By 1897 Pierre Loti (1850-1923) had established himself as one of France’s most popular and respected novelists. Starting with *Aziyadé* in 1879 and running through *Ramuntcho* (1897), he had published ten successful novels with contemporary settings that in 1891 won him election to the French Academy as its youngest member. Then he did something that has confounded those who have considered it: he contacted the admired but not commercially successful theater director, André Antoine, and offered to write a play for his avant-garde Théâtre Antoine, one that would deal with the effects of the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes on some of Loti’s Protestant ancestors. As Guy Dugas and Claude Duvigneau note in their introduction to a recent re-edition of the work,

Pendant longtemps pourtant, [Loti] parut se désintéresser de ses ascendances oleronaises comme de la religion protestante au sein de laquelle il était né. N’est-il pas significatif de noter qu’aucun de ses héros n’est explicitement présenté comme protestant; qu’aucune de ses pérégrinations ne semble jamais le ramener au Temple; que ses constantes interrogations face aux religions du monde ignorent toujours celle dans laquelle il a été éduqué? Alors pourquoi seulement à quarante-cinq ans révolus, et à travers un genre pour lui inédit, le théâtre? (Dugas, Duvigneau 1998 134)

Loti himself offered an explanation to the public and Antoine. In the version of the “Avant propos” that he provided for the original edition of the play published in *La Revue de Paris* shortly after it opened in November 1898, he explained that his family had preserved letters sent from Holland by those who had fled the country

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1 This introduction is followed by an unannotated edition of the play, pp. 140-188. For those not familiar with French history, in 1598, after a half-century of war between Protestants and Catholics, Henri IV, as part of the final peace, proclaimed the Edict of Nantes, which gave French Protestants certain rights and freedoms in certain parts of France. In 1685, for reasons that historians still argue, Louis XIV revoked those freedoms and threatened French Protestants with prison (hard labor for the men) if they did not convert. Many fled the country, leading to major economic decline.
because of the Revocation, and that one of his grandmothers had occasionally read passages from them to him when he was young. Those letters, he continued, “m’ont inspiré ce drame” (Loti 1898a 2-3). This is also evidently what he at first told Antoine. In a letter written three decades later for a special issue of the Mercure de Flandre devoted to Loti, the director recalled that when he first met the author Loti informed him that “il venait de trouver la substance [de son drame] dans de vieilles lettres de famille” (Antoine 1931 34).

Loti was lying, though. As those who have studied his family have discovered, the action of Judith Renaudin is very different from historical reality and so from anything he could have found in those letters. In the play, French troops arrive on Oléron Island in southeastern France to announce the Revocation and demand that the Renaudin family, Loti’s maternal ancestors, along with the rest of the community’s Protestants, convert to Catholicism or face imprisonment and possible death. The younger members of the family, including the title character, Judith, decide to flee to Protestant Holland so as to be able to remain true to their faith, leaving behind the patriarch, Samuel, who is too old to make the trip. In reality Judith converted, at least outwardly, and did not leave for Holland until some fifteen years later, for commercial rather than religious reasons (Dugas, Duvigneau 1998 138-139). Why then did Loti, himself by then an agnostic, invent this story of persecution and flight and pass it off as historical truth?

Some, perhaps feeling that the uncustomary historical setting had to refer to a contemporary issue, have argued that Loti decided to make use of the persecution of France’s Protestant minority to criticize the French military in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair. Jewish French captain Alfred Dreyfus had been condemned at the end of

2 When the play was reprinted in book form, the final paragraphs of the “Avant-propos,” including this passage, were cut (see Loti 1898b iii). This edition was reprinted through the years without alteration. They are also absent from the edition of the play found in the tome devoted to Loti’s theater that was published in 1911 as Volume XI of his Oeuvres complètes (Loti 1911 iii). (All quotations from the play in this essay are taken from that edition.) Dugas and Duvigneau use the original version of the “Avant-propos” in their above-cited edition of the play (140-141), though they use the final version of the play itself.

