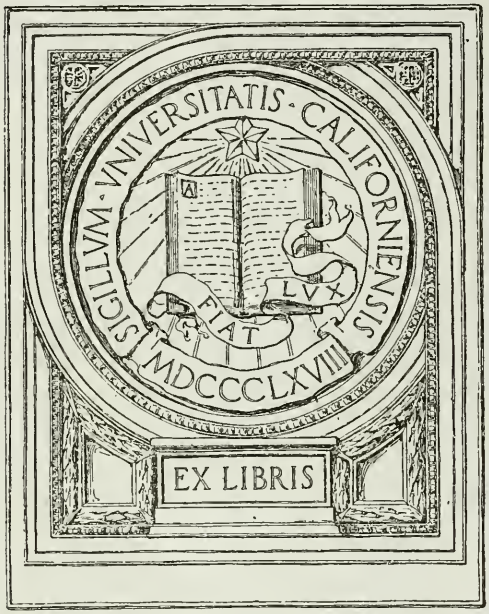

Rosemary Press Brochures

Anacreon and Omar Khayyam
by Henry Harmon Chamberlin

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ROSEMARY PRESS BROCHURES

ANACREON AND OMAR KHAYYÁM

By Henry Harmon Chamberlin

Read before Omar Khayyám Club of America

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OMAR KHAYYÁM CLUB OF AMERICA

The survival of the fittest is a potent catch-word. But it has more sound than sense. How little it means, we can realize when we reflect that we have lost the poems of Sappho and Anacreon, while retaining their inferior imitations in the pages of Horace and Catullus. Lesbia's sparrow still chirps but the song of the Lesbian swan is heard no more. The prettiest of the Latin remains; the great Greek originals have perished. Their immortality was conditioned, not by the genius that inspired them, but by the prejudice and bigotry of succeeding generations.

Between 380 and 390 A. D., so we are told, the works of Sappho and other lyric poets were burned at Rome and at Alexandria; and the public of the Roman world was advised to read instead the respectable effusions of St. Gregory Nazianus. Among the works of genius thus abolished were the poems of Anacreon, whose name has thus outlived his work. His poetry survives only in a few scattered fragments, quoted by theologians and grammarians, but the beauty of such lines as remain indicate the magnitude of the evil which intolerance may inflict on civilization.

One of the fragments of Anacreon, together with certain comments on his work from the Greek Anthology, I bring forward this afternoon for your consideration. These excerpts appear to me to have had some influence, if not on the original rubáiyát of Omar, at least on FitzGerald's translation.

For Omar who lived at Naishápûr in the latter part of the eleventh century, we know not how much he knew of Anacreon or of the Greek Anthology. But FitzGerald, at Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century and translator of Aeschylus and Sophocles, was probably familiar with all the masterpieces of Greek literature.

Consider first, the following quatrain from the first edition of the "Rubáiyát."

First Ed. XI

"Here with a loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
And Wilderness is Paradise enow."

Or the more sophisticated version in the edition of 1879:

Fourth Ed. XII

"A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow."

Let us turn from the literal translation of Omar, by Mr. Eben Francis Thompson, whose immortality will never be interfered with, by any edict of Theodosius of St. Gregory:

"A skin of red wine I wish and book of poesy
A bare subsistence is necessary and a half loaf
And then I and thou sitting in the solitude
Were sweeter than the empire of the Sultan."

Now here is a fragment of Anacreon, done into literal English:

"I breakfasted, by cutting off a part of a thin piece of barley cake; I emptied out a jug of wine (the Greek indicates that it was a pretty large jug) and now tenderly I touch the harp of love, companioning in revelry, a tender and charming girl."

QUOTE: *Anacreon* 13
Anthologia Lyrica, Page 221.

Or to translate more freely:

"I broke my fast on barley cake;
I drained a stoup of wine,
Merrily now my lute shall make
For thee, sweet girl of mine,
Love's music, sweeter for thy sake
And all its charms are thine."

There are obvious differences between the two selections. The girl sings to Omar, whereas Anacreon plays to the girl; but both poets have part of the loaf and the jug of wine and the girl. So far as Anacreon is concerned, Theodosius and St. Gregory have unfortunately made further comparison impossible.

Other excerpts, consisting of certain comments on Anacreon, I have taken from the SEPULCHRAL EPIGRAMS of the GREEK ANTHOLOGY. You are all familiar with Omar's feeling of kindred with those who have gone before, how poignant his compassion for all who are underneath the sod, how haunting his prescience of the time when he too shall join them:

First Ed. XXIII

"Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend,
Dust into Dust, and under Dust, to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and sans End."

Sixteen hundred years before Omar, Anacreon had played variations upon the same theme; and for five hundred years thereafter, he and his poems had afforded inspiration for his admirers.

(*S. E.* 33 *GREEK ANTHOLOGY, Vol.* 2, *Page* 22)

Q: "You died of wine, Anacreon?"
A: Ah, but you
Who never drank, must enter Hades, too."

wrote Julianus, Prefect of Egypt, in the days of Justinian. This fin de siecle poet has another Epigram which comes even closer to the spirit of the quatrain just quoted.

(*S. E.* 32 *GREEK ANTHOLOGY, Vol.* 2, *Page* 22)

"Oft above ground I sang, now underneath;
'Drink ere ye too put on the dust of death'."

Let us now turn to the unrivalled verses near the end of FitzGerald's First Edition of the RUBÁIYÁT (1859) LXII and LXIII;

First Ed. LXVII—LXVIII

"Ah, with the Grape my fading Life provide
And wash my Body whence the Life has died,
And in the Winding sheet of Vine-leaf wrapt,
So bury me by some sweet Garden-side."

"That ev'n my buried Ashes such a Snare
Of Perfume shall fling up into the Air,
As not a True Believer passing by
But shall be overtaken unaware."

