‘Le siècle s’est éclairé’: *philosophes*, phantoms and fanaticism.

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ABSTRACT
The quotation in my title and the three subsequent terms are taken from the most famous scene of Diderot’s first play, *Le Fils naturel*, which has long been judged preachy and dramatically incompetent by critics. Judging by the evidence of the surviving eighteenth-century performance texts, much of it was simply cut. This essay acknowledges the issue but/and contextualises the scene, reading it as an attempt on the part of the *philosophe* to manage the aftermath of the attempted assassination of Louis XV in early January, the significance of which was still up for grabs a month or so later when *Le Fils naturel* was published. Re-injecting some politics into Diderot's bourgeois domestic drama, whose oedipal dynamics have often been noted, the essay explores Diderot's concern with the national family drama of parricide and his mobilisation of a discourse on fanaticism.

KEYWORDS
Diderot; Damiens; Voltaire; Fanaticism; Enlightenment; Contextualisation; Theatre.

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I.

Le Fils naturel occupies a significant place in the history of European theatre. It envisaged the stage as the actor-only space we know today, cleared of the audience members whose social rank gave them the right to sit not just at the front but on the stage itself, which was to be decorated with sets and props designed to create the illusion of a contemporary middle-class domestic interior.[1] It also theorised a new theatrical genre, the *drame bourgeois*, in which a cast of characters speak in prose about their feelings and make choices about their futures as husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and friends. It presented what Peter Szondi in his landmark article called the ‘social psychology’ of the middle class, in which life, confined to the domestic sphere, is envisaged as a series of sentimental *tableaux*, insulated from the sudden reversals of fortune or *coups de théâtre* that characterise life in the political arena.[2]

Le Fils naturel was also Diderot’s first work on and for the theatre. Though it appeared anonymously, an early moment in the framing narrative in which the narrator presents himself as an Encyclopedist,[3] ensured the work was swiftly attributed to Diderot and subjected to

[1] See, for instance, Pierre Frantz, *L’esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, PUF: 1998).
[2] Peter Szondi, ‘Tableau and Coup de Théâtre: On the Social Psychology of Diderot’s Bourgeois Tragedy’, *New Literary History*, 11.2 (1980), 323-343.
[3] [Denis Diderot], *Le Fils naturel ou les épreuves de la vertu, comédie en cinq actes, et en prose, avec l'histoire véritable de la pièce* (Amsterdam, 1757), p. iii. All quotations are from this edition.

criticisms of the kind that had been levelled at the multi-volume work, including plagiarism.[4] In addition, the play was said to be dramatically incompetent, with scenes alternating between not enough speech and far too much, a male hero too emotional to complete a sentence and leaving an unsightly trail of dot-dot-dots on the printed page, and a female heroine, too articulate to be realistic, let alone socially acceptable. And so, for the embattled *philosophe*, *Le Fils naturel* was another *succès de scandale*, albeit not at the box office or, at least not in France – the play fared better in Germany following Lessing's translation.[5] The success was the book, and four editions appeared within the first year of its publication.[6]

Today, the *scandale* is over and with it, the *succès*. Now a work of purely historical interest and significance, *Le Fils naturel* is rarely performed, and Diderot scholars tend to be rather sceptical of its merits as a play.[7] Though the framing narrative, 'l'histoire véritable de la pièce'[8] and the three 'entretiens'[9], create tensions and ironies that tend to be more to the modern critical taste, the play itself tends to be judged, to quote Andrew Curran's view, 'syrupy and tedious'.[10] The main culprit in this regard is Act 4, scene 3, in which Dorval and Constance exchange views about human nature, providence and history, and Constance makes a series of confident, not to say triumphalist, assertions, including that quoted in my title: 'le siècle s'est éclairé'.[11] For Diderot scholars, who tend to prefer the allegedly more 'radical' later works that did not appear in print in the *philosophe*'s lifetime, the scene provokes some exasperation: 'Diderot a cru jusqu'à l'aveuglement au succès de sa propagande, et son théâtre en a reçu un coup mortel', writes Jacques Chouillet in his classic study, continuing: 'La prolifération des tirades vertueuses en est, certes, grandement responsable. Il prêche, comme l'apôtre, en temps et hors de temps. La grande scène de Constance est proprement insoutenable'.[12] The evidence of the surviving eighteenth-century performance texts would suggest that Diderot's contemporaries were likewise unimpressed: the scene appears to have been cut.[13]

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[4] The plot was said to have been lifted from Goldoni's *Il vero amico*, see Anne-Marie Chouillet, 'Dossier du *Fils naturel* et du *Père de famille*', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 208 (1982), 73-166, pp.79-82. Plagiarism charges were levelled at the *Encyclopédie* almost as soon as it began to appear, notably from the Jesuits who had their own dictionary to promote, see Christian Albertan 'Les journalistes de Trévoux lecteurs de l'*Encyclopédie*', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 13 (1992), 107-16. For Diderot and d'Alembert's response, see *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers par une société de gens de lettres*, 28 volumes (1751-1772), vol. 3 (1753), pp. xvii-xviii.