3 See for example Guy Dugas’ introduction to his edition of the letters of Loti and Antoine regarding the play (Loti, Antoine 2000 21-22).
1894 by a military tribunal for betraying his country to the Germans and since then, as more and more individuals became convinced of the injustice of that verdict, anti-military sentiment had been growing in France. Zola’s justly famous open letter “J’accuse,” accusing the Army of a major coverup, appeared on the front page of *L’Aurore* in January, 1898, and Loti’s play, though he had started work on it in 1897, opened in December of that same year while the Affair was still going strong.

While it certainly deals with religious persecution carried out by the military, *Judith Renaudin* offers no other parallels with the Dreyfus Affair, however: no false accusations, coverups, etc. And while the persecution is carried out by the military, the play makes it very clear that this persecution does not originate with the army but rather with Louis XIV himself. Pierre Baudry, the local Catholic priest, begins the play by reading the royal third-person proclamation from the king that has just been posted in Saint-Pierre d’Oléron: “à présent, ayant fait la Trève avec tous les Princes de l’Europe, il s’est entièrement appliqué à travailler avec succès à la réunion de ses sujets de la Religion prétendue Réformée à l’Eglise Catholique. . . . [Il] ordonne que tous les temples qui se trouvent encore dans son royaume seront incessamment démolis,” etc. (6). This attribution of responsibility for the persecution of Protestants to Louis XIV and not the army is subsequently repeated throughout the play. Loti never took a public stand on Dreyfus’ case and maintained in the “Avant-propos” that he had not had it in mind when writing his

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4 Judith Renaudin tells her friend Jeanne that “les dragons, pour agir, ont des ordres de notre prince. . . Monsieur d’Estelan [the officer in charge of the company of dragoons sent to enforce the Revocation on the island of Oléron, where the play takes place], par exemple, ce n’est pas de lui-même qu’il nous persécute” (31). She tells d’Estelan himself that she knows he is “l’exécuteur des ordres du roi” (87). Her father refers to the dragoons as “les bourreaux aux gages du roi” (111), and as he watches his family leave for exile in Holland exclaims in sorrow and anger: “C’est au nom du roi de France!” (122). D’Estelan himself assures Baudry that he is not comfortable in “ce métier de convertisseur que les ordres du roi m’obligeant à faire” (66). It is very much as if Loti went out of his way to make sure that no one would see his play as an attack on the military. (Note: The brief excerpts from the Revocation that Baudry reads in the first scene are not verbatim reproductions of the historical document. Loti did considerable rewriting to make what he wanted to use more concise.)
drama. Here it would seem to make sense to take him at his word.

Trying another approach, Dugas and Duvigneau point out that at the time he wrote the play Loti, a career naval officer, had recently been forced into retirement after over twenty years of service as part of a general staff reduction, and so may have been using this drama to express his resentment toward the military establishment (Dugas, Duvigneau 1998 137). That is possible, of course, but rather unlikely, since Loti was intent on being re-instated—which he was in 1899. And, again, the play does not focus on criticism of the military. Moreover, Loti was not forced into retirement until January 1898 (Loti 1997 401), but he had already met with Antoine to discuss production of the play in November 1897 (Antoine 1928 125). The explanation for Loti’s decision to tell this story must then lie elsewhere.

The reactions at the opening of the drama to the proclamation of the Edict of Nantes’ revocation provide an important clue, particularly since their perspective on the issue is the one repeated throughout the five acts that follow. The second Protestant peasant, having listened to Baudry read, asks: “Et nos enfants, monsieur le curé? Est-ce la vérité ce qu’on annonçait pour nos enfants?” (6; part of the Revocation decreed that young Protestant children be taken from their families and turned over to Catholic clergy for indoctrination.) Like all the other Protestant characters in the play, this peasant’s concern is not with the Revocation’s effect on religious freedom but with the potential loss of his children.

This perspective reappears repeatedly with the Protestant characters. Libaud, one of the wealthier Protestants, asks: “Eh, j’ai des enfants, moi, il faudra bien que je les emmène, que voulez-vous, pour qu’on ne me les prenne pas?” (8). Judith’s blind grandmother, unable to travel to Holland like the younger members of her family, exclaims to Jeanne, a young friend: “Mon Dieu! . . . Et moi, l’aïeule bientôt sans enfants, dire que, avant de

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5 This passage is also part of the last two paragraphs of the original “Avant-propos” and is therefore also absent from the book editions of the play cited above. It can be found in Loti 1898a 2-3 and Dugas, Duvigneau 1998 140-141.

