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Princely vs. Economic Power in Voltaire's *Zadig, ou la destinée*

A Dutch periodical from 1749 presents Voltaire's first published fictional tale (*conte*), *Zadig, ou la destinée. Histoire orientale* as truly entertaining: "it is nothing but a play, a nearly continuous pleasantry; or rather it is a mixture of the serious and the comic which makes this work more amusing than instructive, more suitable for diverting the mind than for forming the heart, capable of arousing laughter rather than sympathy".[1] The review illustrates a widespread opinion amongst the tale's contemporary readers. Unlike the *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), which was treated as a direct threat to the political power in France, the oriental-styled *Zadig* was considered politically harmless. However, the critics' judgement collided with the author's assumption: prior to its publication, Voltaire, who chose to publish the *conte* anonymously, expected censorship. The discrepancy between the author's expectations and the readers' reception constitutes this paper's point of departure. I will suggest that the readers were misled to read the tale allegorically and, consequently, missed its subversive political message; that princely power is threatened by a global power of money.

Zadig, the court and the allegory

When Voltaire published the narrative of the court favourite Zadig, he was exceptionally close to the political power, both in France and in Prussia. In 1740 he made his first visit to the Crown Prince of Prussia, Frederick, crowned to be King Frederick 2nd in 1742. In 1744, Voltaire's friend marquis d'Argenson became minister of foreign affairs in France. *La Princesse de Navarre*, a *comédie-ballet* written by Voltaire and the composer Jean-Philippe Rameau, was performed for the first time in Versailles on the occasion of the French Crown Prince's wedding in 1745. Later that year, the French *philosophe* was appointed to be royal historiographer at the court of Louis XV. Then, in 1746, he was accepted in the prestigious *Académie Française*, where his admission previously had been refused. In 1750, Voltaire went to Berlin to serve as Frederick 2nd's chamberlain. The man who a decade earlier had been exiled from Paris, was now included amongst the happy few. Nevertheless, his correspondence from the 1740s indicates an ambivalence vis-à-vis the position as a court

[1] "ce n'est cependant qu'un jeu, qu'un badinage presque continuel, ou plutôt c'est un mélange de sérieux et de comique, qui rend cet ouvrage plus amusant qu'instructif, plus propre à égayer l'esprit, qu'à former le cœur, plus capable de faire rire que d'attendrir" (cited in Voltaire *Œuvres de 1746–1748 (II)*, ed. Nicholas Cronk, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire, 30b*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 2004, 80). The presentation of the publication context is mainly based on Haydn T. Mason's introduction to the above quoted critical edition of *Zadig*, and on Jacques van den Heuvel, *Voltaire dans ses contes*, Librairie Armand Collin, Paris, 1967.

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favourite. A letter from Voltaire to a close friend expresses the ambiguity: "The court would not seem to fit me, but the king's grace makes me stay, and for the time being, I am here more because of gratefulness than as a result of interest".[2] Despite the fact that the author was finally accepted on the inside, he felt like an outsider.

The ambivalence and the outsider's viewpoint are found again in *Zadig*, and the protagonist's oscillation between inside and outside is a central motif, as a brief summary will indicate: The narrative consists of 19 chapters and is told by an omniscient narrator. In the first two chapters, we learn to know the protagonist, the Babylonian Zadig, as he reveals the true nature of his unfaithful wives. The disappointment makes him consider himself the unhappiest man on earth, and he seeks redemption in natural sciences as well as in social gatherings (ch. 3 and 4). Due to his extraordinary social skills and scientific talent, the Babylonian court soon learns of his existence and he acquires the status as Babylon's most virtuous citizen (ch. 5). He becomes the confident of king Moabdar and later his prime minister (ch. 6). Chapter 8 contains a structural rupture and a narrative climax, as Zadig's passionate admiration for the queen, Astarté, is revealed, and he is forced into exile. In chapters 8–16, as well as in the 18th chapter, Zadig traverses the Arabian Peninsula. He is captured and sold as a slave; he is included in a company of negotiators; and he encounters a number of characters – a fisherman, a thief, a seducing woman and a hermit. During his wanderings, he also runs into his beloved Astarté, who has become a slave as well. The encounter leads Zadig towards the court again (ch. 16). To get hold of the queen and the kingdom in the power vacuum after Moabdar's death, he has to win a tournament and solve a riddle (ch. 17 and 19). After numerous complications, he passes the tests and everything ends well, as in the fairy tale. Zadig is rewarded, order is restored in Babylon, and they all live happily ever after.