[5] For the contemporary critical reception, see Kate E. Tunstall, 'Dossier de critique', in Nicholas Cronk (ed.), *Études sur Le Fils naturel et les Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), pp. 211-324.

[6] See David J. Adams, *Bibliographie des œuvres de Denis Diderot, 1739-1900*, 2 tomes (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d'étude du XVIIIe siècle: 2000), vol. 2, pp. 153-159.

[7] For the modern critical reception, see Russell Goulbourne, 'Essai bibliographique', in Cronk, *Études sur Le Fils naturel,* 181-210, pp. 203-209 ('Réception et postérité').

[8] 'the true story of the play', *Le Fils naturel*, pp. iii-ix and pp. 137-140.

[9] 'conversations', *Le Fils naturel*, pp. 141-299.

[10] Andrew S. Curran, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), p. 183.

[11] 'the century has been enlightened', *Le Fils naturel*, p. 103.

[12] 'Diderot had a blind faith in the success of his propaganda, and it dealt his theatre a fatal blow. The proliferation of virtuous speeches is no doubt largely responsible. He preaches, like the apostle, in season and out. Constance's grand scene is totally unbelievable', Jacques Chouillet, La *Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot, 1745-63* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1973), p. 457.

[13] See pp. 98-99 of the copy of the 1770 edition of the play, printed in Paris by la Veuve Simon et fils, that is held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Richelieu – Arts du Spectacle, shelfmark 8-RF-9132).

Yet I want, in this essay, to stay with Constance's 'great scene'. Taking my cue from Chouillet's dismissal of Diderot/Constance's speeches for being delivered 'en temps et hors de temps', I argue, on the contrary, for the significant timing and timeliness of what Constance says and of Diderot's publication, in mid-February 1757, of the claim that 'le siècle s'est éclairé'. Rather than joining fellow Diderot scholars in dismissing the piece for being tiresomely propagandistic, I want to focus on the scene precisely because of its propagandism and take it seriously as a piece of targeted, politically engaged writing for public consumption in a specific moment.

My approach is to contextualise. First, I reposition Constance's much quoted speech within the dramatic logic of the play from which it is so often removed. I then construct another context for it, using the two lines of poetry that Dorval quotes in the same scene and which are taken from Voltaire's *Poème sur la loi naturelle*.[14] Written between 1750 and 1752, the poem was published for the first time in 1756, along with the *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*,[15] and the two together were hugely successful, appearing in twenty editions in the first year.[16] Scholars and critics have long noted Diderot's nod to Voltaire who, in 1757, was most famous as a dramatist and had recently joined the *Encyclopédie* team,[17] but no attention has been given to the quoted lines themselves or to the fact that they supply Constance with a cue to speak to Dorval of the dangers of fanaticism (or what we would call religious fundamentalism), including politically-motivated violence and regicide.[18] I then construct a further context by mobilising a mass of writings that were appearing at the same time as Diderot's play and which concern an event that was playing out on the national political stage, namely 'l'attentat horrible du 5 janvier 1757',[19] in which a French citizen had made an attempt on the king's life. In mid-February 1757, when *Le Fils naturel* was published, the political significance of that event was still under construction.

Known today as 'l'attentat de Damiens',[20] or in Anglophone scholarship as 'the Damiens Affair',[21] the event is often mentioned (and sometimes recounted in some detail) in histories of eighteenth-century French literature, and it is a constant feature of the timelines that are appended to scholarly editions of *Le Fils naturel*.[22] However, its literary significance – its

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[14] *Poem on the Natural Law*.

[15] *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster.*

[16] It is worth noting also that in June 1756 Voltaire had sent Thieriot a copy of his poem for Diderot, see 'Introduction', *Poème sur la loi naturelle*, critical edition by H. T. Mason and Thomas Wynn, in *Oeuvres completes de Voltaire* (hereafter OCV), 205 volumes (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-2022), vol. 32B, p. 10.