6 Dugas comes back to this interpretation in his introduction to the Loti-Antoine letters dealing with the play and goes so far as to describe the drama as “peut-être de vengeance à l’encontre de l’armée, qui vient de le rayer de ses cadres” (Loti, Antoine 2000 22).
mourir, je verrai peut-être encore passer un été, deux étés, qui sait, dans cette maison et dans ce jardín vides, où je n’entendrai plus jamais ta voix, ma Judith, plus jamais la voix de mes chers petits. . .” (40-41). When the captain of the dragoons that have been sent to enforce the new edict, Raymond d’Estelan, shows up to announce it to the Renaudin household, Samuel Renaudin, Judith’s father and the head of the family, tells him: “Posez nettement vos conditions, et qu’au moins je sache . . . Ne faisons point languir l’entretien terrible, parlez vite! . . . Nous les prendre de force, n’est-ce pas? C’est ça? Nous les enlever?”(48). In his “Avant propos,” Loti refers to the elder Renaudins as “ces ancêtres privés de leurs enfants” (iii).

The importance of this issue in the play is underlined by the fact that even the Catholic figures talk about the sorrow of being deprived of children. Act III focuses on the efforts of curate Baudry to hide the Protestant children until their families can escape with them by sea to Holland. It ends with an unsuccessful attempt, during which one of the young children, Jean, is killed by the dragoons. This incites Baudry’s devoutly Catholic housekeeper, Benoîte, who had previously been outspoken in her dislike of Huguenots, to cry out at the soldiers: “Je suis une catholique, moi! Et une servante de curé encore! Et je vous le dis, oui, que vous êtes des gueux et des pendards! . . . Mais regardez donc ce que vous en avez fait, de ce petit! . . . Mais regardez-le done!” (75). Even d’Estelan, when not allowed to talk to the Renaudin children, expresses sorrow at being deprived of such contact: “Ah! C’est vrai, je suis le maudit, moi, avec qui les enfants ne doivent point jouer, n’est-ce pas? . . . je suis le maudit, vous entendez, et le bourreau!” (46).

This remains the work’s perspective on the Revocation through to the end. In the final scene of the play, where d’Estelan, after a change of heart, helps the Renaudins escape to a waiting ship, the last characters on stage, and therefore the final focus of the play, are not Judith and her siblings but the small Renaudin children saying goodbye to their grandfather Samuel. Portrayed as a strong, almost stoical man up to this point, Renaudin, faced with losing these children, “se jette la tête contre le mur et pleure à grands sanglots” (122). Even as it stands in the final version of the play, that published in book form from 1898 on, this powerful tableau drives home one last time the point introduced by the already-cited opening lines: Judith Renaudin is not about religion, it is about the anguish experienced by men who are separated from their children, and in particular young children, by a revocation of government tolerance for difference. (Loti drives this home one last time by having Samuel exclaim, as the little children are led out: “C’est au nom du roi de France!” [122].) In the version of the play published immediately after
it opened in 1898 in *La Revue de Paris*, however, which reflects Loti’s manuscript as it stood in September of that year (Loti, Antoine 2000 38-39), Samuel’s grief-stricken final comments are attributed not to S. Renaudin, like all his other lines in the play, but simply to “The Father” (Loti 1898a 60-61), even though he is not the father but the grandfather of those young children. This makes it that much clearer that Loti saw his play very specifically as the story of a father’s grief at the loss of his children as a result of his government’s move to intolerance.

Why did Loti decide in 1897 to write a play about this subject, and why pass it off as based on reality? Its contemporary historical context suggests an explanation.