Despite Zadig's drifting through different social contexts, it was primarily his connection to the court that caught the readers' interest. Consequently, they insisted on reading the tale allegorically – as a mirror image of Voltaire's career as a courtier.[3] The narrative has several traits that lead to such an approach. Firstly, its genre, the oriental tale, made readers' who were familiar with oriental satires like Montequieu's *Lettres persanes*

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[2] « La cour ne semblerait guère fait pour moi, mais les grâces que le roi m'a faites m'y arrêtent, et j'y suis à présent plus par reconnaissance que par intérêt » (cited in van den Heuvel, 153).

[3] Modern scholars still tend to focus on this historical-biographical link to the French court. They have paid great attention to details in the narrative, like colours and objects, in order to demonstrate the allegorical links between the fictional Babylonian court and the real French court. Jacqueline Hellegouarc'h's article, "Encore la Duchesse du Maine: notes sur les rubans jaunes de *Zadig*" (1979), gives an account of this tendency.

(1721), aware of the possibility that the oriental scenery was only a displacement of a well-known subject – contemporary France.

Secondly, an allegorical approach seemed to be a natural consequence of the thematizing of meaning in the narrative. The fictional universe is characterized by fragmented signs that require interpretation to become meaningful – Zadig's poem on a broken tablet, traces of the king's horse and the queen's dog, letters written in the sand, or a mute dwarfs drawing of an attempted assassination. Like the protagonist, the reader is urged to puzzle signs and symbols together in order to catch their hidden significance.

Last, but not east, the allegory is suggested in *Zadig*'s fictional dedication letter. The tale is introduced as a "work which says more than it seems to say".[4] The dedication then differs between two types of readers. On the one hand, the sultan wives who seek entertainment and love *contes* like *One thousand and one nights* because they lack reason and significance. "Sultane Shéraa", to whom the dedication is addressed, has, on the other hand, "a little ground of philosophy".[5] She is friendly and benevolent, and has the power of discernment, the author claims. Shéraa is the ideal reader, the one who is potentially able to recognize the tale's hidden message. Contemporary readers considered "Shéraa" synonymous to Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress and Voltaire's protector at the court. As the work presumably was dedicated to a well-known lady at the French court, it seemed evident to focus on the scenes which make fun of the court in order to figure out what the tale really says.

The insistence on an allegorical way of reading is thus motivated in the tale. The hypothesis in the following is, however, that the allegorical approach is a dead-end when discussing *Zadig* in a political context. I will argue that the *conte* is not only an allegorical satire of the French court. Rather, the politically sensitive actions take place in the outside world. Surprisingly few critics, neither in the 18th century nor later, point to the fact that more than half of the narrative takes place outside the court and even outside Babylon. By examining the outside world in *Zadig*, I will suggest that Voltaire presents a transformation of the notion of politics. More specifically, he gives an account of the breakdown of the absolutist state and the constitution of a powerful world market. Thereby, princely power, that is, the Old Regime's government based on inherited power, hierarchies, and a fundamental

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[4] « ouvrage, qui dit plus qu'il ne semble dire ». Voltaire, *Œuvres de 1746–1748 (II)*, ed. Nicholas Cronk, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire, 30b*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 2004, 114. I will in the following refer to this edition when indicating "*Zadig*, page number".

[5] "un petit fonds de philosophie". *Zadig*, 115.

inequality between the Prince and his subjects; is replaced by a global monetary power – a politics where social conditions are entirely dependent on economical terms.[6]

The law of marketability – Zadig's encounter with the outside world

Zadig is presented as Enlightenment's incarnation, governed by universal reason and benevolence. The narrator initially characterises him as a truth seeker. His discourse is always rational. He is able to see through the flattery jargon of the court, as well as to unveil the irrationality of various religious and cultural norms. Thereby he enlightens his surroundings. But despite his extraordinary talents, Zadig, as the title reveals, is haunted by bad luck. Although the tale ends happily, the protagonist experience life as extremely fragile; the road from happiness to unhappiness is short. He manages to advance from citizen to minister, and from slave to Arabia's benefactor, but still he does not seem to control his own situation. Even though the notion of destiny is important in the narrative, it is crucial to notice that blind fate is not Zadig's main enemy: "Zadig's misfortune was a result of his fortune and especially of his merit", states the narrator in chapter 8, which treats the protagonist's fall from trusted minister to vulnerable refugee.[7] Zadig is, in other words, unlucky because he is distrusted by other people. They envy his success, and persecute him for breaking unwritten rules. Hence, it is social conditions rather than an abstract destiny that predict the consequences of Zadig's actions and opinions – both inside and outside of Babylon.