I append Mr. Thompson's literal translation:
"Take care to nourish me with the wine cup,
And this face of amber like rubies make
When I die, wash me with wine
And from the wood of the vine the planks of my coffin make."

"So much will I drink wine that this fragrance of wine
Comes from the clay when I go under the clay
That when a drinker passes over my clay
From the scent of my wine he shall become drunk and lost."
(*i. e. dead drunk*)

Now here is a literal translation of an Epitaph on Anacreon, by ANTIPATER OF SIDON (1st Century B. C.) who wrote in the Hellenistic Age, when the mightier harmonies of Greek literature still echoed in men's ears.

(*S. E.* 23 *Vol.* 2, *Page* 17)

"Let the four-clustered ivy, Anacreon, flourish round thee, and the tender flowers of the purple meadows, and let fountains of white milk bubble up, and sweet smelling wine gush from the earth, so that thy ashes and bones may have joy, if indeed any delight touches the dead."

Or, take the literal translation of some exquisite lines, ascribed to SIMONIDES, a contemporary and friend of Anacreon:

SIMONIDES, Page 17, *No.* 24.

"Oh vine who smoothest all, nurse of wine, mother of the grape, thou who dost put forth thy web of curling tendrils, flourish green in the fine soil and climb up the pillar of the grave of TEIAN ANACREON; that he, the reveller heavy with wine, playing all through the night on his lyre, may even as he lies in earth have the glorious ripe clusters hanging from the branches over his head, and that he may be ever steeped in the dew that scented the old man's lips so sweetly."

Here are free translations of both of these passages:

First, Antipater:

"Now shall the clustered ivy wrap thee round,
Frail flowers in purple meadows that abound,
For thee shall bloom; for thee white springs of milk
And fragrant wine gush from the fruitful ground."

"That even thy buried ashes may be blessed;
And the sweet savor from that vintage pressed.
May reach thee in the regions of the dead.
If any joy can rouse thee from thy rest."

Second, Simonides:

"Glad vine, that makes Mankind forget their doom,
Mother of wine, and Autumn's clustered bloom!
Stretch thy green tendrils from the fostering earth
And climb the column of Anacreon's tomb."

"His genial song was thine. Thy clusters now
Hang o'er his head from each luxuriant bough,
Steeping his ashes in thy perfumed dews,
Whose fragrance did alive his lips endow."

If we turn back to Mr. Thompson's literal translation of these verses of Omar, we shall find no mention of growing things or of any verdure at all. On the other hand, FitzGerald pictures Omar "in winding sheet of vine-leaf wrapt" or as "shrouded in the living leaf." He locates the grave, "by some not unfrequented garden-side." In the original Omar, there is no mention of the living leaf or of the garden but verdure and fruits and flowers are described in the Elegiacs of the Greek poets. Moreover, the original RUBAIYÁT speak of a "coffin" and of "clay." There is no mention of the "buried ashes" which are found both in FitzGerald and in the Greek.

Let us turn to one more passage where there is no close parallel except in the spirit of the verse. I do not think I need take up your time with a literal translation:

Fourth Ed. XXXIX

"And not a drop that from our cups we throw
For Earth to drink of, but may steal below
To quench the fire of Anguish in some Eye,
There hidden—far beneath and long ago."

In a note on these lines, FitzGerald expatiates on the Persian custom of "throwing a little wine on the ground after drinking." During his discussion these words occur: "is it not more likely an ancient Superstition; a Libation to propitiate Earth, or make her an Accomplice in the illicit Revel? Or, perhaps, to divert the Jealous Eye by some sacrifice of superfluity, as with the Ancients of the West? With Omar, we see something more is signified; the precious Liquor is not lost, but sinks into the ground to refresh the dust of some poor Wine-worshipper foregone."

Did not FitzGerald know that the "Ancients of the West" strike precisely the same note as he and Omar struck in this quatrain? Here are two instances:—the first probably very late Greek:

(*S. E.* 28 *Vol.* 2, *Page* 20)

"O passerby, upon my tomb be thine
To pour libations; Still I love good wine."

The second is by ANTIPATER OF SIDON. My translation in even more free than usual:

(*S. E.* 26 *Vol.* 2, *Page* 18)

"Good friend, who would my tomb with tear drops lave,
If once to thee, my books brief solace gave,
Pour on my ashes one small drop of wine
That I rejoice, within the silent grave."

"That I, who the bright days of life would spend
In song, and wine, rejoicing with a friend,
In this dim region may not wholly mourn,
Where all must dwell together without end."

In general it seems to me that between the original Omar and FitzGerald's translations, there is one capital difference. Even in those passages of Mr. Thompson's rendition of Omar, which make

no pretense to be anything but word for word translations, it seems to me that we get a certain tang that we do not get in FitzGerald. The original Persian vintage, though none the less subtle, is stronger, sharper, more concentrated; it has more thrust, more daring, to use a slang expression, more "kick," than the RUBÁIYÁT with which we are familiar. On the other hand, FitzGerald's is a sweeter, gentler vintage, a little more mellow. What it lacks in strength it makes up perhaps in exquisiteness.

Please do not mistake my purpose. I realize the subject is beyond the reach of my imperfect scholarship. But somebody may sometime arise who is qualified to prove what I have hinted at, namely, that Omar himself, especially in his amatory and mortuary passages, was, in his wild eastern way, voicing traditions which had been handed down by the Greek lyric poets notably by Anacreon; and secondly that Edward FitzGerald, through his peculiar temperament and sensibilities, by reason of the thoroughness of his classical training and the greater sophistication of the age in which he lived, sometimes in his translations of the RUBÁIYAT, approached more nearly to the soul of Ancient Greece, than to the soul of Omar.

THE END