The Great 'Umar Khayyam

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Some ʿUmārian Quatrains from the Lifetime of ʿUmar Khayyām

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It is well known that the earliest independent manuscripts or substantial collections of rubāʾīs explicitly attributed to Khayyām date from no earlier than the fifteenth century, some three hundred years after he lived. Rubāʾīyyāt given under his name have been found in anthologies and other works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; discoveries of this kind continue to be made. Yet, so far as I am aware, the earliest one so far known is the single quatrain found in the Risāla fī ʿl-tanbīḥ of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, which was written in the late twelfth century;¹ the same poem and one other are quoted as Khayyām’s in the Mirṣād al-ʿĪbād of the Sufi Najm al-Dīn Dāya, also of Rayy, which is datable to 620/1223.² These have long been known; the earliest of them comes from the best part of a century later than ʿUmar’s death.

The quatrains presented here belong to another category, ones which are quoted anonymously, but which occur in the later corpus under Khayyām’s name. Not many have been discovered from before the thirteenth century, though the number has recently been increased. Four quatrains and one single verse in the Sindbād-nāma of Ẓahīrī Samarqandī, dating from 566-7/1160-1, were noted long ago.³ More recently single specimens have been found in earlier works, in the Rowḥ al-Arwāḥ fi Sharḥ Asmāʾ al-Fattāḥ of Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Samʿānī, who died in 534/1140, the Risāla-yi ʿAynīyya of Aḥmad Ghazzālī, written not long before Ghazzālī’s death in A.H. 520/1126, and in Shaykh Aḥmad-i Jām’s Sirāj al-Sāʿīrīn, written when its author was seventy-two, that is in 513/1119-20.⁴ These may, the last almost certainly does, come from the lifetime of Khayyām.

To these can now be added a handful from about ten years earlier. They are preserved in a work by one Abu ʿl-Qāsim Naṣr b. Aḥmad b. ʿAmr al-Shādānī al-Nishāpūrī who was writing during the reign of the Ghazanavid sovereign Masʿūd III (492-508/1099-1115) and who tells us more than once that in 503/1109-1110 he was in attendance upon a patron (valūniʿmat), who had access to the court. There is doubt over the year in which Khayyām’s death is to be placed, but people who knew him mention him as being alive in 506, 507 and 508.⁵ Shādānī’s book has reached us in incomplete form; the introduction and first chapter are missing and in a
later preface, evidently written in India and probably in the eighteenth century, the anonymous saviour of the work tells us that he found it with its beginning missing and to ensure its preservation added the new preface and had it copied. The original title has been lost; it now goes under the clumsy name *Ganj al-Ganj*. The book was first mentioned in print in Captain Charles Stewart’s Catalogue of the library of Tipoo Sultan, which passed into the hands of the British at Seringapatam in 1799, but the entry is too brief to show that it is of any great interest. A second manuscript dated 1232/1816 in the Ahli Islam Library of Madras has been recorded in even more uninformative fashion. The description given by Ivanow of the manuscript belonging to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which is probably that of Tipoo, is the only one that reveals the early date of the work and gives more than the vaguest idea of the contents. However, so far as I know, this has attracted no attention; in addition, this manuscript only contains the first half of the work. The copy I have used is preserved in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where it has been given a minimal description in the card index of Persian manuscripts. I hope to write a fuller one and little more needs to be said here.

The text is often corrupt but the language has not been modernised in a systematic manner, if at all. Although no reference to the author or to his work as such has come to light it was evidently known in the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century. For instance, Fakhr-i Mudabbir, writing in the reign of Iltutmish, quotes almost word for word Shādānī’s eye-witness account of the occasion in a.h. 503 when the loss of the price-less pearl on the top of the state umbrella was met with superbly royal unconcern by Mas‘ūd III.

The book essentially falls into the category of practical and ethical advice or andarz. Eleven of the original twelve chapters survive. With one exception each chapter is divided into thirty sections; each section begins with quotations from the usual list of pre-Islamic and Islamic sages who appear in such works, Socrates, Aristotle, Khusraw, Buzurgmihr, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, Abū ʿAlī and so on. This is followed by an appropriate anecdote; some of these are set in the pre-Islamic period, a few in relatively recent times, with a quite a high proportion from the early Abbasid Caliphate. What is of concern here is that Shādānī frequently quotes poetry, Arabic and Persian, both in the introductory passages of each section and in the course of the anecdotes, where Persian verse is on occasion put in the mouths of such unlikely speakers as Alexander of Macedon and Hārūn al-Rashīd. Only two of the quotations are attributed, to ʿAsjadī and ʿUṣūrī. There are many lines from the *Shāh-nāma* and a poem of four lines which has been attributed to Rūdakī. Otherwise I have identified another hemistich of ʿUṣūrī, one of Labībī and some verses from Azraqī. Besides rubā’īs there are fragments of qaṣīdas, ghazals, etc. This
substantial and varied body of verse makes the Ganj al-Ganj an important source for the earlier stages of Persian poetry.