[17] See Nicholas Cronk, 'Dorval et le dialogue à trois voix: la presence de Rousseau et de Voltaire dans Le Fils naturel et les Entretiens', in Cronk (ed.), *Études sur le Fils naturel*, pp. 123-137, esp. pp. 127-134.

[18] For the history of fanaticism, see Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010).

[19] 'the horrendous attack of 5 January 1757'.

[20] 'Damiens' attack'. See Pierre Rétat, *L'attentat de Damiens: discours de l'événement* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1979).

[21] Dale Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unravelling of the Ancien Régime, 1750-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[22] See, for instance, Peter France, *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 219; Curran, *Diderot*, pp. 146-49; Chouillet, 'Dossier', p. 80; and the University of Chicago's timeline for the publication of the *Encyclopédie* at https://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/general-chronology-and-publication-dates/general-chronology.

significance for literature or, more accurately, 'the literary'[23] – is never considered, except to state or imply that the attack would lead to a crackdown on works judged to be seditious or heretical, which culminated in the suppression of the *Encyclopédie* (among other works) two years later.[24] Yet if we remain closer in time to the attack itself, we find a corpus of what I have elsewhere called '*attentat* literature', comprising, for the most part, poems that dramatize the *attentat* for public consumption and in the hope of royal recompense.[25] That corpus has rarely been given any consideration by literary scholars, no doubt because its 'occasional' nature tends to be thought of as being at odds with literary value (unless the author is canonical which, in this case, none is),[26] and worse still, it is marked by expressions of great devotion to the King, whereas scholars of eighteenth-century French literature have a tendency to seek out the radical and the proto-revolutionary. That corpus is key, however, to contextualising Constance's 'great scene' in *Le Fils naturel*, which emerges as another attempt to give meaning to the *attentat* and use the resources of drama to visualise, just for a moment, the return to France of the political violence of the past and to consider its implications for the future.

II.

To begin, however, we need a summary of the plot of *Le Fils naturel*. Readers familiar with both the play and the framing narrative may wish to skip to the next section. It begins with the 'true story of the play', which is told by a first-person narrator who says he had gone to recuperate in the countryside following the publication of the sixth volume of the *Encyclopédie*. (This suggests the narrative is set sometime between October 1756 and mid-February 1757.) When he arrived in the countryside, he found it buzzing with the story of an extraordinary man who had risked his life for his friend and been so brave as to 'lui sacrifier sa passion, sa fortune et sa liberté',[27] all in a single day. On meeting the man in question, a man of a melancholic temperament named Dorval, the narrator told him that his story would make a good play, to which Dorval replied that before he died his father had already made a similar suggestion, except that the play he had envisaged was not for performance by actors in a theatre, nor was it one that would culminate in Dorval's virtuous acts of self-sacrifice. Instead, Dorval's father had envisaged a play that he, Dorval and the other family members involved in the original events would act out once a year to themselves in the privacy of their living room as a way of commemorating and transmitting to future generations these foundational family events, which the father views as having culminated in his providential return to France, which saved Dorval and Rosalie from the '*danger*' they were

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[23] For the difference between 'literature' and 'the literary', see *History and the Literary: a method of enquiry into seventeenth- to twentieth-century France,* edited and with an Introduction by Kate E. Tunstall and Christian Jouhaud (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2025), pp. 4-5.

[24] See Chouillet, 'Dossier', p. 80; Curran, *Diderot*, pp. 149-50, p. 161-63.

[25] See Kate E. Tunstall, 'The Knife and the Pen: the a*ttentat* of 1757', in *Turmoil/Dans la Tourmente: Instability and Insecurity in Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Siofra Pierse and Emma Dunne, *Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), pp. 44-62.

[26] See Predrag Matjejevic, *Pour une poétique de l'événement: La poésie de circonstance, suivi de L'engagement et l'événement* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979). The corpus of *attentat* litertaure includes poems by Coger, Baculard d'Arnaud, Billardon de Sauvigny, and Gresset, and a play by Vadé. For Vadé and Coger, see Tunstall, 'The Knife and the Pen', pp. 50-60.

[27] 'give up his passion, his freedom and his life for his friend', *Le Fils naturel*, p. iii.

unknowingly in, the nature of which is not yet revealed.[28] The narrator also learned from Dorval that the first annual performance was due to go ahead, and having persuaded Dorval to allow him secretly to watch it, the narrator teasingly says he will save his account of why he did not see the final scene for another time.

