



Loti, Pierre (Julien Viaud) (1850-1923)

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Pierre Loti at his home in 1895. Photography by Dornac.

One of the most popular and respected French novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Julien Viaud, who wrote under the name Pierre Loti, created a series of novels that chronicle the struggle of a man to understand his homoerotic feelings and their implications for him.

Biography

Viaud was born in Rochefort on January 14, 1850, to one of the city's few Protestant families. On his mother's side, he was descended from survivors of the exile or forced conversion imposed on French Huguenots in 1685 with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. This history instilled in Viaud early on the feeling of belonging to a group that was subject to exclusion and persecution.

Until he was twelve, Viaud's family chose to have him educated at home, in part because of his delicate health. (Viaud would later write that he regretted having been pampered as a child.) He attended high school in Rochefort, and then the Lycée Napoléon (today Henri IV) in Paris to prepare for the entrance exam for the Naval Academy.

While he was there he also studied art, and for the rest of his life found pleasure in drawing and painting. The works that survive show a real talent, and some of the drawings reveal a clear interest in the male body.

Graduating from the Naval Academy in 1867, he began a career as an officer that extended over 43 years and took him to many of the exotic lands that he used as settings for his books. Unlike Conrad or Melville, who left the sea to pursue writing, Viaud published his more than twenty novels and travelogs while still in the service.

In 1886, in part to end pressure from his family, in part because he wanted a son, Viaud married Blanche de Ferrière, a woman whom his mother had picked out for him while he was away at sea. The marriage was not a happy one, and in 1906 Blanche Viaud returned to her family.

In 1910, despite his efforts to remain on active duty, the navy finally forced Viaud to retire. When World War I broke out, however, he managed to obtain a commission in the army as assistant to General Galliéni, military governor of Paris after the flight of the French government in the face of the German invasion. In addition to diplomatic missions that he was able to perform because of his friendship with several of the crowned heads of Europe, Viaud covered the war for the Parisian daily *Le Figaro* and the weekly *L'Illustration*.

Back in civilian life after the War, Viaud became subject to depression and declining health. He published several volumes of somewhat fictionalized memoirs and, with the help of his son Samuel, revised the diary he had been keeping since he was sixteen. Viaud died of uremia and pulmonary edema on June 10, 1923, shortly after a last visit from his friend Sarah Bernhardt.

Sexuality

Because of the homosexual themes in a few of his early novels and Viaud's sometimes flamboyant lifestyle, the French popular press of his time depicted him as gay in satirical cartoons. These cartoons and the rumors that gave rise to them fixed Viaud in the public's mind as gay, to the extent, for example, that French senator Cécile Goldat grouped Viaud with Gide and Cocteau as a distinguished gay writer when legislation concerning homosexuality was debated in the 1980s.

Notwithstanding these widespread assumptions, however, there is no definite evidence that Viaud ever had homosexual relations himself. Edmond de Goncourt, in his diary entry for September 21, 1890, wrote that Viaud had been caught *in flagrante delicto* with a sailor, but Goncourt was a malicious gossip and not always reliable, so this entry proves nothing.

Viaud's family, especially his grandson, has always denied that he was gay. Near the end of his life, Viaud and his son Samuel went through his diaries, excising and rewriting, so even if they had contained evidence of his homosexuality at one time, they no longer do.

Viaud's Works

In the speech that he gave upon being received into the Académie Française in 1891, Viaud declared that "A critic worthy of the name who has to speak about a writer would be fortunate if he were . . . to read him . . . from beginning to end in the exact order in which his books had been written, and in that way to follow the development of his talent, the appearance of his personality, if he has one, and to see take shape in his work the unity without which there is neither greatness nor duration." If one approaches Viaud's own novels in this way, one finds that they are carefully coded, the later ones referring back to the earlier ones in ways that reveal the presence of a constant and progressively more complex homosexual subtext, their "unity."