Generally, the social world thus has a power over Zadig. But although both Babylon and its outside are characterised as unenlightened, and in that sense similar, their constitutions of power differ from each other. Inside Babylon's walls, power is intrinsically connected to the Prince. This power structure is represented as bygone. It is to a large degree the narrative's play with genres that gives the idea of the court's outdatedness, as the romance of chivalry is activated and parodied. When Zadig first enters the outside world, it is as a chevalier. In an Egyptian village, he sees a lady in distress, threatened by a violent man, and his instinctive reaction is to kill the aggressor. But the Egyptians do not celebrate Zadig as a hero; on the contrary, the lady accuses him for having killed her lover. Consequently, the Egyptian law judges him to slavery. Zadig's chivalrous behaviour is thus condemned outside of Babylon.

[6] Several scholars have analyzed the relation between the breakdown of absolutism and the emergence of a fundamentally new concept of politics, among the most well-known are Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* [1962], Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1990; and Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise : ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Karl Aber, Freiburg, 1959.

[7] "Le malheur de Zadig vient de son bonheur même, et surtout de son mérite". *Zadig*, 151.

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The court's standards of hierarchies and courtesies are replaced by a commercial standard. Zadig's punishment for killing the lady's lover is that all his possessions and gold are shared amongst the village's inhabitants. The protagonist himself, as well as his valet, is sold as a slave. The merchant Sétoc, who buys the exiled, estimates Zadig to be of lesser value than his servant. This economical assessment decides their position. Suddenly, Zadig is subordinated to his former valet. In the outside world, power and social status is a question of economics. The buying and selling of commodities and humans seem to be the dominating social activity.The outside world thus is similar to a market place.

Zadig has another experience which clearly illustrates the reduced legacy of the court and the Old Regime's structures and values in the outside world; the encounter with the brigand Arbogad (ch. 14). Arbogad informs Zadig that king Moabdar has been killed, whereupon Zadig immediately asks where Astarté, the queen, is. The brigand – who cares more for profit (*butin*) than for such news – cannot answer, but explains to Zadig that her social status has no significance outside Babylon: "I have taken several women during my errands; I haven't kept one of them. I sell them at great expense when they are beautiful, without informing my self on what they are".[8] Arbogad is only interested in his prisoners' economic value. Consequently, he uses a vocabulary of transaction (*courses*, *vendre*, *acheter*, *marchand*) when referring to the women. Who they are, and which class they belong to, is totally irrelevant from his economical viewpoint. The only thing that matters is their value as marketable commodities.

The brigand represents a corrupted form of commerce. He tells Zadig that he started out as a valet, that is, from being owned rather than being an owner, and that he has "worked" his way up to become one of Arabia's most powerful men. "I was the sand corn, I decided to become a diamante", the self-made man asserts.[9] Interestingly enough, his crimes originated in a feeling of injustice: "I was desperate to see that on the entire earth that belonged equally to all men, destiny had not reserved my portion for me".[10] His thefts and abuses are thus motivated by the political situation; the unjust distribution of wealth and property. Arbogad has constantly accumulated his fortune through illegal activity; stealing, demanding usury, and extortion. Despite – or perhaps due to – the illegality of this activity, it has made him richer than the king of Babylon, and, consequently, more powerful. When king Moabdar

[8] « J'ai pris plusieures femmes dans mes courses; je n'en garde aucune; je les vends cher quand elles sont belles, sans m'informer de ce qu'elles sont. On n'achète point le rang; une reine qui serait laide ne trouverait pas marchand ». *Zadig*, 183.
[9] "j'étais le grain de sable, je résolus de devenir diamant". *Zadig*, 181.
[10] "J'étais au désespoir de voir que dans toute la terre qui appartient également aux hommes, la destinée ne m'eût pas réservé ma portion". *Zadig*, 181.