The narrative now gives way to the text of the play, which opens with Dorval in crisis. With no family of his own and having been given a home by his best friend, Clairville, Dorval has secretly fallen in love with Clairville's fiancée, Rosalie, who is also living *chez* Clairville, whose widowed sister, Constance, took her in after her mother died. Rosalie and Clairville are due to be married as soon as Rosalie's father returns from the Caribbean to give his consent, which he is expected to do any day. In emotional turmoil, Dorval decides he must leave. Unaware of Dorval's feelings, Clairville and Constance try to persuade Dorval to stay. Constance is also in love with Dorval and tells him as much, and Clairville needs Dorval to speak to Rosalie on his behalf to find out whether her feelings towards him really have changed as they appear to have done. Rosalie tells Dorval she has fallen in love with him. Strengthened in his belief that he must leave, Dorval begins a letter to Rosalie in which he confesses his love for her, but he is called away to defend Clairville in a fight with some local men who were, so Clairville believes, defaming Dorval by saying he was in love with his best friend's fiancée, whose guardian was in love with him. In Dorval's absence, Constance finds his half-written letter to Rosalie and, taking it to be for her, now believes she understands why he wants to leave, and when Clairville and Dorval return, she shows Dorval's letter to Clairville, who is delighted that his best friend is in love with his sister and she with him. Clairville tells Rosalie the good news and she faints in shock. A messenger arrives with news that Rosalie's father, Lysimond, has been captured by the English on his way back to France and his fortune stolen. (This suggests the play is set in what would become the Seven Years' War, which began in 1756.[29]) This is bad news for Clairville, who already believes his own meagre fortune is the reason why Rosalie is unsure about marrying him. This is potentially good news for Dorval, but he decides, after much soul-searching, not to profit from such an unexpected turn of events and instead instructs his bankers to use half his fortune to restore Rosalie's fortune and Clairville's chances by pretending it was the insurance money for her father's ship. And he decides he will go and explain to Constance why he cannot marry her and must leave, as he has been trying to do since the play began. His explanation, which omits any reference of his love of Rosalie, does not convince Constance, who persuades him to stay and marry her. (This is the scene to which I shall return.) Accepting now to stay, Dorval goes to persuade Rosalie that she must marry Clairville. In a final scene, Lysimond arrives, and Dorval recognises him: Rosalie's father is also his father; Dorval and Rosalie are brother and sister. And so the danger from which the father believed he had saved his children was incest, while Dorval and Rosalie had, in fact, already renounced the desire they knew was guilty on other grounds in the name of duty and loyalty.

The narrator now returns to recount the ending of the 'true story', which is to say the reason why he did not see the last scene of the play performed. Lysimond's part had to be played by an actor, and when the family members saw him arrive and not their father, they broke down

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[28] *Le Fils naturel*, p. v. The italics are in the original.

[29] The English had begun to capture ships en route to France from the Caribbean in February 1757.

in tears and the performance had to be abandoned. And so, the narrator only discovered that Lysimond was also Dorval's father by reading the text that Dorval subsequently gave him, which is the subject of the three conversations that follow, in which Dorval and the narrator, now called 'Moi', discuss, among other things, the relationship between the play and the original events on which it is supposed to have been based, the creation of *tableaux* on stage and the criticism of *coups de théâtre*.

III.

Act IV, scene 3 is set up to be one great big misunderstanding. Dorval arrives intending to tell Constance the truth about why he cannot marry her and believing that once she knows, he will finally be able to leave the home in which he caused so much disruption. Constance, for her part, delightedly greets Dorval, firm in the belief that he returns her love and they are husband-and-wife-to-be. The scene is also set up to confound the reader/spectator's expectations. For, believing Rosalie to be the reason why Dorval cannot marry Constance, and having heard Dorval tell himself out loud that he intends to tell Constance 'la vérité',[30] the reader/spectator cannot but be surprised to hear Dorval omit any mention of Rosalie among the reasons he cannot marry her. Instead, Dorval tells Constance that he won't make her happy because he doesn't make anyone happy, his temperament is too sombre and melancholic, his morals, too austere, he is dogged by misfortune and is intending to withdraw from society completely and live alone. Constance is having none of it, countering that he can and will make her happy, he already does, his virtuous austerity is what she first fell in love with, only a wicked person would live alone,[31] Dorval is not wicked, quite the reverse, and life with her will make him happy. So Dorval tries again: he doesn't want children, they might grow up to be wicked and, if they didn't, they would surely fall victim to the wickedness of others. Clearly Constance is not called 'Constance' for nothing: she persists, diagnosing his fear of men's wickedness, which forms the basis for his desire not to have children, as a fear of fanaticism (I shall be returning to this extremely surprising move on Constance's part) and tells him that such a fear is unfounded because – here it comes – they are living in an enlightened age. 'Quelle femme!', he exclaims.[32] And when he reveals the truth about himself, namely that he is of illegitimate birth (he is the 'natural son'), and she replies simply that she loves the man he has become, he gives in and accepts to marry Constance and raise the inhabitants of her brave new world. 'What a woman!', indeed.