Of rubâ’îs there are eighty-seven with a further fifty-eight single verses and fifteen hemistichs in rubâ’î metre. Four, as well as one single verse, are found later attributed to Khayyân. For an admirer of FitzGerald’s Khayyân, the first I came across was a particularly pleasing discovery as it was one of those used by FitzGerald, who found it in the Bodleian manuscript:11

It’s a fine day; it’s neither hot nor cold.
The rain-clouds wash the rose-trees free from dust.
The nightingale calls to the yellow rose
Singing in Pahlavi ‘Time to drink wine’.

The second beyt is, of course, the principal source of FitzGerald’s lines:12

And David’s Lips are lock’t;
but in divine High-piping Pehleví, with “Wine! Wine! Wine!
Red Wine!” – the Nightingale cries to the Rose That yellow Cheek
of hers to incarnadine.

Some later sources have a variant in which ba-zabân-i Pahlavî is replaced, by ba-zabân-i āl-i khud ‘in its symbolic language’ or a similar phrase, but, whoever wrote this poem and whichever version one prefers, it is the one with ‘Pahlavî’ that is now by far the earliest attested.

The next quatrain is pessimistic and paradoxically illogical rather than hedonistic:13

Since what exists gives only air to grasp,
Since what does not produces loss and harm,14
Suppose that what is in this world were not,
Suppose that what is not came to exist.

This poem is quoted without attribution in the History of Vâṣṣâf and in two other fourteenth-century sources.15 It is also what has come to be known as a wandering quatrain: besides being attributed to Khayyân it has been
claimed for no less than five other persons: Abū Saʿīd b. Abī ʿl-Khayr, Bābā Afḍal Kāshī, Najīm al-Dīn Kubrā, Awhad al-Dīn Kirmānī and Jalāl al-Dīn ṭūmī. The last four of these lived much later than the date of the Ganj al-Ganj and can now be excluded. As for Abū Saʿīd, his early biographers tell us that he only wrote one rubāʿī, not this one, and one other verse.

The third quatrain is on the common theme of hedonism as the only response to the incomprehensibility of life:

Since certain truth is not within our grasp
We cannot spend our lives in doubtful hope.
No, let us never put the cup aside.
Sober or drunk, man dies uncomprehending.

The fourth specimen reflects on the brevity of life and the inevitability of death:

Those who've grown old and those who've newly come
All as they choose run through their little race.
None lasts for ever in this wretched world.
They've gone, we'll go; others then come and go.

The single verse ends a quatrain in which a speaker faces death with equanimity rather than remain futilely in the unjust world and observes that others have no reason to rejoice at his passing:

That man may celebrate when I am dead
Who can himself escape the grip of fate.

In addition to the quatrains later attributed to Khayyām, the Ganj al-Ganj contains a few others which display sentiments typical of the Omarian corpus but which I have not traced elsewhere. Here, for instance, is another on the theme of “eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.”
Why vex my soul with matters of this world?
I’ll spend what days it gives me merrily.
See what the world has done to my dear friends.
It’s sure to do the same to me, I know.

A second one is similar:  

Fate has decided: what’s to be is fixed.
The pen has ceased foredooming bad or good.
Enjoy yourself, for sorrow has no point
And pointless sorrow no one’s ever praised.

This is reminiscent of the well-known quatrain of FitzGerald:  

The moving finger writes;
and having writ Moves on:
nor all thy Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

FitzGerald’s source was No 31 in the Bodleian manuscript, which has three of the same rhyming words and similar, but not identical, content.