In 1895, using the recently passed Labouchere Amendment, England prosecuted Oscar Wilde for homosexual activity. Though the two years he subsequently served in prison were very hard on him, the greatest sorrow he experienced as a result of England’s recent increase in the persecution of gay men was the loss of his two young sons, Cyril and Vyvyan. As he wrote to Alfred Douglas in the text that has come to be known as *De Profundis*,

> But my two children are taken from me by legal procedure. That is and will remain to me a source of infinite distress, of infinite pain, of grief without end or limit. That the law should decide, and take upon itself to decide, that I am one unfit to be with my own children is something quite horrible to me. The disgrace of prison is as nothing compared to it. I envy the other men who tread the yard along with me. I am sure that their children wait for them, look for their coming, will be sweet to them. (Wilde 1989 911)

After his release from prison in May, 1897, Wilde moved to France, several months before Loti proposed his play to Antoine. Since homosexual acts were not criminal there, Wilde was able to spend time with Douglas without fear of further legal proceedings. But he never saw Cyril and Vyvyan again.

No one in France who read the newspapers would have been unaware of what Wilde had gone through during the past two years or of his recent release and arrival. As Nancy Erber has shown in her well-researched article on the topic, the French press had devoted extensive coverage to Wilde’s trials in 1895 and returned to the subject when he chose France as his new residence two years later (Erber 1996). Loti had known of Wilde even before the trials began: the Irish author had sent him a copy of his French play *Salomé* in 1893, for which Loti had

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sent him thanks. Wilde’s subsequent loss must have struck him, because Loti also had young sons at the time and was himself suspected of homosexual activity in a France that was also growing rapidly more homophobic.

Though homosexual acts had not been illegal there since 1791 when the Constituent Assembly failed to include sodomy in the new civil-law code, the atmosphere had been getting more homohostile for several decades. Following the publication of Amboise Tardieu’s *Etude médico-légale sur les attentats aux moeurs* in 1857, French medical science had taken to turning very negative attention to male homosexuality. By the end of the century it was producing works read outside the medical profession that depicted homosexual men as physically and morally degenerate, incapable of manly behavior. France’s humiliating defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1870 played into these pronouncements. Since physicians and politicians repeatedly explained that loss not as the result of inferior military leadership but rather as confirmation that Frenchmen were losing their masculinity, some began to decry male homosexuality as a threat to France’s political security. Even the popular fiction of the time turned

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7 Wilde sent an autographed copy of *Salomé* to Loti (Quella-Villéger 1998 212) and Loti replied with a flattering thank-you note (Ellmann 1988 375). This copy of the play was included in an exposition organized by the French National Library in 1950 (Bibliothèque nationale 1950 21) but its current whereabouts are evidently unknown (Loti-Viau).

8 On medical attitudes toward male homosexuality in late nineteenth-century France see Rosario 1996; Copley 1989 135-54. In his chapter devoted to “Male Sexual Identity and the ‘Perversions’ in the Fin de siècle,” Robert A. Nye has convincingly argued that “this process of medicalizing and pathologizing sexual identity was more widely and deeply developed in France than elsewhere in Europe in the years around the turn of the century. The model of the perversion that French doctors favored, particularly as it applied to homosexuality, differed in important respects from ones adopted elsewhere, and was considerably less generous in its judgments” (Nye 1998 102-103). On the extent to which some of these pseudo-scientific studies were read by a more general public, see for example J. E. Rivers’ comment that “many of [the disparaging theories of homosexuality found in *A la recherche du temps perdu*] were adapted directly from the standard medical theories of Proust’s day” (157). Nye also deals with the influence of French medical science’s homophobic writings on a wider public.

9 In the book cited in the previous footnote and his preceding one, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France:*
homophobic (Wilson 2001). In 1887, two years after England passed the Labouchere Amendment, a former chief of Paris police, François Carlier, published a book, *Les Deux Prostitutions: étude de pathologie sociale*, in which he argued from his years as head of the morals squad that France needed to recriminalize homosexual behavior as well (Robinson 1995 8). A proposal to that effect was brought before the Chamber of Deputies the same year (Robinson 1995 9). Though it was finally voted down, by 1894 there was a brigade in the Paris police department keeping dossiers on homosexual members of “le Tout-Paris” (Albertini 2003).

