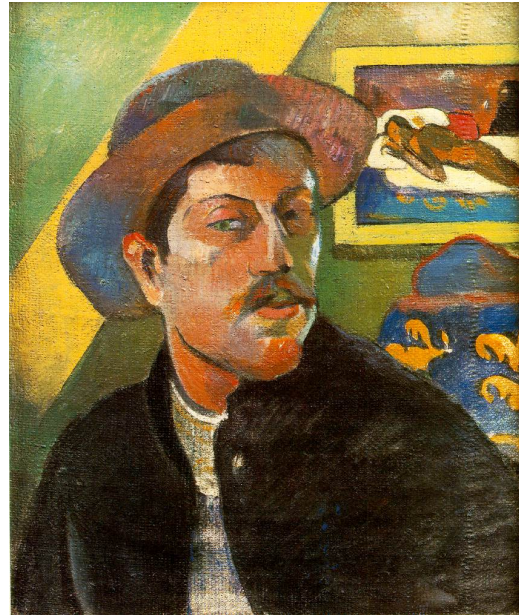


Oil Paintings of Word Paintings of Nature's Paintings

Gauguin's Early Tahitian Canvases and Pierre Loti's Le Mariage de Loti (The Marriage of Loti)

By Richard M. Berrong

Art historians have long known that one of the things that led Paul Gauguin to go to Tahiti for the first time in 1891 was the story French novelist Pierre Loti had told in his very popular 1880 narrative *Le Mariage de Loti* (*The Marriage of Loti*) about an English naval officer's love affair there with a young native girl, Rarahu. While this fact is regularly cited in both scholarly and popular works on the painter, it does not seem to have occurred to anyone to examine his Tahitian canvases in light of Loti's novel. That is what I propose to do here, since the results shed light on how Gauguin conceptualized and developed some of his best known work.



Despite his dismissal of nineteenth-century French academic art, much of which was devoted to imitating predecessors like Raphael and painting scenes taken from Classical literature, in some of his early Tahiti canvases Gauguin did something somewhat similar. He developed a dialogue with the literary work of a contemporary predecessor, Loti's novel, so that he could highlight the ways in which what he was doing was revolutionary and new.¹ In this respect, he was not unlike perhaps the most innovative French painter of his era, Édouard Manet, who three decades before had played off Raphael and Titian in his revolutionary works *Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia* not just to make fun of the academic obsession with Classical models, but also to highlight in what ways his works differed from theirs.

After first reviewing Pierre Loti's standing at the end of the nineteenth century, how he was seen by Gauguin's contemporaries and why Gauguin would have chosen to dialogue with *The Marriage of Loti* in particular, we will consider a dozen or so of the painter's Tahitian-period canvases, including some of the most famous, to discover how they rework specific passages in Loti's novel. In the process we will see that Gauguin repeatedly emphasizes not the ways in which the Tahitians were similar to Europeans, an important theme in Loti's novel, but those that made the Polynesians different. We will also see that, despite his interest in what he saw as "childlike" cultures, Gauguin repeatedly chose scenes in Loti's novel that presented the Tahitians as joyous and carefree only to highlight serious and contemplative aspects of their nature instead. This included depicting the Tahitians as still very much involved in their Maori religion, a religion that Loti had described as almost completely forgotten.

¹ Pierre Loti was the penname of Julien Viaud, who published his first three novels, *Asiyyadé* (1879), *The Marriage of Loti* (1880), and *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881; *The Story of a Spahi*), anonymously. His identity was made public in 1881 during the serialization of the last of those three, so when the novel was published in book form several months later Viaud had to decide what name to put on it. Rather than using his own, he signed it Pierre Loti. Loti – without the Pierre – had been the nickname of the protagonist, Harry Grant, in the first two novels, the name given to him by a group of Tahitian princesses who could not pronounce his English name. In choosing a name associated with the protagonist of his first two books, Viaud suggested what many of his readers had already chosen to assume: that those volumes had at least a basis in the autobiography of the author. Harry Grant subsequently disappeared from Viaud's fiction, replaced by a French naval officer who is variously referred to as Loti or Pierre, but never Pierre Loti. As in the case of authors like Mark Twain or George Sand, Viaud has passed into history with his penname.

For Gauguin's other reasons for picking Tahiti, see Claire Frèches-Thory, "The Paintings of the First Polynesian Sojourn," in *Gauguin Tahiti*, ed. George T. M. Shackelford, Claire Frèches-Thory (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 17-45.

As Loti would do in some of his later, more mature works, Gauguin, in these mature paintings, chose to confront his European audience with people who, though very different, were worthy of serious consideration. If Loti, in his early novel, sought to win respect for the Tahitians by showing how similar they were to Europeans physically and socially, Gauguin, in his mature art, chose to win that respect by highlighting the value in their differences.

Pierre Loti's standing in the late nineteenth century

Gauguin's decision to dialogue with a Loti novel may seem strange to twenty-first century Americans, who still recognize the importance of Raphael and Titian but probably have not heard of that French writer. The situation was very different in the late nineteenth century, however. By 1891, the year that Gauguin first sailed to the South Pacific, Pierre Loti had become one of the most successful and admired novelists of his day, winning election to the French Academy's "forty immortals" in April of that year in recognition of works such as *Le*



Roman d'un enfant (1890; *The Story of a Child*) and his masterpiece, *Pêcheur d'Islande* (1886; *Iceland Fisherman*). The latter is perhaps the finest recreation in French literature of Monet's style of Impressionism, and therefore put its author in the camp of the finally successful new style of painting from which Gauguin, by 1891, was so eager to distinguish himself.² Loti was also highly admired outside France. Henry James, for example, a demanding judge, declared Loti to be "a remarkable genius," "one of the joys of the time," "the companion, beyond all others, of my own selection."³ By 1891 *The Marriage of Loti* had gone through thirty-nine

² On the Impressionism of *Iceland Fisherman* see Richard M. Berrong, "Modes of Literary Impressionism," *Genre* 39.2 (Summer 2006): 203-228. On Gauguin's initial imitation of and then break from Impressionism see *Gauguin and Impressionism*, ed. Richard R. Brettell, Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

³ Henry James, "Pierre Loti," in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 482, 505, 516. For a study of James's views on Loti's work see Barbara Melchiori, "Feelings About Aspects: Henry James on Pierre Loti," *Studi americani* 15 (1969), 169-99.

