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COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL CHOICES IN E. FITZGERALD'S VS. E. HERON-ALLEN'S TRANSLATIONS OF OMAR KHAYYAM'S RUBAIYAT

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Abstract. This study examines the lexical strategies employed by Edward FitzGerald and Edward Heron-Allen in their English translations of Omar Khayyam's Rubáiyát. Using five quatrains from each translator, the research analyzes patterns in word choice, metaphorical density, imagery, and cultural specificity. FitzGerald's translation exhibits a poetic, imaginative lexicon that prioritizes aesthetic dramatization, symbolic imagery, and universalized philosophical reflection, whereas Heron-Allen's lexicon emphasizes literal accuracy, ethical clarity, and preservation of Persian cultural and religious context. The comparison illustrates how lexical decisions shape interpretive and emotional impact, highlighting the broader tension between creative adaptation and philological fidelity in literary translation.

Keywords: translation studies, lexical choices, Omar Khayyam, Rubaiyat, Edward FitzGerald, Edward Heron-Allen, Persian poetry, poetic diction, literal translation, comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), the Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet, occupies a unique position in world literature. Although only a fraction of the quatrains attributed to him can be authenticated, the Rubaiyat has become one of the most widely translated and culturally influential poetic collections in the world. The quatrain form—based on concise reflection, paradox, and existential questioning—invites multiple interpretive possibilities, making translation an especially revealing intellectual exercise. Among the numerous English renderings, the versions by Edward FitzGerald and Edward Heron-Allen stand as two fundamentally different translation philosophies, each shaping Khayyam's voice for a distinct readership and cultural moment.

Edward FitzGerald's first edition of the Rubaiyat (1859) is often described less as a translation and more as a literary re-creation. Influenced by Victorian poetic sensibilities, Romantic imagery, and Orientalist aesthetics, FitzGerald selected, rearranged, and transformed quatrains according to his own interpretive vision. His

lexical choices create a lush imaginative world: “Bowl of Night,” “Hunter of the East,” “Bird of Time,” and other expressions reflect a poetic imagination that often departs significantly from Khayyam’s original philosophical tone. FitzGerald’s version became a global phenomenon, shaping Western perceptions of Khayyam for over a century.

In contrast, Edward Heron-Allen’s 1898 translation represents a much more literal, philologically oriented approach. A scholar of Persian language and culture, Heron-Allen sought to preserve Khayyam’s theological, ethical, and cultural registers. His vocabulary—featuring terms such as “Mihrab,” “dust of sin,” “humble folk,” and “thee”—reflects the moral introspection and Sufi-influenced spirituality of the Persian originals. Rather than crafting a unified poetic narrative, he aimed to reproduce individual quatrains with accuracy and contextual transparency.

Together, these two translations offer a compelling contrast. Their divergent lexical choices reveal not only different understandings of Khayyam but also broader tensions within translation studies: poetic freedom versus textual fidelity, cultural domestication versus preservation, and imagination versus scholarship.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative comparative textual analysis of ten quatrains: five by Edward FitzGerald and five by Edward Heron-Allen. Rather than treating individual quatrains as direct equivalents, the analysis examines each translator’s corpus as a cohesive unit to identify patterns in lexical choice, semantic emphasis, and stylistic strategy. The focus is on nouns, verbs, adjectives, and culturally loaded terms, as well as metaphorical density, imagery, and tone. Semantic fields such as spirituality, temporality, pleasure, and social ethics are analyzed to reveal translational priorities. Syntactic structure and rhetorical devices are also considered to understand how diction shapes meaning and reader perception. The method follows principles from translation studies, particularly the dichotomies of adaptive versus literal translation, domestication versus foreignization, and poetic recreation versus philological fidelity. The goal is to illustrate how consistent lexical strategies across multiple quatrains construct distinct interpretive and aesthetic worlds for each translator.

Comparison and Discussion

A close examination of Edward FitzGerald’s five quatrains reveals a consistent lexical pattern that reflects his broader translational philosophy: he transforms Khayyam’s reflective, often terse Persian rubāʿiyāt into richly imagistic, performative English verse filled with metaphorical elaboration, symbolic reinvention, and a distinctly Victorian-romantic sensibility. In FitzGerald’s quatrains, the lexicon is

dominated by high-poetic nouns, mythic or exotic imagery, personifications, and metaphors that rarely correspond directly to literal Persian equivalents.

Specimen 1:

AWAKE! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light

In the first quatrain, expressions such as “Morning in the Bowl of Night,” “the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight,” and “the Hunter of the East” demonstrate his inclination to dramatize natural phenomena into mythic spectacle. The lexicon relies heavily on concrete nouns lifted into metaphorical abstraction—the “Bowl,” “Stone,” “Stars,” and “Hunter” function simultaneously as physical and symbolic entities. This creates an atmosphere of cosmic allegory rather than philosophical meditation. Even verbs such as “flung,” “puts,” and “caught” animate the dawn into a forceful agent, giving the scene the narrative momentum of an epic tableau.

