

1-1-2001

Enfer

Jim Millhorn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allfaculty-peerpub>

Original Citation

Jim Millhorn, "Enfer," in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, ed. Derek Jones, Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Research, Artistry, & Scholarship at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Peer-Reviewed Publications by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.

Enfer

Enfer is a special division of the Bibliothèque Nationale, France's national library, rare books collection. Enfer is reserved specifically for "ouvrages licencieux" (licentious works or erotica), and access to the collection is restricted exclusively to "travailleurs intellectuelles" (intellectual workers or scholars). This legendary collection has been the source of much interest and curiosity, yet according to its most recent cataloger, Pascal Pia, the collection is quite modest in size and comprises 1730 titles. A partial explanation of the collection's renown is owing to its evocative name. Enfer translates literally as fire and hell, and conjures up images both of burned books (the traditional means of eradicating works of questionable morals) and passage to the infernal regions. The notion of hell as applied to books seems decidedly overcharged to the permissive values of the late 20th century, yet when Enfer took shape in the 19th century official values accorded licentious sexuality and open carnal expression as an abomination and a severe threat to the social order.

The public required protection from such threats to its moral base, and hence the logic of confining works to a highly restrictive special collection, Enfer. Jeanne Veryin-Forrer, who has conducted the most in-depth archival exploration of the founding of Enfer, traced an embryonic collection back to the Ancien Regime. In the Bibliothèque du Roi catalog of 1750 there was a special category tagged Y2 "ouvrages badins" (roguish works) of which one subsection was reserved for erotica. Particularly notorious or offensive works were marked "pour cabinet" indicating that they were locked away, and segregated from the remainder of the collection. It is estimated that by the fall of the Ancien Regime the total number of works included no more than fifty titles.

The revolutionary period with the likes of Restif de la Bretonne and the Marquis de Sade were

rich in the production of pornographic works, yet cataloging was disrupted. The subsequent regimes of the Consulate, Empire and Restoration were extremely vigilant in exercising censorship, and reverted to the old custom of burning morally offensive works. There was not a change of attitude till the advent of the July Monarchy, and even then the cause was indirect. In 1836 there was a move to reform the national library, and especially to conserve and preserve the many treasures scattered throughout the vast general collection. The upshot was the creation of a new rare books collection, the *Reservé*, physically separated from the remainder and which afforded only limited access.

The title *Enfer* made its first appearance in the new catalog of 1844, and absorbed the former Y2 category. In addition, to those works under key in the “cabinet” the culling of rare and precious items approximately tripled the size of the collection to comprise 150 titles. On the other hand, no attempt was made to deliberately build the collection, and acquisitions were sporadic and haphazard at best. In short, the creation of *Enfer* was a bureaucratic nicety, and even then emphasis centered not on the value and rarity of the works, but rather on the dangers they posed. For instance, unlike any other section of the rare books collection works ranged from exquisitely bound and beautifully typed books to the cheapest and most ephemeral types of literature. The latter often arrived via the police authorities to be stored in *Enfer* for safekeeping until trial, whereas the former were often windfall acquisitions the fallout of either seized or donated private collections.

During the Second Empire *Enfer* was the beneficiary of a number of valuable donations and bequests. However, the most notorious addition came from a collection confiscated from Alfred Begis. This indefatigable bibliophile, and by profession bankruptcy trustee, caught wind of *Enfer* in 1850, and brought unwanted attention upon himself. Begis requested permission to view

a particularly rare edition of Aretino, and was turned down on the grounds that his application was insufficiently strong. Insult turned to injury when Begis' personal collection was seized by the authorities in 1866. Among the ten thousand items bestowed to the national library were a number of pornographic works, especially fine editions of 18th century publications. Begis protested vehemently, but did not press his case in court until 1882 following the reform and liberalization of press law under the Third Republic. A definitive decision in favor of the national library was not reached until 1896. In the course of the proceedings there was a distinct shift in the national libraries estimate of the function of Enfer. Although the contents of the collection was admitted to consist of the "most base pornography," there was an equal acknowledgment that these works were part of the national patrimony and that the mission of the national library to preserve and protect exemplary works, regardless of their moral probity, took precedence over the interests of private collectors.

Growth of Enfer accelerated at the turn-of-the-century, and the first rigorous bibliographic description of the collection was published in 1913, *L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale*. The authors, the poet and accomplished pornographer G. Apollinaire, F. Fleuret, and L. Perceau, counted 930 titles consisting of a melange of classic 17th and 18th century pieces along with numerous reprints and a raft of contemporary pornography. Pascal Pia's most recent inventory of 1730 titles indicates that the collection has been more methodically turned to the acquisition of choice books in recent decades, although one continues to find during the 1950s and 1960s ephemeral works confined to Enfer owing to their censure by the courts. Alongside pulp pseudonyms like Aimé Van Rod and Fuckwell, one also finds distinguished names such as Voltaire, Diderot, Mirabeau, Cleland, Mérimée, Baudelaire, Gautier, Maupassant, D.H. Lawrence, Cocteau, Henry Miller, Genet and Bataille. In the last decade much of the veil of

secrecy surrounding Enfer has been lifted, and there was even a proposal for the abolition of the collection. Although the proposal was quashed, a large number of the more distinguished works of the 18th century and Enlightenment were released to the public domain and have been reprinted. In this manner, Enfer has been brought to the light of day, which is poles away from the intentions of the original creators of this most infernal and dangerous collection

Jim Millhorn

Further Reading

Guillaume Apollinaire, Fernand Fleuret and Louis Perceau, *L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1913.

Robert Darnton, "Sex for Thought" (a review of reprinted classics released from Enfer), *New York Review of Books*, v. 41, n.21 (1994): 65-74.

Pascal Pia, *Les Livres de l'Enfer du XVI siècle à nos jours* (The Books of Enfer from the 16th Century to the Present), Paris: C. Coulet et A. Faure, 1978.

Annie Stora-Lamarre, *L'Enfer de la III République: Censeurs et Pornographes, 1881-1914* (The Hell of the Third Republic: Censors and Pornography, 1881-1914), Paris: Editions Imago, 1990.

Jeanne Veyrin-Forrer, "L'Enfer vu d'ici" (Enfer Seen from the Inside), *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, v. 14 (1984): 22-41.