editions and was playing a significant role in shaping how the French were imagining their Polynesian colony. Vincent van Gogh, an avid reader of contemporary French literature, and Émile Bernard, a younger and himself innovative painter whom Gauguin met in Pont Aven, in Brittany, both evidently suggested that Gauguin read it when he was searching for a new place to paint.⁴



Why Gauguin would have used Loti's novel

Loti's depiction of Tahiti would have appealed to Gauguin in part because it portrayed Tahitians as having the qualities of naïveté and childishness that the painter already perceived in the Bretons, whom he had depicted as

primitive during three painting sojourns in Pont Aven starting in 1886.⁵ As Edward J. Hughes has shown in his chapter on attitudes toward the exotic in the literary works of Loti and Gauguin, this view of the Other as primitive was typical of late nineteenth-century Europe.⁶ Gauguin made clear that it was still his attitude regarding the Tahitians even after he had lived among them for several years. In 1895, during his one trip back to France after first sailing to Tahiti, he explained his stay in Polynesia to a journalist by saying, "In order to produce something new, you have to return to the original source, to the childhood of mankind."⁷ Since Loti's novel had a great success in France, Gauguin knew that a connection between it and his work could only benefit him. Frances Fowle, another art historian, has remarked, "Gauguin was commercially minded."⁸

⁴ Stephen F. Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (New York: Thames and Hudson), 47, 55. Cf. also: Ingrid Heermann, "Gauguin's Tahiti—Ethnological Considerations," in *Paul Gauguin: Tahiti*, ed. Christopher Becker (Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1998), 147; Nancy Mowll Mathews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 157. Gauguin does mention Loti on Tahiti in a letter to Bernard, but it is not clear if this is in response to a suggestion from the younger artist. See Paul Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, ed. Maurice Malingue (Paris: Grasset, 1946) 220.

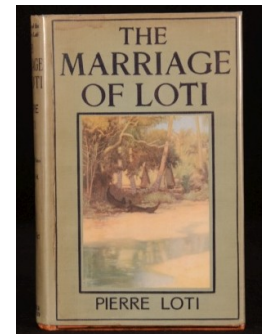
⁵ Belinda Thomson, "The Making of *Vision of the Sermon*," in *Gauguin's Vision* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005), 57.

⁶ Edward J. Hughes, *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature, from Loti to Genet* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9-40.

⁷ Eisenman, *Skirt*, 201.

⁸ Frances Fowle, "Following the Vision: From Brittany to Edinburgh," in *Gauguin's Vision*, 101.

There was more involved than just riding Loti's successful coattails to lucrative sales, however. Since Gauguin could have counted on some of his viewers recognizing allusions in his work to Loti's novel, he was able to use this well-known reference as a way of highlighting by contrast what he was doing that was new and different. His competitive nature was such that he relished the idea of showing how he could surpass Loti at his own successful game. Gauguin biographer Nancy Mowll Mathews has pointed out that "he proclaimed in the newspapers [before his departure that he would] sail to the romantic isle of Tahiti [to] let the Paris public see in pictures what Pierre Loti had described in mere words."⁹ Loti, who had initially studied to be a painter himself, had already tried to create pictures in his medium, in part because he had seen Tahiti as a series of natural canvases. He wrote the wife of playwright Jules Sandeau with regard to *The Marriage of Loti*: "I only knew how . . . to reproduce the *tableaux* that chance put before my eyes."¹⁰ This, too, would have given the competitive Gauguin reason to dialogue with Loti's novel when he, in turn, came to paint the Polynesian paradise.



***Merahi metua no Tehamana*: Differing portraits of a Tahitian as a young woman**

One of the ways Gauguin chose to differ from Loti was by emphasizing the physical features that separated Tahitians from his potential audience back in France. After some preliminaries devoted to the circumstances on the island of the protagonist, English naval officer Harry Grant, *The Marriage of Loti* gets underway with a verbal portrait of the young Tahitian woman/girl who will become the object of his erotic and eventually amorous attention.

Rarahu had reddish black eyes, full of an exotic languor, a caressing sweetness, like that of young cats when you pet them; . . . Her nose was small and fine, like those on certain Arab faces; her mouth, a little thicker, a little wider than the classic model, had deep corners with a delicious contour. . . . Her hair, perfumed with sandalwood, was long, straight, a little coarse; it fell in heavy masses on her round, naked shoulders. The same tawny color verging on brick red that you see on light-colored terra cotta pieces from ancient Etruria extended over all of her body, from the top of her forehead

⁹ Mathews, *Gauguin*, 145.

¹⁰ Pierre Loti, *Journal 1879-1886*, ed. Alain Quella-Villéger, Bruno Vercier [Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2008], 199.

to the bottoms of her feet.

Rarahu was of small build, admirably formed, admirably proportioned; her chest was pure and polished, her arms had an antique perfection. . . .

What characterized her race above all in her was the excessive closeness of her eyes, which were level with her face like all Maori eyes; when she was laughing and gay that glance gave her childlike face the malign finesse of a young monkey; when she was serious or sad there was something in her that could be no better defined than by these two words: Polynesian grace. (I.V)¹¹



Though the description of Rarahu's eyes distances her, Loti's assertion that her skin color resembles Etruscan pottery and that her "admirably formed, admirably proportioned" body is "polished" and has an "antique perfection" ties her to admired works of Western Classical statuary and culture. One of Gauguin's most famous early Tahitian paintings, *Merahi metua no Tehamana* (1893; fig. 1), specifically recalls this passage in Loti's novel.¹² The painter presented his young *vahine* (Tahitian for "young woman") very differently, however. If Rarahu has a nose that, "small and fine," could appeal to European tastes, as Loti meant it to do, Gauguin did

not hesitate to make that of Tehamana, the young woman depicted in this canvas, particularly broad. Her eyes are not close together, and she bears no resemblance to a young

¹¹ Since, as in *The Marriage of Loti*, the chapters in his novels are often very short and there are so many different editions of them with different pagination, it is customary in Loti scholarship to cite his works by Part and Chapter number rather than referencing a particular edition that readers may not be able to find. All translations from the novel and other French texts are my own. Copies of the original French of the passages quoted here may be found in this Supplement.