Specimen 2:

DREAMING when Dawn's Left Hand was in the sky
I heard· a Voice within the Tavern cry,
Awake,myLittleones, and fill the Cup
Before Life's Liquor in its cup be dry.

This mythopoetic tendency continues in the second quatrain, where FitzGerald again uses anthropomorphic and symbolic diction: “Dawn’s Left Hand,” “a Voice within the Tavern,” and “Life’s Liquor.” His penchant for compound metaphors—here “Life’s Liquor” representing mortality—illustrates his desire to weave universal existential meaning into sensuous imagery. The tavern, a recurrent Khayyamic space, becomes in FitzGerald’s lexicon a site of poetic proclamation rather than socio-religious tension. His diminutive phrase “my Little ones” injects a tender, almost pastoral emotional quality foreign to the Persian original. The urgency embedded in “fill the Cup / Before Life’s Liquor… be dry” shifts the original emphasis from moral or ontological reflection to an aesthetic exhortation to pleasure.

Specimen 3:

NOW the New Year reviving old Desires,
The thoughtful Soul to Solitude retires,
Where the WHITE HAND OF MOSES on the Bough
Puts out;1-and Jesus from the Ground suspires

The third quatrain amplifies FitzGerald's symbolic layering through the infusion of religious figures. The "WHITE HAND OF MOSES" appearing "on the Bough" and "Jesus from the Ground" who "suspires" are remarkable lexical reinterpretations. FitzGerald appropriates scriptural figures not as theological references but as seasonal or natural metaphors—Moses' white hand suggesting blossoming, Jesus' breath signifying spring renewal. His lexicon here operates through emblematic transfer, converting religious icons into agents within a poetic landscape. The diction of cyclic revival ("reviving old Desires," "Soul… retires") maintains FitzGerald's tendency to frame Khayyam's philosophy in pastoral-romantic terms.

Specimen 4:

IRAM indeed is gone with all its Roses,
And Jamshyd's Sev'n-ring'd Cup where no one knows;
But still the Vine her ancient Ruby yields,
And still a Garden by the Water blows.

In the fourth quatrain, FitzGerald shifts to a lexicon of legendary grandeur and natural continuity. The names "IRAM" and "Jamshyd" invoke a mythic Persian past but function in his translation as nostalgic, aestheticized references rather than culturally specific symbols. His phrase "Sev'n-ring'd Cup" exemplifies his ability to create enchantment through archaic and ornamental vocabulary. Meanwhile, expressions like "the Vine her ancient Ruby yields" rely on allegorical synesthesia, associating wine with rubicund richness and cultural longevity. The tension between loss ("IRAM… is gone with all its Roses") and persistence ("still the Vine… yields") is expressed through a diction that leans heavily on color, image, and sensory suggestiveness.

Specimen 5:

COME, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly-and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing.

The fifth quatrain continues FitzGerald's characteristic blend of imperative exhortation and symbolic nature imagery. "COME, fill the Cup" repeats the tavern motif, but here nature becomes the moral agent: "in the Fire of Spring / The Winter Garment of Repentance fling." His lexicon transforms repentance—a moral-spiritual state in Persian tradition—into a garment that can be discarded. This metaphor is a telling instance of cultural domestication through materialization: spiritual concepts become tactile objects. The phrase "The Bird of Time" is another quintessential FitzGerald creation, personifying temporality itself as a fleeting creature. The line "Lo! the Bird

is on the Wing" employs motion and immediacy to press urgency upon the reader. Across all five quatrains, FitzGerald's lexical strategy is to universalize, aestheticize, and dramatize. His words belong less to the moral-philosophical lexicon of Khayyam and more to a Victorian poetic lexicon saturated with imagery, metaphor, sensory detail, and emotional expansiveness.

In contrast, Edward Heron-Allen's five quatrains display a markedly different lexical landscape, grounded in moral clarity, cultural authenticity, and philological restraint. Rather than reimagining Khayyam through embellishment, Heron-Allen aims to preserve the ethical tone, religious resonance, and directness characteristic of Persian didactic verse. His lexicon is dominated by abstract nouns, ethical imperatives, second-person address, and culturally specific terms.

Specimen 1:

IF I have never threaded the pearl of Thy service,
I have, at least, never wiped the dust of sin from my face;
this being so, I am not hopeless of Thy mercy,
for the reason that I have never said that One was Two.

In his first quatrain, words such as "threaded the pearl of Thy service," "dust of sin," and "mercy" locate the text within a devotional, introspective framework. Unlike FitzGerald's cosmic or scenic metaphors, Heron-Allen's metaphors remain culturally grounded: the "pearl of Thy service" evokes familiar Islamic devotional imagery, and the phrase "never said that One was Two" reflects monotheistic doctrinal precision. His verbs—"threaded," "wiped," "said"—are literal and unembellished, forming a straightforward moral argument.