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sends his troops to get him killed, Arbogad uses his economical power to win the situation. He buys the king's valet by offering him a better salary. Due to the universal law of marketability, the moral is that the richest automatically gains power.

The world as a household

A passage describing the Balzora fair gives a positive depiction of the world as a market (ch. 8). Sétoc brings Zadig to this important Arabic port and centre of commerce, where the protagonist finds hope and comfort in a supper:

> Setoc, who would never separate from this man in whom alone all wisdom centred, resolved to take him with him to Balzora fair, whither the richest merchants round the whole habitable globe, used to resort. Zadig was delighted to see representatives from several countries, assembled together in one place. It appeared to him, as if the whole universe was but one large family that happily met at Balzora. On the second day of the fair, he sat down with an Egyptian, an Indian, that lived on the banks of the river Ganges, an inhabitant of Cathay, a Grecian, a Celt, and several other foreigners, who by their frequent voyages towards the Arabian Gulf, were so far conversant with the Arabic language, as to be able to discourse freely, and be mutually understood.[11]

The symposium in Balzora physically and linguistically unites representatives from different nations. Subsequently, it is a genuinely cosmopolitan community; the assembly even makes Zadig picture the universe as a family. One of the few scholars, who have commented this scene in the light of commerce, Robin Howells, sees Balzora as a perfect symbol of Voltaire's ideal society. Howells claims that utility and humanity constitute Balzora's social bonds, and that the brotherhood of these tradesmen shows how utility, commerce and science are intermingled in *Zadig* to create a positive notion of the enlightened community.[12] From such a viewpoint, Voltaire states "one of the maxims of the modern world", as the historian Margaret Jacob has put it; that is, the idea that commerce is associated with tolerance and freedom. [13]

I would like to add that commerce, and the affiliated idea of the universe as a family, is an ambiguous notion in this *conte*.[14] The family metaphor indicates that the community is based on its members' kinship. However, the tradesmen's relation is neither built on a

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[11] « Sétoc, qui ne pouvait se séparer de cet homme en qui habitait la sagesse [Zadig], le mena à la grande foire de Balzora, où devaient se rendre les plus grands négociants de la terre habitable. Ce fut pour Zadig une consolation sensible de voir tant d'hommes de divers contrées réunis dans la même place. Il lui paraissait que l'univers était une grande famille qui se rassemblait à Balzora. Il se trouva à table, dès le second jour, avec un Égyptien, un Indien gangaride, un habitant du Cathay, un Grec, un Celte, et plusieurs autres étrangers qui, dans leurs fréquents voyages vers le golfe Arabique, avaient appris assez d'arabe pour se faire entendre ». *Zadig*, 170.

[12] Robin Howells, "*Télémaque* et *Zadig*: apports et rapports", in *SVEC*, No. 215, p. 63–75, Oxford, 1982, 72.

[13] Margaret Jacob, *Strangers Nowhere in the World. The Rise of Cosmopolitanism in Early Modern Europe*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2006, 66.

[14] More ambiguous than in previous works like *Lettres philosophiques* and the poem "Le Mondain" (1736) where world trade is seen as beneficial to society.

common reason nor on an intuitive compassion that morally unites all human beings; cosmopolitan ideas ever since the Greek Antiquity. Their social bonds are rather generated on a more pragmatic level, in the sense that they, like a family, share the same household. In this context, to be a citizen of the universe means to be part of an economical community. And I will argue that not only is the brigand's illegal business a negative contrast to this cosmopolitan community of commerce; the readers will additionally learn to know the dark sides of the household's economical rationality.

The peacefulness of the merchants' supper is short. No sooner have they sat down than the quarrel explodes. "What an abominable area Balzora is!", the Egyptian exclaims, outraged by the fact that no one is willing to pay a reasonable prize for the mummy of his beloved aunt.[15] His statement is the prelude to an affective discussion on the merchants' various religious and cultural manners. Nevertheless, the conflict is initiated by commerce itself, by the Egyptian's rage of not being able to sell his product. A discord on economical value provokes a debate on religious and cultural values. Moreover, the quarrel – as well as the chapter – ends with a reference to an economic transaction, which on the level of syntax is one of several examples of the pairing of friendship and money in the narrative: "Sétoc, *after having sold his goods at a high prize*, followed Zadig back home to his tribe" (my italics).[16] The merchants' conflict is thus framed by economical terms. Consequently, commerce is not pictured as the sphere of progress and perpetual peace, linked to universal ideas of the common good (*le bien public*) or humanity (*le genre humain*), which was one of the standard images of the enlightened society. I would rather suggest that Voltaire constitutes the Balzora fair as a producer of universal principles, in the sense that economical value becomes the prevailing norm of political, religious, and cultural phenomena. The world is thus reduced to a household, a sphere of practical affairs.