¹² The catalogue raisonné of Gauguin's paintings by Georges Wildenstein, *Gauguin* (Paris: Les Beaux Arts, 1964), is the universally accepted reference for the artist's painted work. It established what have come to be the recognized names for the paintings, some of which are in French, some in a sort of pseudo-Tahitian of Gauguin's creation that is hard to translate and therefore usually left as is. (Why Gauguin may have decided to create Tahitian names for some of these paintings, names that he usually painted on the works themselves so that they could not be ignored, we will consider at the end of this essay.) I use Wildenstein's names, giving the French ones in English translation, as is the custom in American art museums.

monkey. Nor, however, does she resemble Classical statuary. If Loti tried to make Rarahu sympathetic to his European readers by highlighting elements in her appearance that were similar to those that Europeans knew and even esteemed, Gauguin was intent on emphasizing how different the Tahitians were physically.

The background is important in this painting as well. As Stephen Eisenman shows in his analysis of this canvas, Gauguin presented Tehamana as still very much surrounded by elements of her non-Western, non-Christian culture: the inscriptions on the wall behind her, the scantily-dressed dancing figure, the mangoes on the floor.¹³ Loti had used Rarahu to demonstrate the decline and disappearance of traditional Polynesian culture under European occupation. Born in 1858 and raised as a Christian, “Rarahu wasn’t at all familiar with the god Taaroa, nor with the innumerable goddesses who accompanied him; she had never even heard anyone speak about any of these characters in Polynesian mythology” (I: LXIII). Privately, as Gauguin scholar Claire Frèches-Thory has remarked, Gauguin also lamented “the near disappearance of Maori civilization, forever corrupted by European colonization,”¹⁴ and wrote to his wife back in Denmark, “The Tahitian soil is become quite French, and the old order is gradually disappearing.”¹⁵ That was not how Gauguin depicted his Polynesian subjects for his public, however. In this painting he presents his young Tahitian as someone who may have assimilated superficial aspects of Western culture, such as her dress, but who still lives in a traditional Maori world. As in other of his Tahitian paintings that we will consider shortly, here the artist argues that Loti was wrong, that the land Gauguin had chosen to paint was still different from France, which was rapidly becoming the most secular nation in Europe.

That shift in France worried Gauguin, himself no respecter of organized religion, for artistic reasons. Some of the most important canvases that he had painted during his three sojourns in Brittany before his departure for Tahiti had emphasized the primitive, mystic nature of the region’s Christianity. In 1903, in a letter to his friend Charles Morice, Gauguin showed why he believed that religion was so important to contemporary art:

¹³ See Eisenman, *Skirt*, 69-70; also Frèches-Thory, “The Paintings,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 37.

¹⁴ Frèches-Thory, “The Paintings,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 25.

¹⁵ Frèches-Thory, “The Paintings,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 25.

We have just undergone a great period of aberration in art caused by physics, mechanical chemistry, and the study of nature. Artists, having lost all of their own uncivilized wildness, no longer having any instincts, one could say any imagination, have gone astray in many directions in order to find the productive elements that they do not have the strength to create, and then they act like confused crowds who feel afraid, as if they are lost when they are alone.¹⁶

If Gauguin presents Tehamana and her fellow Tahitians as still very much in touch with their past, it was also to present their world as one in which, as a result, the creative arts could still flourish. Remember Gauguin's admonition to the journalist: "In order to produce something new, you have to return to the original source . . . of mankind." As we shall see, Gauguin often depicted his Tahitians as engaged in creating music, often in connection with their ancient religion.

Loti, too, had presented the Tahitians as natural artists: Rarahu is famous for her inventive songs. In *The Marriage of Loti*, however, there is no suggestion that such creativity results from maintaining contact with the past or religion. As already noted, Loti presents Rarahu as being completely detached from ancient Maori culture. Nor does he ever suggest that the Tahitians are any more artistically creative than Europeans. The idea that overly refined European civilization had become detached from the vital primitive forces necessary for the creation of great art, an idea shared by authors like Gustave Flaubert whom Loti greatly admired, finds no echo in *The Marriage of Loti*. For Gauguin, Loti had not understood the source of the Tahitians' artistic creativity and its relevance to the situation in contemporary France.

***Fatata te miti* and *Arearea*:
Tahitians at play, more and
less playfully**

Evoking scenes in *The Marriage of Loti* in order to insist on the Tahitians' greater seriousness, on their not just



¹⁶ Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 369.

being childlike, was one of Gauguin's guiding principles in constructing his painterly dialogue with Loti's novel. When Harry Grant first encounters Rarahu she is often in the company of her young friend Tiahoui.

Her ways of spending time were very simple: daydreaming, swimming, swimming especially, and singing and walks in the woods in the company of Tiahoui, her inseparable little friend. — Rarahu and Tiahoui were two carefree and laughing little creatures who lived almost entirely in the waters of their stream, where they jumped and frolicked like two flying fish. (I.VIII)

Gauguin also presents young Tahitian women in pairs engaging in the same activities.

Fatata te miti (1892; fig. 2) and *Arearea* (1892; fig. 3), both from the time of *Merahi metua no Tehamana*, show young women bathing and engaging in music under the trees, respectively. The young Tahitian women they depict do not appear to be “carefree and laughing,” however. In *Arearea* they are more serious and meditative. Even in *Fatata te miti* one would not say that they “jumped and frolicked like two flying fish.”¹⁷ In *Arearea*, the one young woman is smiling to the viewer, but her expression does not suggest licentiousness or frivolity. In the background, we once again see Tahitians still connected to their ancient cult. Whether Gauguin hoped his French audience would see a link between that connection to primitive religion and the young woman's music making is difficult to say, but it is true that he does position the musician as if she is next in line after the third *devotée* of the worshiped statue. In *Mahana no atua*, which we will consider shortly, he makes that link very clear.



¹⁷ This is even more the case in the paintings Gauguin did on these same themes after he returned to Tahiti from France. *Vairumati* (1897, for a portrait of a young Tahitian woman) and *The Bathers* (1898, for a portrait of young Tahitian women bathing in a stream) depict young women who bear no resemblance to Rarahu and Tiahoui.



In *Te verioa* (1897; fig. 4), which dates from after Gauguin's one return to Europe and which Gauguin scholar George T. M Shackelford has called "the finest interior of his Tahitian career,"¹⁸ the young women's daydreaming does not seem simple. Like *Tehamana*, they are surrounded by what appear to be depictions of scenes from their mythology and might well be meditating on them.¹⁹ Again Gauguin would appear to be arguing for the Tahitians' intellectual and emotional seriousness. It is true that Rarahu and Tiahoui are still in their early teens, an age that generally does not exemplify the profundity of any civilization's thought. When Loti presents the elderly Queen Pomaré IV, she is anything but carefree and frivolous. Still, the women in these Gauguin paintings do not appear to be much older than Rarahu and Tiahoui.

