayyam as a scientist

Several papers were presented on Khayyam as a scientist. The first speaker was Jan P. Hogendijk (University of Utrecht) with the paper "Khayyam and Isfahani Geometrical Art?" in which he discussed the very complicated tiling patterns in the North Cupola of the Friday Mosque, probably designed by Khayyam. The next contribution was by Mohammad Bagheri (University of Tehran), under the title of "Between Tavern and *Madrassa*: Umar Khayyam the Scientist." Bagheri examined Khayyam's classification of cubic equations, his commentary on Euclid's *Elements*, and Khayyam's scientific achievements. The paper "The mathematician Omar al-Khayyami and his rebirth as the (fictitious) poet Omar Khayyam" by Francois de Blois (SOAS), examined Khayyam's personality. De Blois focused on biographical sources of Khayyam's time, showing that he was a scientist rather than a poet. A specific type of poetry became attached to his name after his death.

Khayyam is also famous for his contribution to the theory of music. In his specialized paper, with the title "Omar Khayyam's Musical Legacy in the Netherlands" Rokus de Groot gave an overview of compositions by Dutch composers. In addition to this aspect of Khayyam's musical reception, De Groot's paper concentrated on the following questions: "Which perspectives and meanings do they [quatrains] emphasize in their musical settings and how? To what extent does linear temporality play a role? Which meanings prevail? Are those meanings brought into any form of polarity, related to musical structures and processes? How can their musical settings be positioned between spirituality and secularity? Are there traces of musical orientalism in dealing with these perspectives and meanings?" In addition to De Groot's invaluable contribution, two other papers were devoted to this topic. Gabrielle van den Berg (Leiden University) offered a lucid examination of how Khayyam's quatrains were set to music and sung in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, in her paper entitled "Omar Khayyam and the

Performance of Quatrains in Central Asia." The specific genre of quatrains that were attributed to Khayyam in these areas is identified with *falak* (complaints to the heavens). Amir Hosein Pourjavady (University of Tehran) presented "Omar Khayyam on the Science of Music." In this paper, Pourjavady discussed Khayyam's famous musical treatise describing tetrachords. By discussing how, on the basis of Greek music theory, Khayyam classified tetrachords in three genera of diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic, Pourjavady demonstrated Khayyam's contribution to the science of music.

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