This homophobia became yet more public in 1895 when the French press began to cover the Wilde trials. Nancy Erber has shown that even some of the writers who defended Wilde as an artist nonetheless condemned homosexuality, sometimes quite vehemently, and distanced themselves from it (562-88; the following examples come from her article). Gaston Jollivet, writing for *Le Gaulois*, found the revelations that emerged from the trials “revolting,” an adjective also employed by Ange Goldemar reporting from London for *L’Echo de Paris*. Jacques St.-Cere declared that homosexuality was deviant, marginal, and foreign to the French nation—the last affirmation being repeated by others, such as Henry Bauer. As J. E. Rivers noted, “the Wilde affair cast a pall of paranoia over the subject of homosexuality [in France]” (110).

The popular press of the time, meanwhile, especially since the publication of his very homoerotic fourth novel *Mon Frère Yves* in 1883, had taken to portraying Loti as gay. Various satirical Parisian publications associated him with notoriously gay Frenchmen like Claude Lorrain and Robert de Montesquiou, a model for Proust’s Baron de Charlus (Cardon 2003 78-9; Tin 2003 265). In its April 25, 1903 issue, for example, *L’Assiette au
Beurre published a cartoon in which a woman holding a copy of *Mon frère IV* by Pierlo To addresses a flower-sniffing, overly-bejeweled man with the line: “Allons donc, mon cher! ... Vous n’avez même pas l’excuse d’être dans la marine!” (Iribe 1903 1822). That same issue also featured a cartoon in which a fashionably dressed woman out for a stroll with her husband asks some unseen third party “Vous venez, ce soir, dîner, n’est-ce pas? ... Nous avons Pierre Loti et son nouveau frère Yves” (Iribe 1903 1832). Such rumors had been current since well before *Judith Renaudin*. In the 21 September, 1890, entry of his diary, novelist Edmond de Goncourt wrote: “Est-ce vrai? La princesse [Mathilde] déclaraît qu’un amiral et un contre-amiral lui avaient affirmé que Loti aurait été surpris en flagrant délit de pédérastie et qu’il y avait contre lui un commencement d’instruction, abandonnée je ne sais pourquoi” (Goncourt 1956 III, 1230).

Given the homophobic climate of the times and his image in the press, Loti would have had good reason to believe that if anti-homosexual legislation made its way through to become law in France as it had in England, he, like Wilde a celebrity in the public eye, would be among its first targets. This gives added resonance to a speech he gave Samuel Renaudin: the patriarch tells Baudry, “Nous étions depuis longtemps préparés, vous vous en doutez bien, au coup qui nous frappe aujourd’hui, et l’édit affiché ce matin n’est que la confirmation de nos longues craintes” (18). Given the importance of his own young sons to Loti, Wilde’s loss of his because of England’s legislation of establishment homophobia must therefore have struck the French author with particular force and made him particularly apprehensive, which would explain the repeated concern in *Judith Renaudin* with loss of one’s young children to newly-legislated government intolerance for difference.

While this concern is the most striking link between Loti’s drama and Oscar Wilde, other aspects of the play take on new significance when read in the context of the growing homophobia in Western Europe at the end of the nineteenth century as well. Judith, the eponymous protagonist, comes under repeated pressure to marry. Her father and grandmother urge her to wed Daniel Robert, a young man who claims that he lacks the courage to maintain his faith and leave France if she does not accompany him as his bride. Samuel is quite direct: “Voyons, Judith! ... Voyons, ma fille. ... Que nous ayons au moins cette consolation, de vous bénir tous deux ensemble, avant

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11 It bears mentioning that de Goncourt, like many of his contemporaries, used “pédérastie” to refer to adult male same-sex activity. It did not for him have the denotation of child molestation that it does today.
que vous nous quittiez à jamais” (21; cf. also 25, 26, 27). Her grandmother also lays it on quite heavily: “Tu ne réponds pas, Judith. . . . Oh! quelle plus dure épreuve le Seigneur me réservait pour la fin de ma vie! . . . Être devenue si âgée pour voir échouer le projet qui avait été ma consolation dans ma nuit de pauvre vieille aveugle: les unir l’un à l’autre, ces petits-enfants que mes yeux ne connaissent plus!” (25-26). Judith asks for time to consider, clearly not interested in Daniel (20), and brings down the curtain on Act I with her declaration that she cannot marry him: “Mais ce mariage, non, je ne pourrais pas. . . Laissez-moi rester libre. . . Pardonne-moi, mon cher Daniel. . . Tous, pardonnez-moi . . . Non, je ne pourrais pas” (27). In Act IV, d’Estelan, by now in love with her, also pressures Judith to marry, threatening that if she does not wed him he will increase his persecution of the island’s Protestants: “si vous me repoussez, oh! alors, seul dans la vie, je resterai soldat plus dur, persécuteur plus acharné de ceux que vous m’aurez fait davantage haïr, en me sacrifiant à leur hérésie maudite” (91).

