## Fahrenheit CCCCLI: Roman Book-Burning and Literary Persecution

by L. Curchin

Public burnings of The Satanic Verses and the sensational threats against author Salman Rushdie are likely to attract media attention for some months to come. Yet what is newsworthy is not necessarily new. The ancients had also to deal with objectionable literature, and the obvious remedy was to burn the book and punish the author. Despite the Romans' incessant praise of libertas (civic rights), the political realities of the Late Republic and Empire made free speech dangerous or impossible, and there was no Amnesty International to rescue literary offenders from prison, death or exile.

Then as now, religious writings were the likeliest to inflame passion. The Sibyl of Cumae reportedly offered to sell nine volumes of Apollo's prophecies to Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome, but he thought the price too high. Indignant, she burned three of the books, then offered the remaining six at the original price. Tarquinius again refused, so the Sibyl burned another three books but still demanded the initial sum. Finally Tarquinius realized that the books were invaluable and bought three for the price of nine. This example of book-burning is unique in that it punished the purchaser rather than the publisher! The three surviving books were destroyed by fire (accidental this time) in 83 B.C., but their oracles had often guided Rome in the interval.

Writers of heretical religious tracts could expect censure. Already in 411 B.C. the Athenians are said to have burnt the writings of Protagoras because he denied the existence of the gods. In 212 B.C., during the dark days of the Hannibalic War when disillusioned Romans were turning from the traditional (but seemingly powerless) native gods to exotic foreign cults, a decree of the Senate ordered all books of prophecies, prayers and rituals to be surrendered to the Urban Praetor (to be burnt or at least suppressed). Exactly 200 years later, Augustus became Pontifex Maximus and set about burning some 2000 volumes of irresponsible prophecies, including even some of the re-collected Sibylline oracles. A new threat was soon posed by Christianity. Its most vigorous opponent, the emperor Diocletian, ruthlessly persecuted Christian literature (and Christians generally). He also banned books on chemistry and metallurgy, to prevent people tampering with his new coinage!

Political writings too often struck a nerve in a deserving tyrant. In 43 B.C. Marc Antony, collaborating with Lepidus and Octavian - the "Second Triumvirate" - tried to get rid of his political enemies by "proscription" (putting a price on their heads). Cicero, who had mercilessly attacked Antony in fourteen speeches (nicknamed "Philippics" after Demosthenes' orations against Philip), was killed in this proscription, and the hands which had written them were lopped off. The prolific writer Varro, "the most learned of the Romans", managed to escape, but his extensive personal library was burnt.

Under the Empire, historians praising the Republic were as welcome as czarists in the U.S.S.R. Augustus ordered the historical writings of Titus Labienus (a staunch republican) to be burnt, presumably because they criticized his regime. When giving public readings from the manuscript, Labienus would omit large sections, saying "This part can be read after my death". That death was not far off: Labienus was so distressed at the destruction of his works that he had himself buried alive. A friend, the orator Cassius Severus, boasted that he had already memorized Labienus' works; he was exiled to Crete for life, and his own speeches were burnt. The emperor Tiberius put the historian Cremutius Cordus on trial

for calling Brutus and Cassius the last of the Romans. Cordus starved himself to death to avoid certain execution, and the Senate ordered his works burnt. Domitian not only put to death the historian Hermogenes for some imprudent comments in a book, but crucified the slave copyists who had helped publish it. The late imperial historian Procopius wrote an official history of Justinian and a "secret history" of the court scandals; he was wise enough to keep it secret until after his death!

Poets also got into trouble for their writings. Augustus is said to have ignored anonymous verses written against him. On the other hand, he exiled Ovid for "a poem and a mistake". The poem was the Ars Amatoria, which made a mockery of Augustus' moral legislation; the mistake was possibly an affair with the emperor's lascivious daughter Julia. Tiberius put to death several poets who composed verses against him, as well as the tragedian Scaurus who made an unfavourable reference to monarchy in a play about the Mycenaean king Atreus. Even the fabulist Phaedrus was tried, and possibly imprisoned, for supposed political allusions in his fables. Nero, who feared conspiracies everywhere, ordered the death of such prominent writers as Lucan, Seneca and Petronius. Another writer, named Curiatius Maternus, got into trouble for a play about the Republican hero Cato; it is unclear whether this is the same Maternus who was killed by Domitian for speaking against the emperor.

Some poets were tempted to burn their own work. Vergil ordered that, on his death, his friends burn the Aeneid, with its immodest praise of the family of Augustus, who of course rescued it from the flames. To protest his exile, Ovid dramatically burned his Metamorphoses (fully aware that there were other copies in circulation!). Persius' literary executor advised the poet's mother to destroy some verses praising Arria, who had helped her condemned husband commit suicide.

Book-burning and literary persecution almost invariably backfire by giving publicity, even popularity, to the forbidden writings. The final word belongs to Tacitus (Annales, 14.50), commenting on Nero's order that the works of one Fabricius Veiento be burnt: "So long as it was dangerous, his books were avidly sought and read; once the ban was lifted, they were forgotten."