Specimen 2:

If I tell Thee my secret thoughts in a tavern,
it is better than if I make my devotions before the Mihrab without Thee.
O Thou, the first and last of all created beings!
burn me an Thou wilt, or cherish me an Thou wilt.

Heron-Allen's second quatrain continues this ethical-theological focus through lexical choices such as "secret thoughts," "devotions," "Mihrab," and "first and last of all created beings." The inclusion of "Mihrab," a specifically Islamic term referring to the niche indicating the qibla, is an example of his refusal to domesticate culturally embedded references. His diction foregrounds spiritual sincerity and theological proximity; the contrast between "tavern" and "Mihrab" is not metaphorical, as in FitzGerald, but explicitly moral and ritualistic. The lexical field emphasizes spiritual hierarchy and divine-human relationship rather than aesthetic contemplation.

Specimen 3:

So far as in thee lies, reproach not drunkards,
lay thou aside pretence and imposture;
if, henceforth, thou desirest rest from this life of thine,
do not for a moment shun humble folk.

Specimen 4:

So far as in thee lies, cause no pain to anyone,
nor cause anyone to suffer from thy wrath;
if thou hast a desire for eternal peace,
fret thyself always and harass no one.

The third and fourth quatrains further develop Heron-Allen's thematic consistency through a lexicon centered on ethical injunctions. Phrases such as "reproach not drunkards," "lay thou aside pretence," "cause no pain to anyone," and "harass no one" rely heavily on negation and prohibition, mirroring the admonitory style of many Persian ethical rubāʿiyāt. His verbs are prescriptive—"reproach," "lay aside," "shun," "cause," "harass"—and rarely metaphorical. His vocabulary anchors itself in moral conduct, interpersonal responsibility, and social humility. Even the abstract aspiration "eternal peace" is expressed through practical, relational instructions. Unlike FitzGerald, who elevates imagery and atmosphere, Heron-Allen grounds meaning in actionable ethics and social responsibility.

Specimen 4:

Since no one will guarantee thee a tomorrow,
make thou happy now this love-sick heart of thine;
drink wine in the moonlight, O Moon, for the moon
shall seek us long and shall not find us.

The fifth quatrain reveals yet another aspect of Heron-Allen's lexicon: a commitment to conveying the literal philosophical argument of the original. Expressions such as "no one will guarantee thee a to-morrow," "make thou happy now this love-sick heart," and "the moon shall seek us long and shall not find us" are rendered in a near-literal, almost severe tone. The diction prioritizes clarity and directness. His use of words like "love-sick heart," while poetic, remains psychologically literal rather than symbolically elaborate. The final lines hinge not on metaphorical transformation, but on empirical observation: time passes, opportunity fades, the moon endures longer than its viewers. Heron-Allen avoids the metaphorical dramatization typical of FitzGerald, instead presenting mortality through sober lexicon and straightforward syntax.

As a whole, Heron-Allen's lexical profile is one of restraint, fidelity, and cultural precision, while FitzGerald's is one of imaginative expansion, symbolic reconfiguration, and poetic license. Heron-Allen's quatrains employ a didactic, introspective lexicon anchored in moral, theological, and interpersonal registers. FitzGerald's quatrains employ a sensual, imagistic, and often exotically stylized vocabulary that privileges atmosphere over doctrinal meaning. Together, the two translators present radically different linguistic worlds: one in which Khayyam becomes a Victorian visionary-philosopher of nature and time, and another in which he remains a Persian moral thinker whose words bear the imprint of their religious and cultural environment.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Edward FitzGerald's and Edward Heron-Allen's five quatrains each demonstrates how lexical choice serves as the primary vehicle for shaping the reader's perception of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat. FitzGerald's translation consistently exhibits a lexicon characterized by imaginative metaphor, exoticized imagery, and poetic embellishment. Across his quatrains, nouns and verbs are often personified or imbued with symbolic force, as seen in expressions like "Bowl of Night," "Hunter of the East," and "Bird of Time." His vocabulary favors theatricality, sensuality, and emotional resonance over literal semantic fidelity, transforming Khayyam's contemplative philosophical reflections into a Victorian-Romantic vision that emphasizes universality, drama, and aesthetic pleasure. The lexicon works synergistically with metaphor and syntax to create vivid, mythopoetic tableaux, often subordinating original cultural or theological context in favor of imaginative narrative coherence. Heron-Allen, in contrast, maintains a lexicon grounded in literalism, cultural specificity, and moral-ethical clarity. His word choices – "Mihrab," "dust of sin," "humble folk," and "eternal peace" – preserve Persian ethical and spiritual registers, while verbs and syntactic structures emphasize prescriptive guidance and introspective reflection. Metaphor is restrained, and when present, it serves primarily to convey doctrinal or philosophical concepts rather than atmospheric flourish. Heron-Allen's diction situates Khayyam firmly within his historical, religious, and social context, prioritizing fidelity over aesthetic reinvention. The result is a contemplative, didactic tone that communicates the poet's moral and spiritual preoccupations directly to the reader.

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