The merchants' quarrel ends well. The reasonable Zadig makes them realize that their disagreement is only superficial, and that eventually, all of them recognize the same God. The chapter is thus an example of how Zadig, the peacemaker, exterminates conflicts by furthering universal norms. He expels traditional prejudices and introduces enlightenment. Yet, Zadig's reasoning is marked by the practical logic of the household. That is, he advocates a moral of (economical) utility.

In chapter 11, Zadig's economical focus becomes clear. The chapter begins with Zadig convincing Sétoc that worshiping the moon and the stars is completely irrational, and hence

[15] "Quel abominable pays que Balzora!" *Zadig*, 170.
[16] "Sétoc *après avoir vendu fort cher ses denrées* reconduisit son ami Zadig dans sa tribu". *Zadig*, 174.

meaningless. Zadig rejects the worshipping because it is both useless and unprofitable; "You receive more advantages, answered Zadig, from the water of the Red Sea, which transports your merchandises to the Indies".[17] Sétoc's religious practice is considered unenlightened and absurd because it lacks an immediate practical purpose. From Zadig's viewpoint, the values of human life equal the values of a household. An activity is meaningful only if it is profitable and useful. At the end of the day, then, Zadig's universal norm turns out to be an economical one. The advocate of Truth is thus advocating the interest of money.

The same logic makes Zadig abolish an old Arabian custom called the "Widow's Sacrifice". From time immemorial, tradition had forced the widow of a deceased man to throw herself upon her husband's funeral pile. Zadig changes tradition and becomes "Arabia's benefactor". He thus brings enlightenment. However, his winning argument is worth a remark. It is contrary to human nature, Zadig claims, "to permit the burning of young widows, almost every day; when they might be of service to their country, either by the addition of new subjects or by the education of such as demanded their maternal indulgence".[18] The young widows can give birth, and thus produce beneficial labour for the state. The widow's sacrifice represents a waste of resources which are useful to the country. Zadig does not mention the women's suffering. To further *le bien du genre humain* is not to avoid injustice against innocent individuals. His critique of the custom is clearly not founded on ethics. Rather, it confirms the notion of the world as a household, wherein progress and wealth are measured in the balance of receipts and expenditures. Through the arguments against the adoration of stars and the widow's sacrifice, Zadig becomes the representative of a society where profit, and not ethics or moral values, becomes the universal norm of political and cultural life.

The restoration of princely power

Through the world outside Babylon, Voltaire presents a cosmopolitan commercial society; national borders are wiped out and people communicate in a common language to further a common interest. Simultaneously, the world is represented as a household, where profitability is the universal rule. This second signification shows that commerce not necessarily leads to wealth and progress. Instead of associating commerce and peace, the narrative reveals the potentially destructive monetary power that governs in the wake of the king's fall:

[17] «Vous recevez plus d'avantages, répondit Zadig, des eaux de la mer Rouge qui porte vos marchandises aux Indes». *Zadig*, 166.

[18] «qu'on laissait bruler tous les jours des jeunes veuves, qui pouvaient donner des enfants à l'Etat, ou du moins élever les leurs ». *Zadig*, 168.

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> The season for stealing has never been better since Moabdar was killed, and all Babylon is left in the utmost confusion. […] All that I know, is that Moabdar became a perfect madman, that he was killed; that all the people in Babylon are cutting one another's throats, and that the whole Empire is laid waste; that there is still an opportunity for pull off some coups; and let me tell you, Sir, I have done my part, and made the most on it.[19]

The brigand's statement anticipates the outlook presented in *Candide*; Babylon after Moabdar is lawless and chaotic, a place where only the lawless thrive. The breakdown of princely power is thus resulting in a distorted version of commerce, where trading and making profit happen at the expense of, and even is dependent on, human suffering.

