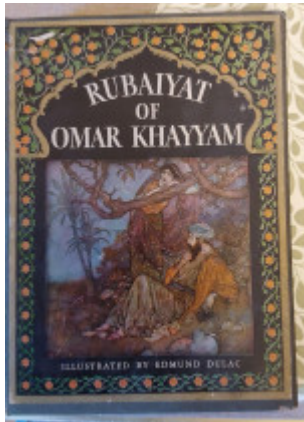


The dark Epicureanism in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Post by “Kalosyni” of February 16, 2026 at 2:44 PM

I just found a second book in the attic! (published in 1937 with illustrations by Edmund Dulac).



I asked Google the following question:

Did Edward Fitzgerald make mistakes when he translated the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam?

AI Overview:

Yes, Edward Fitzgerald made numerous, intentional, and often admitted "mistakes" (or rather, liberties) when he translated

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Rather than a strict, literal translation, Fitzgerald created a "transmogrification" or "tessellation" of the original Persian quatrains, resulting in a work that is more of an English classic inspired by Khayyam than a direct translation.

Here are the specific ways Fitzgerald diverged from the original:

1. Misreadings and Translation Errors

- **Literal Failures:** Critics and scholars, including E.B. Cowell (who taught Persian to Fitzgerald), noted that Fitzgerald occasionally struggled with the language, leading to direct errors in understanding the original text.
- **Opposite Meanings:** In some instances, Fitzgerald misunderstood the Persian so completely that he made Khayyam say the exact opposite of what was written.
- **Misread Words:** Scholars have pointed out that he occasionally misread words, such as mistaking *mānam* (I remain) for *mātam* (grief/tears), which changed the meaning of the verse.

2. Intentional Alterations ("Transmogrification")

- **"Mashed" Quatrains:** FitzGerald combined lines from different, separate quatrains to create a new, cohesive poem.
- **Invented Verses:** Several stanzas in the *Rubaiyat* do not exist in the Persian original and were invented by FitzGerald himself.
- **Refusal to Correct:** When informed of errors by his mentor, Cowell, FitzGerald sometimes refused to correct them because he felt his version fit the "spirit" of the poem better.
- **Changed Tone:** FitzGerald turned what was sometimes a, at times, pessimistic or philosophical, at times, mystical original into a more consistently hedonistic, "carpe diem" ("seize the day") narrative that resonated with Victorian skeptics.

3. Cultural and Ideological Differences

- **Sufi vs. Skeptic:** While the original Persian often features spiritual, Sufi, or mystical undertones, FitzGerald's version downplays this in favor of a secular, skeptical, and Epicurean tone.
- **Interpretation of the "Saki":** The "Thou" or "Saki" (cup-bearer) in the original, who is often a young, budding male, was interpreted by FitzGerald in a way that fit the romanticized, often slightly homoerotic tone common in some Victorian intellectual circles, rather than the original cultural context.

Conclusion:

While FitzGerald did make technical, linguistic mistakes, his biggest "mistakes" were, by his own admission, intentional, aimed at creating a poetic masterpiece rather than a dictionary translation. The resulting *Rubaiyat* is widely recognized as a "transcreation" that is more of a 19th-century English masterpiece than a literal 11th-century Persian one.