¹⁸ Shackelford, "The Return to Paradise," *Gauguin Tahiti*, 158.

¹⁹ Eisenman offers an interesting reading of the painting (*Skirt*, 133-35).

***Parau api*: More physical difference**

Several of the novel's short early chapters are just portraits of Rarahu in her various settings. When she goes into Papeete for Sunday services, for example,

Rarahu possessed two muslin dresses, one white, the other pink, that she alternated on Sundays over her blue and yellow *pareo* to go to the Protestant missionaries' church in Papeete. Those days her hair was separated in two long, very thick tresses; in addition, she stuck over her ear (where elderly clerks put their pens) a large hibiscus flower, whose burning red gave her bronzed cheek a transparent paleness. (I.XIV)

Gauguin's *Parau api* (1892; fig. 5) shows two young Tahitian women—or one from two different angles, as some have suggested—one with a blue and yellow *pareo*, the other with a white and pink town outfit, just as in Loti's text. The one on the right wears a large hibiscus flower, also as in Loti. Once



again Gauguin is intent on portraying his Tahitians as less European than Loti's. He paints the skin of the woman on the right so dark that the red flower does nothing to make her look more pale, i.e., more European.

***Mahana no atua*: The omnipresence of religion and artistic creation**

Depicting young Tahitians as still devoted to their ancient religion was not the only way Gauguin altered reality in his Polynesian canvases. In them he also continued to develop the break from mimetic realism with which he had first experimented while painting in Brittany. Harry Grant's first meeting with Rarahu is right out of a 1930s movie. One day he goes for a walk in the Apiré district in an area where European sailors know that young Tahitian women come to bathe in the Fataoua River. (The location is now designated the "Loti Baths" and has a bust of Loti on a large pedestal that features a sculpture of Rarahu. There

he comes upon a pleasant scene that he describes as a *tableau*, recalling the author's already quoted remark to Mme Sandeau that he had encountered natural *tableaux* on the island.

The young Tahitian women, the regulars at the Fataoua stream, overcome with sleep and the heat, were stretched out along the shore on the grass, their feet dipping in the clear and cool water. . . .

In the background of the *tableau* suddenly the mimosa bushes and guava trees opened, . . . and two little girls appeared, examining the situation like mice emerging from their holes.

Their hair was made up with crowns of leaves that protected their heads from the heat of the sun; their waists were surrounded with *pareos* (sarongs) that were dark blue with wide yellow bands; their tawny torsos were svelte and naked; their black hair long and free flowing. . . . The two little ones, reassured, came to stretch out under the waterfall that began to spray more noisily around them. . . (I.XI)



Gauguin depicted a similar scene, producing one of his most famous Tahitian canvases, *Mahana no atua* (1894; fig. 6), which he painted or at least finished in France during his one return there. Again the artist stresses the seriousness of the scene, again adding a Maori religious dimension with the statue in the center of the

background. This time a young woman making music is located in the same plane as the idol and appears to be playing for it, making a direct link between primitive religion and artistic creation that Gauguin had only suggested in *Arearea*. These women may adopt Western-imposed attire in town and attend Western religious services on Sundays like Rarahu, Gauguin would seem to be saying, but when they are back in nature they are once again in touch with their primitive traditions in a way that Loti's creation is not. The novelist had not understood. This is not a civilization in decline.

The blatantly unrealistic coloration of the water seems to suggest something else as

well. Gauguin pointed out to Charles Morice that “certain forms and colors” in his latest paintings “move away from reality.”²⁰ This canvas is, in fact, a striking example of what Dina Sonntag calls “Gauguin’s anti-mimetic concept based upon visionary imagination.”²¹ Indeed, George Shackelford has declared that the artist’s “notions of antinatural color and rhythmic, sensuous line [are] brilliantly revealed in his 1894 painting *Mahana no atua*.”²² Here Gauguin is putting into practice the philosophy he expressed to his friend and fellow artist Émile Schuffenecker in August, 1888, during one of his Breton sojourns: “Don’t paint too much according to nature. Art is an abstraction, get it out of nature . . . think more about creation . . . that’s the only way to rise to God’s level.”²³ It is as if he is showing that, by getting back to primitive religion, to “the childhood of mankind,” he has been able to bring a whole new creativity to landscape painting, an original approach of which even the Impressionists had never dreamed.

Parahi te marae: More non-mimetic creativity

Gauguin discards concern with a mimetic depiction of nature repeatedly in his Tahitian canvases. Harry’s first riverside meeting with Rarahu does not go well, but he soon gets to know her and through Rarahu the rest of the island and its people, which, Loti implies, most Europeans there never bother to discover. One thing Harry discovers outside Papeete, the island’s only city, are *marae*, tumuluses that nineteenth-century Europeans took to be burial mounds but that anthropologists now believe served as temples.

[T]he Tahitians just planted clusters of ironwood trees on them. The ironwood tree is the cypress tree of the region, . . . These tumuluses, which are topped with large black trees and retain the whiteness of the coral despite the years, evoke memories of the terrible religion of the past. (I.XLVIII)

²⁰ Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 346.

²¹ Dina Sonntag, “Prelude to Tahiti: Gauguin in Paris, Brittany, and Martinique,” in *Paul Gauguin: Tabiti*, 94.

²² Shackelford, “The Return to Paradise,” *Gauguin Tabiti*, 152. Frèches-Thory on the other hand feels that “despite its importance, *Mahana no atua* seems, all things considered, a fairly unconvincing attempt at synthesizing the Tahitian experience. The painting’s small format is inadequate to contain a composition of such monumental ambition, and the unevenly successful collage of recurrent motifs makes the overall work look like a jigsaw puzzle” (“The Exhibition at Durand-Ruel,” in *Tabiti Gauguin*, 89). Henri Dorra finds it “a fitting meditation on ancient Tahiti’s poetry.” (*The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica, and the Dilemmas of Humanity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007], 240).

²³ Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 151.

How white the coral *marae* were in the nineteenth century it would be difficult to determine. Today they are at best a dirty white. Gauguin, in another of his most striking canvases, *Parahi te marae* (1892; fig. 7), focused attention on the vivid yellow of the coral. It dominates the painting and, as those who have seen Tahitian *marae* know, bears no resemblance to the dull-white of the stones one sees there today. Again, the painter was intent on bringing out the strange and different in Maori culture. He also once again linked his break from mimetic realism to aspects of Tahiti's primitive religious culture.



