

ah, wilderness!





A BOOK OF VERSES, UNDERNEATH THE BOUGH

The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

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Illustration from a facsimile of the manuscript *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, 1898. Courtesy Flickr: The Commons.

An avid reader, O'Neill included numerous literary references in his plays. This is especially true of *Ah, Wilderness!*, in which Richard Miller is himself an enthusiastic reader of poetry and prose. One of the most-quoted pieces in the play is the *Rubáiyát*, a poem first written in 1120 by Omar Khayyám, a Persian poet, mathematician, and astronomer. It was translated into English by Edward FitzGerald in 1859, and by 1860, his adaptation had gained popularity in England. It is from FitzGerald's translation that Richard quotes in *Ah, Wilderness!* Emphasizing the poem's importance to the play is the fact that the title comes from Richard's favorite stanza of the *Rubáiyát*:

***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!***

In the play, Richard assumes that the older members of his family have not read the *Rubáiyát*, perhaps thinking that they found it improper. Indeed, when it was first published, the poem incited a degree of controversy, because the poet articulates a disbelief in the afterlife and emphasizes the importance of enjoying each day. Some more conservative

critics interpreted this as an endorsement of debauchery, since the poet's version of making the most of each day tended to include drinking. Of course, controversy can breed interest, and the poem's popularity continued to grow throughout the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. By 1906, when *Ah, Wilderness!* takes place, it was regarded as an important piece of literature, and it was one that many had read—including the older members of Richard's family.

FitzGerald professed that his poem told the story of the life and death of a poet, but on a grander scale, the *Rubáiyát* has been interpreted as a meditation on the unanswerable questions of existence. According to scholars William Henry Martin and Sandra Mason, "The story line . . . flows from the light of dawn and youth, through the ups and downs and philosophical concerns of mid-day and middle age, to thoughts of evening and death." When interpreted through this lens, it is easy to see why O'Neill was so attracted to this poem in relation to *Ah, Wilderness!*; the play explores the struggles and foibles of many ages, from young Tommy and his obsession with fireworks, to the awkwardness of teenaged Richard's first love, to Lily Miller's poignant and sorrowful desire for companionship as she grows older.