Most of the secondary literature focuses not on Constance, however, but on Dorval and his melancholic temperament. Critics note that his melancholy is peculiarly unmotivated by the events in the play,[33] or is, at best, an excessive response: 'Quand je pense que nous sommes jetés tout en naissant, dans un chaos de préjugés, d'extravagances , de vices et de misère, l'idée m'en fait frémir'[34] seems over the top as a reaction to being born outside of marriage (or falling in love with his best friend's fiancée) and would seem to belong to a tragic register that is otherwise

[30] 'the truth', *Le Fils naturel*, p. 83.

[31] This is the line, 'il n'y a que le méchant qui soit seul' [only the wicked man lives alone] (p. 97), which Rousseau believed was directed at him (and might have been).

[32] 'What a woman!', *Le Fils naturel*, p. 105.

[33] See, for example, Nathalie Rizzoni, 'Du *Fils naturel* au fils dramaturge', in *Études sur 'Le Fils naturel'*, 1-20, p. 7.

[34] 'When I think how we are thrown into a chaos of prejudice, extravagance, vice and misery as soon as we are born, the idea makes me shudder', *Le Fils naturel*, p. 99.

alien to the play, though it is present in the framing narrative where Dorval's father speaks in comparable terms.[35] As a result, critics frequently offer what they present as a psychoanalytic reading of his melancholy, according to which it is the sign of his forbidden desire for Rosalie, a desire he must repress because it betrays his friend and disavow because it is incestuous, and yet re-ignite and re-repress on an annual basis in order to commemorate his father's vision of the foundational event of the family, the return of the father.[36] Critics further note that in writing the play, Dorval is engaged in an oedipal struggle with his father over the correct interpretation of the events on which the play is based.[37] A reading of a different order has been offered by Caroline Weber, one that is attentive to a colonial sub-text, to the fact that Dorval's father's fortune was made 'aux Isles',[38] more specifically in Martinique, whence his boat sets sail, and therefore was made using enslaved labour.[39] Her argument is not only that Dorval knows about the source of his father's fortune but also that he is 'haunted by the ironbound ghosts of his father's island laborers'.[40] Privileging textual details, such as when Constance tells Dorval that he is 'obsédé de phantômes',[41] and when Dorval tells Constance he has a history of making people unhappy and quotes a line from a Voltaire poem referring to men in chains, an image to which Constance returns,[42] Weber argues that the play is insistent in its hinting that bourgeois domestic virtue is a fantasy that cannot be sustained.

Weber's contrapuntal reading is certainly timely in our historical moment that seems to be starting, albeit very belatedly, to reckon with the crimes of racial capitalism, and I have nothing to add to it here. My aim is, instead, to look in more detail at Dorval's quotation from the poem by Voltaire and then at Constance's response to it, and to demonstrate that they point in another direction, one that is no less concerned with French history and politics.

IV.

To pursue my line of enquiry, it is necessary to quote at some length from the exchange between Dorval and Constance.

> DORVAL
> Ah! Constance, qui ne tremblerait d'augmenter le nombre de ces malheureux, qu'on a comparés à des forçats qu'on voit dans un cachot funeste,
>
> *Pouvant se secourir, sur l'un est l'autre acharnés*
> *Combattre avec les fers dont ils sont enchaînés*.
>
> CONSTANCE

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[35] *Le Fils naturel*, pp. v-vi.
[36] See Roger Lewinter, *Diderot ou les mots de l'absence: essai sur la forme de l'œuvre* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1976), pp. 21-32, and Lucette Peyrol, 'Une autre lecture du *Fils naturel* et les *Entretiens*', RHLF, 76 (1976), 47-59.
[37] See James Fowler, *Voicing Desire: Family and Sexuality in Diderot's Narrative* (Oxford: ViF, 2000), pp. 38-63.
[38] *Le Fils naturel*, p. 106.
[39] See Caroline Weber, 'The Sins of the Father: Colonialism and Family History in Diderot's *Le Fils naturel*', *PMLA*, 118:3 (2003), pp. 488-501.
[40] Weber, 'The Sins of the Father', p. 494.
[41] 'obsessed with ghosts', *Le Fils naturel*, p. 99.
[42] *Le Fils naturel*, p. 102, p. 103.