All this pressure on Judith to marry was, again, strictly Loti’s invention. The historical Judith converted and stayed in France, single, not going to Holland until around 1700, a move that seems to have been motivated more by commercial interests than a desire to practice the Protestant faith (Dugas, Duvigneau 1998 138-139; Loti, Antoine 2000 17, 20). Since this pressure on her to enter into marriage parallels the government pressure on Protestants to convert, the intolerance of difference that produced the latter is associated with the former. It would therefore appear that in writing this drama Loti was thinking not only of the suffering that threatened fathers perceived as gay but also of contemporary Western Europe’s efforts to get homosexual men to give up their “bent” and focus on marriage and reproduction. Robert A. Nye has shown how late nineteenth-century France saw its falling birthrate as one more argument that Frenchmen had a patriotic duty to marry and procreate rather than waste their seed in men and exerted pressure on all of them to do so (Nye 1984 Ch. X; 1998 Ch. 6).\(^\text{12}\)

Other aspects of the play also take on new depth when read against this interpretation. At one point Baudry reminds d’Estelan that the persecuted Protestants are also Christians and then adds: “peut-être même . . . leur foi en Notre-Seigneur, avivée par tant de persécutions, est-elle en ce moment plus ardente que la nôtre” (68-69). In a famous passage from the first volume of L’Histoire de la sexualité, Michel Foucault wrote that the appearance in late nineteenth-century medical and legal discourse of a largely negative presentation of the newly created male

\(^{12}\) Loti would return to the issue of family pressure to marry in his last novel, Les Désenchantées (1906).
homosexual, while making possible the control of all men's sexual activity and even emotions, “a permis aussi la constitution d’un discours ‘en retour’: l’homosexualité s’est mise à parler d’elle-même, à revendiquer sa légitimité ou sa ‘naturalité’” (Foucault 1976 134). The persecution of Wilde only increased those efforts, moreso in England and Germany where there were actually laws against homosexual acts between adults, but also in France. As Florence Tamagne has written, “les procès d’Oscar Wilde ont également joué un rôle déterminant dans le processus identitaire. En révélant l’existence d’une subculture homosexuelle déjà bien organisée, du moins dans les grandes villes, et en engageant une discussion de l’homosexualité masculine dans la presse, ils permettaient à de nombreux hommes de prendre conscience de leur singularité” (430). Was Loti suggesting through Baudry that at least some gay Frenchmen would become more rather than less intent on being true to their nature if their government outlawed them? He does have Judith exclaim at one point: “Mais on se lasse, à la fin, de courber la tête” (95).

Similarly, given this interpretation, the second scripture-reading scene in Judith Renaudin becomes particularly meaningful. As the younger members of his family get ready to try an escape to Holland by sea, Samuel Renaudin, too moved to read it himself, hands the family Bible over to Judith and, telling her to let the book open as God wills, asks her for a reading. She intones aloud this passage from John:

> Ce que je vous commande, est de vous aimer les uns et les autres. Si le monde vous hait, sachez qu’il m’a haï avant vous. Si vous étiez du monde, le monde aimerait ce qui serait à lui; mais parce que vous n’êtes point du monde, c’est pour cela que le monde vous hait. Souvenez-vous de la parole que je vous ai dite: S’ils m’ont persécuté, ils vous persécuteront aussi. . . . Je vous ai dit ces choses afin que vous ne soyez point troublés. Ils vous chasseront des temples et le temps vient où quiconque vous fera mourir croira faire une chose agéeable à Dieu. Ils vous traiteront de la sorte parce qu’ils ne connaissent ni mon père, ni moi. Or je vous ai dit ces choses afin que, lorsque ce temps-là sera venu, vous vous souveniez que je vous les ai dites. . . . (108-109; John 15:17-20, 16:1-4)