***Manao Tupapau*: The power of superstition and downside of primitive religion**

Gauguin usually depicts his Tahitians' relationship with their primitive religion as meditative. There are exceptions, though. One day Harry and Rarahu stop at one of these *marae* and find an old skull.

Rarahu had never looked so closely at the lugubrious object that was set there on my knees and that, for her as for all Polynesians, was a horrible bogymen.

You could see that that sinister thing awakened in her uncultivated mind a throng of new ideas, without her being able to give them a precise form.

"*Riaria!*" Rarahu said. . . *Riaria*, a Tahitian word that is only imperfectly translated by the word *terrifying*, because there it designates that particularly dark terror that comes from ghosts or from the dead . . .

"What about this poor skull can frighten you so much?" I asked Rarahu. . .

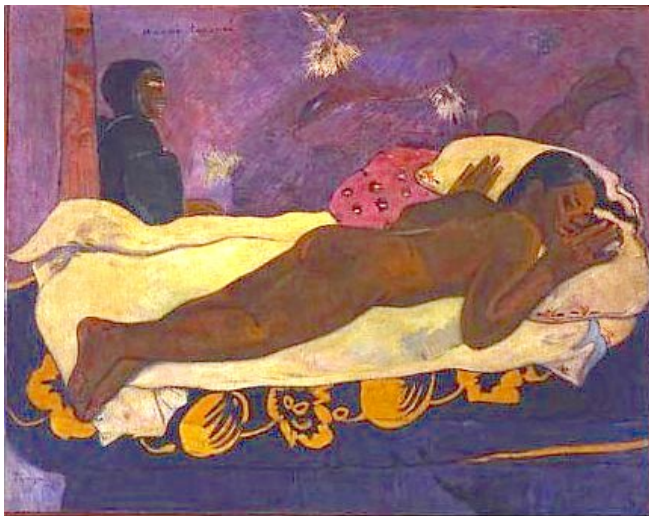
She answered by pointing with her finger at the toothless mouth:

"It's his laugh, Loti; it's his Toupapahou laugh" . . . (I.L)

Loti's declaration that Rarahu experiences fears at the sight of death "without being able to give them a precise form" may seem demeaning. Readers of other Loti works will recognize

in it his description of the natural artist, however. Yves Kermadec in *Mon Frère Yves* (1883; *My Brother Yves*) and Ramuntcho in the eponymous novel (1897), two such natural artists, are both described similarly with no hint of disdain, reflecting a Romantic tradition that goes back at least to Friedrich Schiller's *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795-6): unschooled artists create without conscious awareness of how they do so. Their inspiration flows directly from nature through them. They are its unconscious conduit. Gauguin suggested the same thing when he was trying to promote himself as a primitive. To art critic André Fontainas, for example, who had found fault with the painter's symbol-filled masterpiece *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*, of which more shortly, Gauguin explained rather disingenuously that the canvas was "without any allegory that I could catch," alleging "lack of literary instruction, perhaps" on his part.²⁴

The scene in Loti's novel where Rarahu expresses her fear of the skull is more an example of late nineteenth-century liberal disdain for all religion, starting with Catholicism, that led to the separation of church and state in France in 1905. It is not a compliment, certainly, but it is not necessarily a question of racism so much as a form of anticlericalism.



On this issue Gauguin does not make a particular effort to distance himself from his predecessor as a painter of Tahiti and the Tahitians. In *Mana'o Tupapau* (1892; fig. 8), which Frèches-Thory has called "surely one of his greatest pictorial successes of the years 1891-93,"²⁵ Gauguin also shows a young woman worried about the spirits of

the dead. She does not seem as terrified as Rarahu, but she has not thrown off the shackles of religion either. In a letter to his wife Mette describing the painting, Gauguin wrote: "I put

²⁴ Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 331.

²⁵ Frèches-Thory, "The Paintings," *Gauguin Tahiti*, 35.

a little fear in her face.”²⁶ That would have been part of her primitive charm for the painter, even though not part he would have deigned to share as a late nineteenth-century Frenchman. The bright yellow cover on the bed emphasizes the darkness of the young Tahitian’s skin, as the large hibiscus flower had in *Parau api*.

Another of this Tahitian’s charms for Gauguin was evidently her androgyny. In his study of the painting Henri Dorra points out that the artist modeled it on an etching of a young boy.²⁷ This recalls an episode in *Noa noa*, the highly fictionalized, while putatively autobiographical account of some of Gauguin’s first experiences in Tahiti, a book with which he dreamed of making some much-needed money. In that episode, the painter follows a young, unclothed Tahitian man into the forest to hunt for carving wood. Focusing on his back, the artist starts to have thoughts of sex, until the Tahitian turns around and Gauguin sees physical proof of his manhood.²⁸ This episode evidently titillated Gauguin’s initial audience. Had they known that the real-world model for this episode was not Tahitian but a French naval officer, Jénnot, they would probably have seen it differently.²⁹ Frenchmen could get away with doing things with foreigners in foreign lands without provoking the censure that the same acts committed with Westerners would have provoked.³⁰ This was a fine line that Gauguin understood and that separated the admired and honored Pierre Loti from his imprisoned and exiled contemporary and admirer, Oscar Wilde. As Mathews remarks, for example, when Gauguin consorted openly with a Pacific island girl on his return to France in 1893, “her race, like that of Tehamana, actually deflected the attention of Gauguin’s European friends away from her age.”³¹

Street in Tahiti: Taking on Loti himself?

As we have seen, in his dialogue with *The Marriage of Loti* Gauguin generally criticized the author’s depiction of the Maori and their culture. On at least one occasion he seems to have

²⁶ Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 271.

²⁷ *Symbolism*, 217-21.

²⁸ Paul Gauguin, *Noa noa*, in *Oviri: Ecrits d’un sauvage*, ed. Daniel Guérin (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 112-15.

²⁹ Mathews, *Gauguin*, 185.

³⁰ On this, see Edward W. Saïd’s famous study, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

³¹ Mathews, *Gauguin*, 205.

taken a pot shot at Loti himself, however. Once Rarahu's parents die, she decides to move into Papeete and live with Harry. Like a middle-class couple back in France, they get a house and settle down.

Not far from the palace, behind the Queen's gardens in one of the greenest and most peaceful avenues in Papeete, was a small hut, cool and isolated. — It had been built at the foot of a stand of coconut trees that were so tall one would have said that it was a Lilliputian dwelling. — On the street side it had a veranda decorated with garlands of vanilla. — Behind it was an enclosure filled with mimosas, rose laurels, and hibiscus. — . . .