> Je connais les maux que le fanatisme a causés, et ceux qu'il en faut craindre. Mais s'il paraissait aujourd'hui... parmi nous... un monstre, tel qu'il en a produit dans les temps de ténèbres, où sa fureur, ses illusions arrosaient de sang cette terre... qu'on vît ce monstre s'avancer au plus grand des crimes en invoquant le secours du Ciel... et tenant la loi de son Dieu d'une main, et de l'autre un poignard, préparer aux peuples de longs regrets...croyez, Dorval qu'on en aurait autant d'étonnement que d'horreur... Il y a sans doute encore des barbares ; et quand n'y en aura-t-il plus ? Mais les temps de barbarie sont passés. Le siècle s'est éclairé. La raison s'est épurée. Ses préceptes remplissent les ouvrages de la nation. Ceux où l'on inspire aux hommes la bienveillance générale, sont presque les seuls qui soient lus. Voilà les leçons dont nos théâtres retentissent, et dont ils ne peuvent retentir trop souvent. Et le Philosophe, dont vous m'avez rappelé les vers, doit principalement ses succès aux sentiments d'humanité répandus dans ses poèmes, et au pouvoir qu'ils ont sur nos âmes. Non, Dorval, un peuple qui vient s'attendrir tous les jours sur la vertu malheureuse, ne peut être ni méchant, ni farouche. C'est vous-même; ce sont les hommes qui vous ressemblent, que la Nation honore, que le Gouvernement doit protéger plus que jamais, qui affranchiront vos enfants de cette chaîne terrible dont votre mélancolie vous montre leurs mains innocentes chargées.[43]

Neither Dorval nor Constance names the author of the verses that Dorval quotes at the opening of this extract, but Constance later ascribes them to 'le Philosophe', whose poetry has been so successful at spreading humanitarian sentiments. The *philosophe*-poet in question is Voltaire, and Nicholas Cronk has noted that it was a somewhat peculiar decision on Diderot's part to quote Voltaire the poet since it was as a dramatist that Voltaire was much better known at this time.[44] Just as peculiar, however, if not more so, is Constance's apparent inattention to the actual lines from Voltaire that she has just heard Dorval quote, for they contain anything but humanitarian sentiments that unite men in a general feeling of kindness and care. In fact, the sentiments they contain might more easily belong to Pascal, whose bleak vision of the human condition Voltaire had earlier criticised in his *Lettres philosophiques* (1733):

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[43] 'DORVAL. Ah! Constance, who would not shudder to increase the number of these unfortunate souls, who have been compared to convicts we see in a grim dungeon, *Able to help each other but attacking one another relentlessly,/ Fighting each other with the chains that bind them*. CONSTANCE. I know the evils that fanaticism has caused, and those that we must fear. But if today... among us... a monster appeared, like those produced in the dark times, when its fury and delusions drenched the earth in blood... if we saw this monster advancing to commit the greatest of crimes, invoking Heaven's help... holding the law of his God in one hand and a dagger in the other, preparing the people for a long period of regret... believe me, Dorval, we would be as astonished as we would be horrified... There are undoubtedly still barbarians; and when will there not be? But the times of barbarism are past. The century has been enlightened. Reason has been purified. Its precepts fill the works of the nation. Those that inspire men with general benevolence are almost the only ones that are read. These are the lessons that resound in our theatres, and they cannot resound too often. And the Philosopher, whose verses you have reminded me of, owes his success mainly to the sentiments of humanity spread throughout his poems and to the power they have over our souls. No, Dorval, a people who come every day to be moved by virtue suffering cannot be wicked or fierce. It is you yourself; it is men like you, whom the nation honours and the government must protect more than ever, who will free your children from this terrible chain that your melancholy shows you weighing heavily on their innocent hands', *Le Fils naturel*, pp. 102-103. The italics are in the original.

[44] Cronk, 'Dorval et le dialogue à trois voix', pp. 127-134. Cronk also notes Voltaire's rather lukewarm reply to Diderot, who had sent him a copy of his new play.