This passage would have struck home for persecuted Protestants in 1685, of course, but also for persecuted same-sex-desiring men at the end of the nineteenth century. They would have appreciated the comparison of their own persecution with that suffered by Christ and an explanation of it as simply the result of their being different: “vous
n’êtes point du monde, c’est pour cela que le monde vous hait.”\footnote{Certainly the description of the persecutors as men who think that “quiconque vous fera mourir . . . [f]era une chose agêable à Dieu,” but who do so “parce qu’ils ne connaissent ni mon père, ni moi,” would have been particularly telling.}

This interpretation also clarifies an otherwise somewhat strange scene near the opening of Act Four. The other officers of the dragoons are sitting around gambling and laughing about their coercion of the local Protestants. When d’Estelan reminds them angrily that he has forbidden setting fire to houses, Philippe de Flers, his lieutenant, jokes that d’Estelan must himself be Protestant. D’Estelan reacts “with mounting anger” in a way that suggests more a man whose manhood has been questioned than his faith: “Protestant! protestant! Voici deux fois que vous me la faites, cette plaisanterie-là, et elle me déplaît, vous m’entendez?” (81). Philippe’s rejoinder continues in the same sense: “Dame, mon cher, tu en as l’air, toujours, si tu ne l’es pas.” (How does one have an air of being Protestant?) D’Estelan very much sounds like a straight man who becomes defensive about his heterosexuality when others see that he does not treat gays with the ridicule that even today is too often part of testosterone-laden all-male gatherings.\footnote{One might ask how much of his audience Loti expected to see the parallels between seventeenth-century France’s move to prosecute Protestants and his own era’s move to pressure homosexuals.\footnote{The case of Oscar Wilde was still fresh in their minds, certainly, since the poet had come to France upon his release from prison in May, 1897, and was in Paris on 2 November, 1898, when the play opened.\footnote{Antoine had built his reputation on presenting}}}

One might ask how much of his audience Loti expected to see the parallels between seventeenth-century France’s move to prosecute Protestants and his own era’s move to pressure homosexuals.\footnote{In his novels Loti repeatedly speaks of a small group of select readers who will understand him, a group he usually refers to as his “unknown friends.” For how he dealt with homosexuality in his novels, which were the source of his international celebrity, see Berrong 2003.\footnote{For Wilde’s whereabouts during this period see Wilde 2000. Wilde saw Antoine’s production of Hauptmann’s}}
serious literary drama, often dealing with contemporary social issues: he had just produced the French premiere of Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* a few months before, for example. Loti could have gone to a far more commercially successful producer, as he had done five years before with his theatrical adaptation of *Pêcheur d’Islande*, yet he sacrificed revenue instead to pick one whose audiences were accustomed to and evidently tolerant of plays about controversial social issues.

There is also the issue of the actor chosen to create Samuel Renaudin. For this grandfather whom the text describes upon his first appearance as “presque un vieillard” (14) Loti and Antoine chose the then well-known and highly-regarded actor Edouard de Max. Audiences watching him play an elderly patriarch must have experienced something of a Brechtian moment of alienation, since the actor was all of 29 in 1898 and they were accustomed to seeing him in correspondingly youthful roles. That same season, for example, Antoine featured de Max in one of his favorite parts, Racine’s depiction of the young Nero (Antoine 1928 137). This contrast would have been all that much more striking in that Antoine had established his reputation, in part, as one of the creators of a naturalistic theater that strove to reproduce the reality behind the play as faithfully as possible. Why would Antoine have gone against his custom and put a young actor in the part of an old man?

De Max was openly homosexual and did not object to having that aspect of his private life linked to the roles that he played. That same year, for example, he lobbied Antoine to produce Gide’s *Saul*, in which the author wanted de Max to create the same-sex-attracted title role (Boisdeffre 1970 I, 366; Sheridan 1999 154). Was Antoine and Loti’s choice of de Max for Samuel Renaudin an effort to get at least some of the audience to see the connection between the elderly patriarch and a gay man much in the news who had also lost his children through recently-legislated government intolerance for difference?