However, the brigand's conception of the world does not triumph in the narrative. Zadig finally gains power by playing the old game of power, represented by the knight tournament and the riddle. Consequently, the narrative ends with a re-establishment of the Babylonian state. By re-conquering the court, Zadig somehow confirms its order. From such a point of view, the moral lesson to be drawn from *Zadig* is, apparently, the preference of the absolutist idea of the sovereign Prince. While the commercial community of the outside world is distorted, peace and prosperity may prevail in the absolutist state. The restoration of princely power may not be surprising; having in mind the generally accepted view that Voltaire preferred the enlightened monarchy as the fundament of politics. But the way the restoration happens, requires a comment.

The last three chapters, where the reinstatement of princely power takes place, are pastiches: Chapter 17 describes a knight tournament that is a caricatured version of the romance of chivalry, similar to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Chapter 19, where Zadig needs to solve a riddle in order to reach the throne, alludes to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and to the happy ending of the fairy tale. Furthermore, the chapters are filled with a variety of intertextual references, which call attention to the tale's ludic qualities, while realistic references to commerce and trade are nearly absent.[20] Chapter 17 ends indeed with Zadig's encounter of a tradesman, who sells him a white nightgown and a nightcap. In spite of this short passage, which is comic and absurd rather than realistic; this last part of the narrative implies a break with the representation of Arabia as a market place, governed by economical principles.

The restoration of princely power is ambiguous. The new king enters the throne dressed in a nightgown. Eventually, he makes fun of the courtly rituals where certain

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[19] « Jamais la saison de voler n'a été meilleure, depuis que Moabdar est tué, et que tout est en confusion dans Babylone. […] Tout ce que je sais, c'est que Moabdar est devenue fou, qu'il a été tué, que Babylone est un grand coupe-gorge, que tout l'empire est désolé, qu'il y a des beaux coups de faire encore, et que pour ma part, j'en ai fait d'admirables ». *Zadig*, 182–183.

[20] Cf. Robin Howells, who points to the tale's playfulness as a device to destabilize the existing order. In *Disabled Powers: a reading of Voltaire's contes*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1993, 7.

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costumes possess a representative power. The ideal of the warrior king, who ascends the throne by the way of his sword, is not compatible with Zadig's, and Voltaire's, ideal of the philosopher king, who gains authority through wisdom. The crowning of Zadig means Babylon's enlightenment. In the end, it is actually the philosopher king who rules to his people's best: ”The Empire was in the full enjoyment of glory, peace and plenty; it was truly the golden age; governed by justice and love. Every one blest Zadig; and Zadig blest Heaven”.[21] In these last sentences, however, Voltaire presents Babylon as a utopia. The end therefore implies a sort of setback: from a realistic representation of a new socio-political order to a far too idyllic depiction of the old order in restored shape.

Conclusion

The tale thus ends with a ridicule restoration of princely power. The ridicule of court manners was nevertheless not seen as a political threat. The eager reader, focused on finding the allegorical link between fictional Babylon and real-life Versailles, may have been blinded to the fact that a political message could be hidden elsewhere. The tale's genre and its almost suspiciously explicit invitation to read the tale allegorically were perhaps intended to have this effect; as devices to lead the reader away from the tale's more explosive political subject.

From this brief outline of the tale's treatment of economical and princely power, I will like to suggest that the Voltaire's work contains a realistic diagnosis of his contemporary world order. He juxtapose the Babylonian court with the world as a market place; a global household where power has been transferred from the sovereign to money.[22] From such a point of view, *Zadig* is informed by the same comparative technique as Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*, which, unlike *Zadig*, actually *did* provoke public condemnation. The work was burned on the stairs of the Parisian Palace of Justice and it caused its author's exile. A comparison of France and England made France seem second-rate. Voltaire thus suggested another way of organising the political society. A similar comparison is repeated in *Zadig* if we take Babylon's outside world into consideration. The breakdown of the Old Regime's “truth” is displayed by introducing an alternative. But while England, the alternative to the French state in *Lettres philosophiques*, is a sort of ideal society, the harmony of *Zadig*'s global household is at best temporary, due to the tale's realistic exposition of the darker sides of the economical power.

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[21] «L'empire jouit de la paix, de la gloire et de l'abondance; ce fut le plus beau siècle de la terre ; elle était gouvernée par la justice et par l'amour. On bénissait Zadig, et Zadig bénissait le ciel ». *Zadig*, 226.

[22] Due to the limits of this paper, I have not examined a third form of community that is to be found in the narrative; the ”salon” or the civil society inside Babylon's borders.