The collection of quatrains in the Ganj al-Ganj provides a suitable opportunity to raise the question of the rhyme-schemes of rubā’īs as an indication of their date. At the All India Oriental Conference in Baroda in 1933 Mohammad Iqbal presented a paper in which he presented evidence showing that from at least the eleventh up to the earlier part of the twelfth century a very high proportion of rubā’īs had four rhymes rather than the three typical of, for instance, FitzGerald’s translation. For the small number of quatrains ascribed to poets of the earliest period, up to the later eleventh century, which were available to Iqbal the proportion with four rhymes was considerably less. As Iqbal acknowledged, it is likely that not all these quatrains were correctly attributed, and he maintained that in fact the four-rhyme type would have been favoured at that time. He also provided evidence that in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries the type with four rhymes was regarded as the original. Although he acknowledged that not all these quatrains were correctly attributed he himself maintained that the three-rhyme type was favoured at that time. Against this
however, he also provided evidence that in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries the type with four rhymes was regarded as the original. Rashíd al-Dîn Watwât, for instance, states that the du-beytâ lacking the rhyme in the third misrâ’ was known as khašî, castrated, implying that it is in some way imperfect. Iqbâl’s study attracted little attention but was not completely overlooked, for it is considered in Govinda Tîrtha’s Nectar of Grace. Tîrtha considered that the four-rhymed form was the earliest but rejected Iqbâl’s conclusion that ‘in a genuine collection of Ṭûmar Khayyām’s quatrains the four-rhymers should outnumber the three-rhymers.’ Tîrtha had a complicated and unsatisfactory scheme of dividing the quatrains attributed to Khayyām into ‘Known’ and ‘Unknown’; it is evident from his preface that for him ‘Known’ at times meant genuinely the work of Khayyām. Against Iqbâl’s argument he pointed to three quatrains with three rhymes in which, he maintained, ‘indicate the poet’s age at the time of their composition.’ However, there is no good reason to regard these as by Khayyām rather than by somebody else (or indeed to assume that the mention of age necessarily indicates the age of whoever wrote them). The question of the rhyme-schemes of the rubâ’î was later considered by Ellwell-Sutton, who knew of Tîrtha’s work, and provided further statistics which tally with Iqbâl’s, though he did not discuss what bearing they had on the ‘Omaric question.’ Elwell-Sutton’s observations on the matter became known to Iranian scholars, in particular, Sîrûs Shamîsâ. Recently a more detailed investigation was carried out by Sayyid ‘Alî Mîr Aîdarî, who examined the divans of nine poets of the later eleventh and early twelfth centuries, eight of them on the basis of thirteenth and fourteenth-century manuscripts. In a total corpus of 1,458 quatrains 92.3% had four rhymes. There is some variation between the poets but the highest proportion of triple rhymes, in the work of Sanâ’î and ‘Abd al-Vâsi’ Jabalî, is less than 20%. The evidence of the Ganj al-Ganj falls into this pattern. Of 86 quatrains 67, that is, nearly 85%, have four rhymes.

In the later twelfth century fashion changed, the percentage of quatrains with four rhymes drops and the proportions are soon reversed: three-rhymed quatrains come to heavily outnumber four-rhymed ones. Iqbâl provided data for this period but the material available to him was limited. Those given here are from a selection of the major poets based on the more recent editions of their works. Even if these may not all be wholly reliable the contrast with the previous period is clear enough. Some poets can be said to stand in an intermediate position. Of over three hundred of Khâqâni’s rubâ’îs nearly 54% have four rhymes. For Sîzâni’s eighty-one the proportion is 49%. Others of their contemporaries appear to be rather less old-fashioned. In nearly four hundred and fifty quatrains in the Divân of Anvarî the percentage is 36. Of Rashîd al-Dîn Watvât’s 40 quatrains 13 (32.5%) have four rhymes. Only slightly later the proportions have shifted more decisively. In Athîr al-Dîn Akhsikâtî’s Divân quadruple
rhymes account for just over 22%. For Jamāl al-Dīn Ḳāshānī the figure is a little more than 9%. In the Dīvān of his son Kamāl al-Dīn Ismāʿīl for the first 200 (of 867) quatrains it is 16.5%. In a sample of some three hundred from ‘Aṭṭār’s Mukhtār-nāma the percentage of quadruple rhymes is less than eight. Sporadic counts of poets of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have revealed some variation but almost none have more than 30% of quadruple rhymes. Most have far less: of ninety-nine quatrains of ‘Ubayd Zākanī only one has four rhymes.

As Muhammad Iqbāl observed, since three-rhymed quatrains are found at all periods, his discovery cannot be used to prove that any individual quatrain is early, let alone by Khayyām. Nevertheless, it does provide a criterion by which any collection of rubāṭyāt can be assessed. The results are striking. Of the 31 quatrains attributed to Khayyām in the thirteenth-century Nuzhat al-Majālis 39% have four rhymes; for the famous Bodleian manuscript of 865/1460 the percentage is down to 27%. Even the higher figure is far below the 80% or more to be expected from a collection coming from Khayyām’s lifetime.