There, eight days after the death of her adopted father, Rarahu came to settle with me.

It was her dream fulfilled. (II.VII)

One doesn't have to be overcome with anti-orientalist fervor to laugh at the last line here, wondering to what extent living with Harry was really the young woman's dream come true and to what extent his inflated male ego put that interpretation on her efforts to make the best of a difficult situation. Feminists would have every right to point out that in this novel Rarahu seldom gets a chance to express her thoughts; most of what we learn about her comes through the eyes and ego of Harry himself. Here he attributes to her a very Western middle-class dream.

In *Street in Tahiti* (1891; fig. 9), Gauguin depicted a house that seems to evoke the one Loti had described. The flora is once again luxuriant, the trees once again tower over the dwelling. Its female occupant is pensive, however, as if to say that even though she has a roof over her head and a European husband, she still has serious preoccupations. Living with Harry is not enough for her. Once again Gauguin's Tahitian is more intellectually serious than Loti's.³²



³² Gauguin repeated this brooding figure in an inside setting in *Te Faaturuma* (1891).

Siesta: Idleness vs. Work

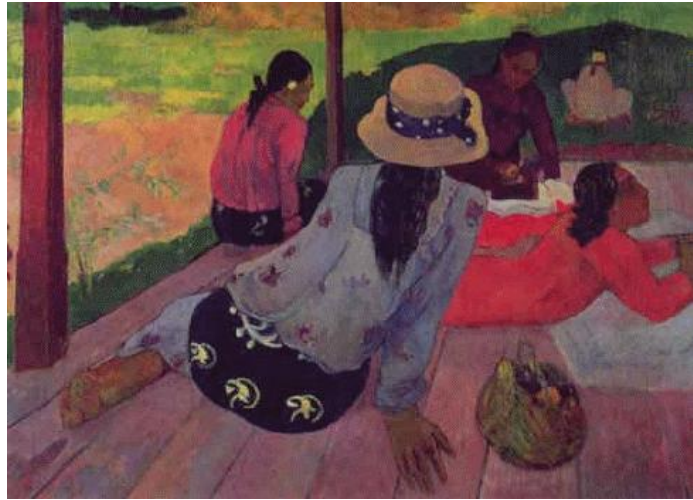
As their domestic life together settles into routine, Harry learns to enjoy the afternoon siesta.

After that, sleep occupied the largest part of our days. — Those who have lived in the tropics are familiar with the stimulating well-being produced by a noon sleep. — Beneath the veranda of our dwelling we hung hammocks made of aloe, and there we spent long hours dreaming or sleeping, to the sleep-inducing sound of the cicadas. (II.IX)

Gauguin depicted a similar scene in *Siesta* (1891-1892; fig. 10).

Once again we are on a veranda.

The Tahitian women aren't just sleeping, though; they are working or thinking. "You see," the oil painter says to his viewers, "these people aren't as lazy, physically or intellectually, as Loti told you they are," a theme that runs through



several of the canvases we are examining here.

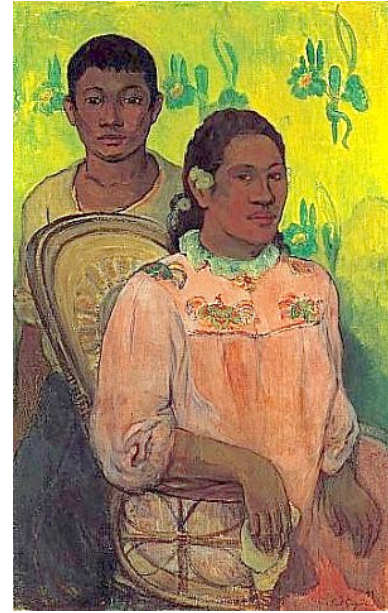
Young Girl and Boy: More Seriousness

One sign of being accepted as a couple in the West is being invited to events as a couple. In best Western fashion Tiahoui and her new husband Téharo, who have left Papeete for the culturally more authentic countryside, invite Harry and Rarahu to attend a party being held during their honeymoon. The English officer and his Tahitian wife throw together a few things and set off for Papéuriri, which even today is a pleasant escape from the traffic jams of the capital. As they approach they

met Téharo and Tiahoui, who were coming to look for us, on the path. Their joy at meeting us was extreme and noisy. Great demonstrations of emotion between friends who meet are completely in the Tahitian character.

These two good little *sauvages* were still in the first quarter of their honeymoon, which is very sweet in Oceania as elsewhere; both of them were very kind,—and hospitable in the most cordial sense of the word. (II.XII)

Again Loti is intent on showing how much like Europeans the Tahitians can be, and Gauguin does not appear inclined to contradict him. *Young Girl and Boy* (1899; fig. 11) dates from after his return to Tahiti and therefore from a period when his paintings generally tend to be even less interested in mimetic realism. This particular canvas does not share that tendency, however. The subjects are serious and contemplative, as opposed to Loti's with their "extreme and noisy joy." As in *The Marriage of Loti*, however, so here this couple is presented as remarkably European, except, of course, for the skin color.



And the Gold of their Bodies: How different is different? And how permanent?

The Tahitians' skin fascinated both artists, which comes as no surprise for painters interested in the nuances of color. Earlier we saw the detailed description Loti devoted to Rarahu's skin color, which he had compared to Etrurian pottery. Once Rarahu settles into her life in the city, however, Harry notices that

she had become paler in the shade for having lived city life. Without the light tattoo on her forehead, which the others made fun of and which I loved, you would have said that she was a young white girl. — And still, some days there were tawny reflections on her skin, exotic shades of pink bronze that still recalled the Maori race, sister to the red skin races of America. (II.XIV)



It is as if Loti were suggesting that at least some of the Polynesians' physical difference was not inherent, but just the result of exposure to a different climate. Gauguin would have none of that, of course. As we have seen, he often intensified the Tahitians' darkness to emphasize their difference from Europeans, as in *Parau api*.

He, too, was clearly fascinated by their color. One of his last paintings, *And the gold of their bodies* (1901; fig. 12), even takes it as its

subject, and this preoccupation can be seen in such earlier canvases as *Abe oe fēii?* (1892; fig. 13) as well. As with his portrait of Tehamana, so here Gauguin is not interested in winning the viewer's sympathy for his subjects by showing how little real difference there is between the Tahitians and Europeans. Rather, the oil painter strives to emphasize the differences.



Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?: Tahitians as Serious Thinkers

As Dina Sonntag has argued, Gauguin came to believe that “painting must pursue the objective of lending visible form to an idea in the pictorial image.”³³ He wrote Émile Schuffenecker in 1885, for example, “As time goes on, I believe more and more in translations of thought by any means other than literature,”³⁴ in other words that painting had to convey ideas without relying on text or narrative. If Loti could bring painting into literature, why couldn't he bring ideas into painting? Perhaps the most famous example of Gauguin's efforts to bring philosophy into his painting is the large canvas he titled *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* (1897; fig. 14), one of his major undertakings during his second stay in Polynesia. Writing with his customary lack of modesty to his friend Daniel de Monfried, he declared: “I have finished a philosophical work on this theme comparable to the Gospel.”³⁵ I will not analyze the painting here. For that I would refer readers to, among other works, George T. M. Shackelford's essay “Where do we come

³³ Sonntag, “Prelude,” 102.

³⁴ Paul Gauguin, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: documents, témoignages*, ed. Victor Merlhès (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984), 88.

³⁵ Dorra, *Symbolism*, 254.



from? What are we? Where are we going?.”³⁶ If the canvas shows anything, though, it is that Gauguin was presenting his Polynesians as serious thinkers inclined to philosophical contemplation. When it was first shown in Paris in 1898, art critic André Fontaines, though he found fault with it, conceded that it depicted a land “peopled by a grave, somewhat precious, and uncultured race.”³⁷

As we have seen, Loti does not generally present Rarahu as so thoughtful—though it bears noting, again, that she is a young girl and in that respect no more representative of her civilization’s intellectual depth than her chronological equivalent would be in any other society. Still, given the right setting, even his young heroine can be inspired to ask profound questions. When she and Harry climb to the top of the island’s central volcano and she sees for the first time the expanse of ocean that separates Tahiti from all other land (except Moorea), she remarks:

“One thing frightens me . . . o my beloved Loti . . . ; how did the first Maoris come here, since even today they don’t have ships strong enough to communicate with the islands situated outside their archipelagos; how were they able to come from that so distant land where, according to the Bible, the first man was created? Our race differs so much from yours that I’m afraid, despite what the missionaries tell us, your God the savior did not come for us and will not recognize us.” (II.XX)

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

³⁶ Shackelford, “Where,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 167-203. For Gauguin’s explanation of the painting, see his letter to Charles Morice in Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme*, 343-46. It is interesting to note that, for all he talked about wanting his painting to be separate from literature, he twice describes this work to his friend as a “poem” (*Lettres à sa femme*, 346).

³⁷ Eisenman, *Skirt*, 140.



The Fire Dance: Serious Desire

Gauguin's Tahitians were not always contemplative, but when he portrayed them as active, it was with the same intensity. The last of the scenes in *The Marriage of Loti* that he seems to have used as a point of reference is one of the most striking and certainly one that his potential buyers back in France would have recalled on seeing his

painting, *The Fire Dance, or the Devil Speaks* (1891; fig. 15). At one point Queen Pomaré makes a royal excursion to the nearby island of Moorea for the consecration of a new Protestant church at Afareahitu. Members of the crew of the *Rendee* [sic], Harry's bizarrely named ship, are invited to take part. Harry himself escorts the Queen. That night, however, he has to return to his ship. From it he sees and hears the festivities. As the night wears on, the celebration takes on a decidedly non-Protestant tone.

In the distance you saw the fires on land that lit the *upa-upa* [a frenetic Tahitian dance]; raucous and lubricious songs arrived in a confused murmur, accompanied in syncopation by drum beats.

I felt a deep remorse at having abandoned [Rarahu] in the middle of that saturnalia; a worried sadness held me there, my eyes fixed on those fires on the beach; those sounds that came from the land wrung my heart. . . .

I dreamed that at that particularly voluptuous hour of the morning Rarahu was there, excited by the dance, and left to her own devices. And that thought burned me like a red-hot iron. (II.XXXI)

This scene, repeated subsequently in countless B jungle movies, presents the Tahitians as savages and not just *sauvages*, even if Harry's terminology is determined in part by jealousy that has nothing to do with racism.³⁸ Restrained by no nineteenth-century bourgeois concerns with decorum, these Polynesians give vent to their wildest sexual desires.

³⁸ In his examination of Gauguin and *The Marriage of Loti*, Eisenman explains how the idea of the mutual incomprehension of cultures was part of nineteenth-century European racist discourse (*Skirt*, 48).

Loti made a drawing of a young Tahitian woman dancing what could be the *upa-upa* (fig. 16). Its innocent charm, at least in the form in which it has come down to us, does little to suggest the “raucous and lubricious songs,” the “saturnalia” of his text. It does, however, highlight by contrast how Gauguin used all the genius and craft at his command to make us see, hear, and feel in vivid color what Harry can only imagine.³⁹ Gauguin makes no apologies to his prospective audience for these Tahitians, nor does he do anything to belittle them. He does, however, show just how wild his otherwise meditative and sedate “primitives” could be. That might have scandalized some of his viewers, though Gauguin was a sufficiently savvy businessman to know that it probably would also have made at least some of them curious if not indeed envious as well. After having spent time in what he saw as highly prudish Denmark, he was more than a little delighted to “shock the bourgeoisie,” as the nineteenth-century French poet Théophile Gautier was fond of saying. Gauguin’s painting shows once again that his Tahitians were in touch with the sort of primitive passions that he felt were necessary to infuse life into creative art.



³⁹ In 1898 Loti’s publisher, Calmann-Lévy, brought out a lavishly illustrated edition of *The Marriage of Loti* that made use of some of the drawings Loti had created while in Tahiti in 1872 and, it would seem, some drawings that he did from memory or his imagination specifically for that edition. In cases where we have the originals, we can see that they are both more detailed and, sometimes, livelier and more *sauvage* than the engravings that figure in the book. (For a comparison of the engravings and those original drawings we do have, see Alain Quella-Villéger, Bruno Vercier, *Pierre Loti dessinateur: Une oeuvre au long cours* [Saint Pourçain sur Sioule: Bleu autour, 2009], 270-282.) We do not have the original drawing from which this engraving was derived, however, nor can we determine if it was done while Loti was in Tahiti or twenty-some years later when this illustrated edition was being prepared.