> *Qu'on s'imagine un nombre d'hommes dans les chaînes, et tous condamnés à mort, dont les uns étant chaque jour égorgés à la vue des autres, ceux qui restent voient leur propre condition dans celle de leurs semblables, et, se regardant les uns et les autres avec douleur et sans espérance, attendent à leur tour. C'est l'image de la condition des hommes.*
>
> Au lieu donc de nous étonner et de nous plaindre du malheur et de la brieveté de la vie, nous devons nous étonner et nous féliciter de notre bonheur et de sa durée.[45]

Voltaire had changed his mind by 1756, when he published the poem from which Dorval quotes, along with the poem on the Lisbon disaster, but his altered vision is not quite as bleak as Dorval would have it. For Voltaire is clear that men have it in their power to live happier lives, if they would only choose to help each other:

> De la société les secourables charmes
> Consolent nos douleurs au moins quelques instants:
> Remède encor trop faible à des maux si constants.
> Ah! n'empoisonnons pas la douceur qui nous reste!
> Je crois voir des forçats dans un cachot funeste,
> Se pouvant secourir, l'un sur l'autre acharnés,
> Combattre avec les fers dont ils sont enchaînés.[46]

In their original context, the lines Dorval quotes are part of an interrogation of the consolatory possibilities of society, an interrogation that Diderot transposes into dialogue, with Dorval rejecting those possibilities and stating his desire to withdraw from society, and Constance opposing him.

Something similarly transpositional is also going on in Constance's immediate reply to Dorval's quotation. On the face of it, her statement, 'Je connais les maux que le fanatisme a causés',[47] is a *non sequitur*. Dorval has said nothing about fanaticism either in his own words or by means of the quotation. One way to make sense of her statement is to suggest she views the Pascalian vision itself to be fanatical and thereby potentially harmful. In fact, however, she is picking up Voltaire's poem where Dorval left off, for while the lines he quotes may be the final lines of the poem in the version dedicated to the Margravine of Bayreuth, they are followed, in

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[45] '*Imagine a number of men in chains, all condemned to death, some of whom are slaughtered every day in full view of the others. Those who remain see their own condition reflected in that of their fellow men and, looking at each other in pain and despair, await their turn. This is the image of the human condition.* Instead of being surprised and complaining about the misfortune and brevity of life, we should be surprised and congratulate ourselves on our happiness and its duration', *Lettres philosophiques*, *OCV*, 6B, p. 287. Voltaire quotes Pascal's *pensée* from the Port-Royal edition of 1678.

[46] 'The helpful charms of society/ Console our pain for a few moments at least:/ A remedy too weak for such constant ills./ Ah! Let us not poison the sweetness that remains!/ I think I see convicts in a grim dungeon,/ Able to help each other but attacking one another relentlessly,/ Fighting each other with the chains that bind them', Voltaire, *Poème sur la loi naturelle*, *OCV*, 32B, pp. 76-77.

[47] 'I know the evils that fanaticism has caused', *Le Fils naturel*, p. 102.

the version dedicated to Frederick, by a fourth *chant* that compares France unfavourably to Prussia on the grounds that Prussia, unlike France, had succeeded in avoiding faction and fanaticism. Addressing Frederick directly and praising him, Voltaire's poet says:

> D'où vient que les enfants de Calvin, de Luther,
> Qu'on croit delà les monts bâtards de Lucifer,
> Le Grec et le Romain, l'empesé quiétiste,
> Le Quakre au grand chapeau, le simple anabaptiste,
> Qui jamais dans leur loi n'ont pu se réunir,
> Sont tous sans disputer, d'accord pour vous bénir?
> C'est que vous êtes sage, et que vous êtes maître.
> Si le dernier Valois, hélas! avait su l'être,
> Jamais un jacobin, guidé par son prieur
> De Judith et d'Aod fervent imitateur,
> N'eût tenté dans St. Cloud sa funeste entreprise:
> (a) Mais Valois aiguisa le poignard de l'Eglise;
> Ce poignard qui bientôt égorgea dans Paris,
> Aux yeux de ses sujets, le plus grand des Henris.
> Voilà le fruit affreux des pieuses querelles:
> Toutes les factions à la fin sont cruelles[.]
>
> (a) Il ne faut pas entendre par ce mot l'Eglise catholique, mais le poignard d'un ecclésiastique, le fanatisme abominable de quelques gens d'église de ces temps-là détesté par l'Eglise de tous les temps.[48]

In referring, apparently out of the blue, to the 'evils of fanaticism', Constance's reply to Dorval is, in fact, also informed by Voltaire's poem. Seen in the light of what Voltaire goes on to say about France's violent sectarian history in the same poem from which Dorval just quoted, the ghosts that Constance had earlier claimed Dorval is obsessed with are not so much enslaved labourers as religious fundamentalists, and his fear about the future, fear of another regicide.

