

# From Pornography to Controversial Literary Works

"I'll publish anything the others are afraid of..."

— Leonard Charles Smithers

**P**rior to the publication of James Nelson's *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* in 2000, Smithers (1861-1907) was known primarily as a lascivious pornographer through his clandestine publishing activities in association with Harry Sidney Nichols and his collaborative translations with Richard Francis Burton of *The Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885-1888) notoriety. However, he also loved art and literature. Proud of his French ancestry, he commissioned the unexpurgated translation of controversial French literary works, including those by Balzac and Zola, beautifully illustrated and bound. Smithers thereby contributed to the importation of French literary alterity during the 1890s, in the aftermath of the Vizetelly trials. Henry Vizetelly had been prosecuted by the National Vigilance Association. He was incarcerated in 1889 and lost his publishing house in 1890 for having published inexpensive editions of Zola's novels in English translation, the most controversial of which was *La Terre*.

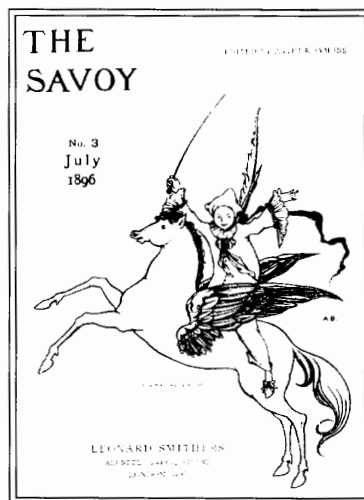
A subscriber to Burton's eroticized *Nights*, published by the Kama-shastra Society of London and Benares, and much impressed by the financial success that the private edition had brought Burton, Smithers decided to print books rejected by the socially sanctioned presses. He was a solicitor by training and so he was able to circumvent book-trade legal problems with astute agility. His predilections set him apart from the mainstream publishers of bowdlerized "three-deckers" distributed by the circulating libraries of the time. When one looks behind the exotic names of "The Erotika

Bibliion Society" and "The Lute-tian Society," one finds a common thread, the name of Smithers. Much more so than Mudie's Select Library, Smithers's interests were directed to a select clientele of wealthy and powerful men, who were willing to pay steep prices for collectors' items. Many of

for a new edition. Burton and Smithers considered the private printing of 500 copies of the *Priapeia* in 1890 as a test case to see it was possible to issue translations of Latin erotica in England with impunity.

In 1891, Smithers and Nichols moved to London to open a rare

printer Charles Unsinger), 1889. Smithers-Nichols also printed a thousand copies of Arthur Machen's sumptuous, complete and unexpurgated translation *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova*. The two parted ways around 1896, probably because Nichols dealt consistently in hard-core pornography.



these limited editions were translations of upscale erotica that circulated freely in the original, but remained underground in translation.

Born in Sheffield, Yorkshire, Smithers, Nichols produced and clandestinely distributed pornographic books. The first of Smithers's publications bearing the Erotika Bibliion imprint was his prose translation from the Latin: *Priapeia, or The Sportive Epigrams of Divers Poets on Priapus* (1888) (250 copies). In Trieste, Burton rendered Smithers's prose into metric verse, and Smithers expanded the notes

book shop and a printing business in Soho, the centre of London's pornography trade. Under the Erotika Bibliion Society imprint, Nichols & Co. published numerous translations of erotica based on Latin, Greek and oriental sources, as well as French court memoirs; for example, the Smithers-Burton *Carmina of Caius Valerius Catullus*, 1894, the Samuel Smith translation *Lysistrata of Aristophanes*, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, 1896, Isidore Liseux's translation of the Marquis de Sade's *Opus Sadicum* (Smithers acquired 50 sets of the sheets of Liseux's edition from the

Apparently striving for social legitimacy, Smithers then set up business at his Arundel Street home, soon adding legitimate publishing. He moved his business two years later to prestigious Old Bond Street. Though despised in polite circles, the bibliophile pornographer attracted defiant and controversial writers and artists, including Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons and Havelock Ellis, who shared his interest in art and French literature. Smithers's ancestors had crossed the Channel during the French revolution and

Smithers made periodic trips to Paris between 1894 and 1899. Fluent in French, he chose to translate erotica from the French. Titles issued under the Erotika Biblion imprint include *Tableaux Vivants*, 1888, *The Romance of My Alcove*, 1889, *Six Nouvelles Amoureuses*, 1891, and *Oriental Stories*, 1893, as well as two volumes of "oriental" pastiche: *The Thousand and One Quarters of an Hour, or Tartarian Tales*, 1893, and the *Transmigrations of the Mandarin Fum-Hoam*, 1894.

The wealth he accumulated through the "under-the-counter" sale of such works allowed him to explore his love for lavishly illustrated, elegantly bound literary works printed on high quality paper. *Belles lettres* bore the Smithers's imprint or his device "Puck on Pegagus" drawn by Beardsley. The list of Smithers's literary translations confirms the firm's Gallic interests: the three-volume translation of Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*, Dowson's translation of Balzac's *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or* with wood engravings by Charles Conder, Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine. Scenes of Parisian Life. Now for the First Time Completely Translated into English by Competent Hands*.

In addition, Smithers was probably the financial interest behind the semi-clandestine Lutetian Society, which published retranslations of six of Émile Zola's banned novels in 1894 and 1895 (Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, *La Curée*, Arthur Symons, *L'Assommoir*, Victor Gustave Plarr, *Nana*, Ernest Dowson, *La Terre*, Havelock Ellis, *Germinal*, Percy Pinkerton, *Pot-Bouille*), as well as French classics with an erotic edge, such as M. G. Lewis translation and continuation of le Comte Antoine Hamilton's *Les Quatre Facardins (The Four Facardins)* fancifully illustrated by Hugh Graham (1899), Dowson's translations of

Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and Voltaire's *La Pucelle d'Orléans* as *The Maid of Orleans* (1899).

After Wilde's 1895 court case and his imprisonment for "gross indecency," Smithers rescued young avant-garde writers caught up in the backlash. His foray into legitimate publishing led him to found, in 1896, the periodical *The Savoy*, whose literary editor was Symons, and chief illustrator, Beardsley. *The Savoy* published verse, short stories, essays and translations signed by Dowson, Ellis and Symons, among others, during its short lifespan (it ceased publishing after one year with number 8). Smithers had made his money in the early 1890s from the pornographic book trade. Ironically, once he launched into legitimate publishing, his fortunes changed. He supported controversial writers and artists, ensured the publication of lavish translations in the art nouveau style; however, the Lutetian Society's translations of Zola's novels were a financial disaster. The market during his lifetime for beautiful editions of literary works in translation was not as lucrative as the market for underground pornography.

Leonard Smithers lived the high life until the late 1890s, doing business out of an elegant establishment on Old Bond Street, before declaring bankruptcy in 1900. He dealt in piracies of Oscar Wilde's works and sold pornography until 1905, when he dropped out of sight professionally. He died penniless in December 1907 and was buried in an unmarked grave. ☞

#### Further Reading

MERKLE, Denise. 2003. "The Lutetian Society," *TTR* XVI/2, 73-101.

NELSON, James G., 2000. *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.

# La Fille aux Yeux d'Or

[THE GIRL WITH THE GOLDEN EYES]

BY

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

TRANSLATED BY

ERNEST DOWSON

With Six Illustrations Engraved on Wood by  
CHARLES CONDER



LEONARD SMITHERS  
ROYAL ARCADE: OLD BOND STREET  
LONDON W  
1896