The first of them, *Aziyadé* (1879), is among the most open in the presentation of a homosexual subtext. Roland Barthes, with much exaggeration, referred to it as "a little Sodomitic epic." It recounts the story of an English naval officer stationed in Turkey, Harry Grant, who meets first a handsome young boatman, Samuel, and then a young harem resident, Aziyadé. While recounting the relationship between Harry and the young woman, Viaud uses a series of parallels to suggest that the relationship between the young officer and the boatman is equally romantic and erotic.

In his fourth novel, *My Brother Yves* (1883), there is no heterosexual romance cover. Viaud recounts the love of his protagonist, French naval officer Pierre Loti, for the handsome Breton sailor Yves Kermadec in a fairly direct manner. (Jean Genet alludes to this novel repeatedly in his own tale of a naval officer's love for a Breton sailor, *Querelle* [1953].) The mystery, never resolved, is to what extent Yves reciprocates that love and shares Pierre's homosexual feelings.

In his next novel, *Iceland Fisherman* (1886), Viaud's masterpiece, the author relates the apparently heterosexual tale of Gaud Mével's love for Breton fisherman Yann Gaos. Much of this novel is structured to recall its predecessor, however, so that, in recounting Gaud's love for Yann, it at the same time further elaborates Pierre's love for Yves.

Madame Chrysanthemum (1888) became one of the sources of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and the musical *Miss Saigon*. In it Pierre "marries" Madame Chrysanthemum for the duration of a tour of duty in Japan. The author makes it very clear, however, that, unlike in the theatrical works derived from it, the officer has no romantic interest in the young geisha. He is, rather, more than a little worried that Yves might become involved with her.

Viaud's next novel, *The Story of a Child* (1890), is a biography of the young Pierre based on the author's own childhood. In it, Pierre tries to understand his feelings of difference and speculates on the function of literature to help readers understand each other by bringing out the commonalities that join them.

Ramuntcho (1897) is the story of a young Basque pelote player and contraband runner who also struggles with feelings of difference and alienation from those around him. He considers marrying Gracieuse, a friend from childhood, but cannot bring himself to go through with it. In his effort to understand himself he finds a picture of his father, a sophisticate who recalls Oscar Wilde or Robert de Montesquiou. Ramuntcho does not want anyone to see his resemblance to him, however; he is not comfortable with that role, either. He finally leaves the world of his childhood, which constantly seems to be closing in on him, for the open possibilities of the New World, just as Pierre, at the end of *The Story of a Child*, had decided to join the navy.

Viaud came back to Oscar Wilde in his play *Judith Renaudin* (1898), which was staged by André Antoine. Based on an incident in Viaud's own family history, the drama recounts the story of a young Protestant woman who is forced to leave her family behind and flee to Holland upon Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Written during the Wilde trials, it is a dramatization of how legislated intolerance of difference tears families apart when it forces some individuals to leave their own country.

Viaud's last novel, *The Awakened* (1906), deals most extensively with the situation of gay men. As in *Iceland Fisherman* and *Judith Renaudin*, Viaud uses female characters to tell the story, in this case three young Turkish women, like Aziyadé trapped in the harem system. Through their leader, Djénane, the novel deals with the plight of individuals who live on the margins of society and are forced to marry against their will.

Djénane corresponds with André Lhéry, a French novelist who much resembles Viaud himself. As they plan how she will help him write a novel about her situation, Viaud reflects on the importance of community for gay men, something that Viaud's younger contemporary and admirer, Proust, would argue fifteen years later in *Sodom and Gemorrah* to be impossible to achieve. Viaud also explores the value of literature for learning about one's true self when society is trying to shape our minds and self-images in ways that suit it.

Conclusion

Viaud's novels never deal with homosexuality directly, but then neither does Oscar Wilde's work, and he is regularly held up as the first important figure in English-language gay literature. *Aziyadé* and *My Brother Yves* were obvious enough to foster rumors about Viaud's homosexuality in the popular press of the day. Others, like *Iceland Fisherman*, *Ramuntcho*, *Judith Renaudin*, and *The Awakened*, have had to wait longer for gay readings.

Read in chronological order, Viaud's novels present the story of a gay man working to come to an understanding of his feelings and who he is as a result of them, the first novelistic corpus in Western literature to do so. It would be a half-century before any other major novelist in English or French undertook something similar in so positive a fashion.

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