The same test can be applied to the modern selections claiming, with greater or less assurance, to represent the authentic Khayyām. Ṣādiq Ḥidāyat’s Tarāna-hā-yi Khayyām has just under 19% of four-rhymed quatrains; the edition of Furūghī and Ḥanfī does a little better with almost 27%. ‘Alī Daštī’s smaller corpus of 75 quatrains included 41% with four rhymes, better but still by no means good enough.

In conclusion, while the persona of Khayyām has for centuries played a useful part in encouraging the preservation, study and enjoyment of the Omarian poems it has also presented an obstacle to a realistic appreciation of them. Even the titles of Iqbāl’s and Mīr Afdāl’s studies imply that they thought of them as part of the search for the genuine Khayyām while their data show that the search itself has in the past been carried out ineffectively and, except in the improbable eventuality that different and trustworthy evidence is found, can never succeed.

Doubts about attribution began early. FitzGerald himself had reservations about the late Calcutta manuscript. Many others have since expressed pessimistic opinions. Estimates of the proportion of genuine poems in the corpus, and the definition of the corpus is itself problematic, have varied but are often very low. In 1934 Hans Schaefer boldly stated that the name of ‘Umar should be struck out from the history of Persian poetry. Although the twelfth-century sources for Khayyām say nothing about his being a poet a small number of verses in Arabic are attributed to him on reasonably good authority and it is of course impossible to prove that he did not write some in Persian. Yet, allowing for this slight reservation, the case for regarding the Persian poet Khayyām as a fiction evolved long after the man himself had died, as already argued by, for instance, de Blois, is strong. The statistical evidence provides concrete support for the doubts
expressed earlier on account of the late appearance and dubious nature of the textual tradition, supported by arguments from style and content, which last are often to some extent arbitrary. The poet Khayyām is a will-o’-the-wisp. We should be prepared to abandon the pursuit and accept that few, if any, of the quatrains attributed to him are his, and that we have no means of discovering which those might be. The corpus as a whole should not be seen as including somewhere the philosophy of an individual genius but rather as the expression by many minds of currents of pessimism and skepticism with a long history in Greek, pre-Islamic Iranian and early Islamic thought.

Notes

8 Wladimir Ivanow, Concise Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the Collection of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1924, pp. 655-6, No 1370.
9 Accession No. 345670.
12 No. VI in FitzGerald’s first version, which is followed here.
13 *Ganj al-Ganj*, f50a, emending the *chun hast* of the manuscript at the beginning of the first line to *chun nñst*. Tñrtha, p. 65, No 146 (IV. 52); Tabrñzñ, p. 41, No. 148.

14 Why should what does not exist cause harm? Reading a second nñst here would seem to make better sense: ‘Since what does not exist causes no loss or harm.’ However the recorded specimens do not support this.


18 *Ganj al-Ganj*, f48a. Tñrtha, p. 125, No 145 (VII. 156); Tabrñzñ, p. 48, No 177.

19 Emending the MS readings naniham to nanihñm and næla to bæda.

20 *Ganj al-Ganj*, f409a; Tñrtha, p. 231, No 326 (X. 19), noting attributions to Sanæ > ñ and Bæbæ Afš al; Tabrñzñ, p. 17, No. 43.

21 Deleting the unmetrical wæw after sufla in the MS and emending nadænad to namænad.


23 The nonsensical nakhwæhad of the MS, perhaps intruding from its place in the first verse of the complete quatrain, has been replaced by the tavænad of the other sources.

24 *Ganj al-Ganj*, f 419b.

25 *Ganj al-Ganj*, f373a.

26 FitzGerald, first edition, No. LI.

27 A few of FitzGerald’s quatrains have four rhymes.


30 In fact the second one has no reference to age at all.


32 *Seyr-i rubæ T*, pp. 18-20.


36 Dîvñ-i Anvãrt, ed, Muñammad Tañt Mudãris Rãdãvt, Tehran 1340.


43 Statistics for a number of the older published collections are given by Iqbãl, p. 913.

44 Hans Heinrich Schaedener, “Der geschichtliche und der mythische Omar Chajjam”, in *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Band 88, Neue Folge, Band 13
(1934), p. 28. Schaeder’s brief note ended with the announcement that its arguments would be published in expanded book form, but no such book appeared.

### Bibliography