Conclusion

Gauguin devoted much effort during his best years as an original artist to differentiating himself from the leaders in his field, Monet and the Impressionists in painting, Loti in painting Polynesia.⁴⁰ At times, in the paintings we have examined, he seems to be trying to claim a more accurate and profound understanding of these “primitives” who had fascinated the Western and in particular the French mind ever since Louis Antoine de Bougainville published a narrative of his voyage there in the eighteenth century.

In doing so, Gauguin saw himself as revealing the primitive in all of us. He wrote his friend Daniel de Monfreid shortly after he first arrived in Tahiti the initially strange declaration, “I am content to dig into myself, not into nature.”⁴¹ As we have already seen repeatedly, even before he left for Tahiti Gauguin had begun to break with the fundamental nineteenth-century artistic tenet that depictions of nature needed to reproduce it in at least some respect. No matter how abstract Monet’s Impressionism became, for example, he always strove to reproduce at least some of the effects of light and color that he observed in his motifs. Gauguin, with works like *Mahana no atua* and *Parahi te marae*, threw that tenet aside. In his correspondence he never pursued what he meant by the first part of his declaration to de Monfreid. Given his already-quoted explanation of his move to Polynesia, “In order to produce something new, you have to return to the original source, to the childhood of mankind,” one might conclude that Gauguin imagined that in studying what he

⁴⁰ Gauguin’s supporters continued his efforts to differentiate his depictions of Polynesia from those of Loti. Reviewing for *L’Echo de Paris* the works that the painter showed in Paris when he returned at the end of 1893, his friend Octave Mirbeau dismissed Loti as a “petty soul, fearful and finicky, oiled with dubious scents, rubbed in perfumes for export” (Frèches-Thory, “The Exhibition,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 86), someone who “thought he was revealing [Tahiti] to us, [but] never understood in the slightest” (Anne Pingeot, “Sculpture of the First Voyage,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 73). Another friend, Charles Maurice, wrote in his Preface to the catalogue for that 1893 Paris exhibition that Gauguin’s work unveiled “the Tahiti of yore, the Tahiti from before our terrible sailors and the scented pabulum of Mr. Pierre Loti” (Frèches-Thory, “The Exhibition,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 85). In both cases the wording shows that Loti’s novel was the standard reference for Tahiti in France. It also shows, ironically, that the criterion for artistic value both critics used was anthropological accuracy, by which criterion Gauguin’s work is actually very much inferior to Loti’s novel.

⁴¹ Frèches-Thory, “The Paintings,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 25. At the dinner held to send Gauguin on his way to Tahiti, poet Stéphane Mallarmé said that the painter was leaving “to seek new strength in a far country and in his own nature” (Frèches-Thory, “The Paintings,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 24). Remember that Joseph Conrad started to write *Heart of Darkness* in 1898, his chilling story of a European who learns to his horror that he has within himself, despite his very cultured upbringing, all the unrestrained savagery he finds in the forest-dwelling primitives he encounters in some uncivilized land. That novel relied heavily on Loti’s later narrative, *Ramuntcho*, which presented a much more negative view of the primitive. See Richard M. Berrong, “‘Heart of Darkness’ and Pierre Loti’s *Ramuntcho*: Fulcrum for a Masterpiece,” *The Conradian* 35.1 (Spring 2010): 28-44.

chose to see as primitive Polynesians, he would at the same time discover what lay at the root of his own nature.

In this respect Gauguin shared the then-common idea that modern “primitive” people had never evolved and so resembled and therefore provided keys to what Western man had been like before he set out on the road to civilization. Gauguin wrote to dramatist August Strindberg in 1895, for example, that the Tahitian language (which he evidently never



made much progress in learning, despite his claims to the contrary) was “naked and primordial,” which may explain why he insisted on giving Tahitian—or at least what he presented as Tahitian—names to some of the canvases he did there.”⁴² Studying the Tahitians was, therefore, for him both a way of exploring a people that he portrayed as very different from the French and, at the same time, a key to self-understanding for highly-refined Parisians who had moved so far away from their own primitive origins.

At other times Gauguin seems to be showing how little he cared about mimetic accuracy, using Loti’s text to demonstrate that he could paint what Tahiti was really about better with his imagination. Loti dealt with this issue in his 1897 novel *Ramuntcho*, of which Joseph Conrad made use in his famous consideration of these ideas, *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

It is also possible that Gauguin’s first stay in Tahiti made him resentful of Loti’s idyllic narrative. As Frèches-Thory has remarked, like those of other readers of *The Marriage of Loti* before and since “Loti’s book . . . had inflamed [Gauguin’s] imagination about an ideal

⁴² Gauguin, *Lettres à ma femme*, 302.

life on an enchanted isle, an earthly paradise where idleness and easy love affairs would peacefully coexist—a place where he might find a Rarahu of his own.”⁴³ The reality of Tahiti even then was otherwise, though, as Gauguin found once he got there. “Disappointment had gotten the better of his dream of Eden.”⁴⁴ If Gauguin took to ridiculing Loti and his *tableaux* of Tahiti, resentment may have been involved. No one should have known better than Gauguin not to rely on *tableaux*, even verbal ones, for accuracy. Loti had warned his readers of this danger, having Harry write to his sister shortly after arriving on the island that he was disillusioned to find Tahiti was just “a land like all the others, my God” (I.IV).

Still, it is a tribute to Loti’s ability to paint pictures with words even early in his career that Gauguin, at what was the height of his, felt it worth his time to take on the author’s novel in a battle of the painters. Granted, we sometimes end up with one painter responding on canvas to works that another artist painted with words in an effort to convey to those unable to view them first-hand the *tableaux* that nature and a “natural” people had painted in Polynesia. Nineteenth-century French academic art, for all its reliance on the studio and historical models, never got further from nature and more literary than that. Gauguin had reasons to do so, however. Belinda Thomson has gone so far as to assert that *The Marriage of Loti* “performed a vital role for Gauguin as he assimilated his own experiences of Tahiti. . . . The very process of publically distancing himself from [Loti] helped Gauguin articulate his own aesthetic.”⁴⁵ What I hope I have demonstrated here are the ways in which he did so.

⁴³ Frèches-Thory, “The Paintings,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 19. Gauguin’s relationship with his wife had been anything but peaceful.

⁴⁴ Frèches-Thory, “The Paintings,” *Gauguin Tahiti*, 45.

⁴⁵ Belinda Thomson, “Bridging the ‘distance infranchissable’ between Paul Gauguin and Pierre Loti.” I thank Professor Thomson not just for allowing me to quote from this unpublished paper, but for the opportunity to correspond with her about the relationship between Gauguin and Loti’s novel.

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