Loti’s choice of guests for the dress rehearsal makes one wonder as well. To Antoine’s box he invited two people who knew Wilde well, Sarah Bernhardt, for whom Wilde had written his French play *Salomé*, and Robert de Montesquiou (Loti 1997 407). Was it coincidence that Loti invited someone who had also been the object of public satire for homosexuality? Did he point out to them the link between the fears that this work expresses, Wilde’s loss, and the worsening situation in France?17

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17 It would have been interesting had some of the critics who reviewed the play for the Parisian press picked up on
In the end, Judith and the other younger Renaudins do escape, in part thanks to the help of d’Estelan, who has overcome his fear of what others may think of him. When she went to plead for protection, Judith had given him a copy of the Bible in French (98). Father Baudry informs the Renaudin family that “à la lecture de l’Evangile, une lumière soudaine s’est faite en lui sur l’horreur de la mission qu’il avait trop légèrement acceptée” (114). While, as Guy Dugas has noted, some found this sudden change of heart improbable (Loti, Antoine 2000 20), it fits with an idea that Loti had already put forth several years before in works such as Le roman d’un enfant (1890) that literature has the power to make readers empathize even with those who are different. Just as the Bible wins d’Estelan over to tolerance for the Huguenots, so Loti may have hoped that his play and similar works might win some of his contemporaries over to tolerance for other persecuted groups. The last line of the drama seems to refer to this. As the little children leave to join their parents for the voyage to Holland, Baudry makes the sign of the cross and calls out: “Oui, Seigneur, et vous, Vierge Marie, ayez pitié d’eux! Guidez-les, protégez-les! Et, de votre sainte lumière, Seigneur, pénètrez leurs âmes!” (123). The first part, “ayez pitié d’eux! Guidez-les, protégez-les!,” certainly refers to the fleeing Renaudins. But the last part, “de votre sainte lumière, Seigneur, pénètrez leurs âmes!,” does not reflect the respect for his Protestant neighbors’ convictions that Baudry had demonstrated throughout the play. Instead, it seems to be a prayer to God and the Virgin to fill their persecutors’ souls with understanding and tolerance such as d’Estelan had found reading Judith’s Bible, and such as Loti felt his ever more homophobic French contemporaries might find in literature of his own time.

There is no written proof that Loti had the Wilde Affair and France’s own growing establishment homophobia in mind while writing Judith Renaudin. The parallels certainly seem to go beyond the realm of coincidence, however. Loti definitely saw his drama as the story of a father’s loss of his young children because of government intolerance of difference. To that intolerance he paralleled repeated efforts to force an individual to marry. To make his dramatization of these issues that much more powerful, he presented them as historical fact, though he had to change the truth radically to do so. Since Loti’s contemporary works are highly autobiographical, it would not be unjustified to suspect that the fears expressed in Judith Renaudin also reflect concerns of its author, the parallels to the Wilde case. None of those whom I have been able to consult did, however.

18 On this aspect of Le roman d’un enfant see Berrong 2003 151.
who also had young sons. Given his depiction in the popular press of his time, it does not require too great a leap of fancy to see in this play a reference to the Wilde affair and the increasing establishment homophobia that brought it about. Even though Loti did not deal with it more openly, the fact that he did so so movingly—parts of *Judith Renaudin* are very powerful—argues that his one original play deserves discovery by those interested in gay history and theater and French social history in general. It provides insight into at least one facet of gay thought in the not always so idyllic France of the Belle Epoque.

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19 Before condemning Loti for not being more open in *Judith Renaudin*, one might recall Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s words regarding Wilde’s own covert way of dealing with homosexuality: “Reading *Dorian Gray* from our twentieth-century vantage point where the name Oscar Wilde virtually means ‘homosexual,’ it is worth reemphasizing how thoroughly the elements of even this novel can be read doubly or equivocally” (165).


____. (1898a). Judith Renaudin. La Revue de Paris 5-6.