No such fear is expressed in Voltaire's poem, however, which ends on a plea for tolerance and for the crown to have equal jurisdiction over all its subjects as a way of ensuring a society built on humanitarian values. These are the values that Constance goes on to associate with the *Philosophe* but before she does so, she departs from the *Philosophe*'s script and asks Dorval to imagine the re-appearance – 'aujourd'hui… parmi nous'[49] – of a dagger-wielding monster from

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[48] 'How is it that the children of Calvin and Luther,/ Whom we believe to be Lucifer's bastard children beyond the mountains,/ The Greek and the Roman, the stiff Quietist,/ The Quaker with his big hat, the simple Anabaptist,/ Who could never agree a common law,/ All, without dispute, agree in their blessing of you?/ It is because you are wise, and you are master./ If only the last Valois had been,/ Then no Jacobin, guided by his priest,/ A fervent imitator of Judith and Holofernes,/ Would ever have attempted his fatal undertaking in St. Cloud:/ (a) But Valois sharpened the dagger of the Church;/ That dagger which soon slaughtered in Paris,/ Before the eyes of his subjects, the greatest of the Henris./ That is the terrible fruit of pious quarrels:/ All factions are cruel in the end[.] (a) This word should not be understood to refer to the Catholic Church, but rather to the dagger of a clergyman, the abominable fanaticism of a few churchmen of that time, which the Church has detested throughout the ages', OCV, 32B, p. 79.

[49] 'today… among us', *Le Fils naturel*, p. 102.

the bad old days, intent on committing 'the greatest crime of all. My next question is how that came across in mid-February 1757 when France and most of Europe was buzzing with the news, precisely, of a dagger-wielding monster, a fanatic, who had in fact re-appeared and had made an attempt on the king's life and, this time, had failed.

V.

On 5 January 1757, a man, who would later be named as Robert-François Damiens, entered the courtyard at Versailles and, just as the King was getting into his carriage, rushed forward and stabbed him with a pocket-knife. The wound was found to be superficial, and the King made a swift recovery. The Crown, however, was shaken, and existing political divisions sharpened, notably those between Jansenist Parlementarians and the Crown over its support of the papal bull *Unigenitus*, which enabled the Church to refuse the last sacraments to anyone who could not produce a *billet de confession* signed by a priest supportive of the bull.[50] As tensions rose and blame was laid either on the Jesuits, the ultramontanist episcopacy and their secular allies at Versailles or on the Jansenists and anti-royalist parlementarians, Damiens was tortured, interrogated and convicted of parricide. On 28 March, he was put to death on the Place du Grève in the spectacularly horrifying manner that had first been devised nearly one hundred and fifty years earlier for Ravaillac, Henri IV's assassin.

Historians are familiar with the graphic accounts of Damiens' death, from which Foucault so memorably quotes in the opening pages of *Surveiller er punir*.[51] They are less familiar with what was written about the event up until that moment and while it was still unfolding. There was censorship and self-censorship too: the *Mercure de France* kept completely silent on the subject until April when, having simply reprinted the official account of Damiens' death, it changed to a larger typeface to request readers refrain from continuing to send in poems on the subject, explaining they would continue not to publish them and hoped they would not be published elsewhere either so as to ensure that 'un si noir attentat fût à jamais exclu de l'histoire comme de notre Recueil'.[52] In early April also, the *Parlement* recommended that if writers really must write about the *attentat*, they should do so in such a way as to 'faire douter à l'avenir s'il a pû exister un Monstre capable d'attenter à la vie d'un Prince, à qui nos suffrages & nos cœurs ont déféré le titre de Bien-Aimé'.[53] What, then, had been written in the months preceding Damiens' death?

The question of the official palace communication seems to have been a thorny one, judging by the two articles that appeared in the *Gazette* a week apart. The first, dated 6 January but appearing on 8th, supplies little more than a forensic medical report, detailing the location, size and superficial nature of the king's wound, along with the size of the knife, 'un canif', that

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[50] See Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair*, esp. pp. 99-163.

[51] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

[52] 'such a dark attack be forever excluded from history as well as from our collection', *Mercure de France*, April 1757, p. 193.

[53] 'make the future doubt there could ever have been a monster capable of making an attempt on the life of a Prince, on whom our voices and our hearts have bestowed the title of Dearly-Beloved', *Arrest de la Cour de Parlement qui condamne différens libelles à être lacérés et brulés dans la Cour du Palais par L'Exécuteur de la Haute-Justice* (Paris: P. G. Simon, 1757), p.2.

caused it and the direction of the blade, 'de bas en haut',[54] while the second, dated 13th but appearing on 15 January, offers what amounts to an apology for the first, which it claims was published in haste and lacked the appropriate care. Taking such care, it told of an 'exécrable attentat' as follows:

> Comment retracer néanmoins ce moment de surprise et d'horreur ? […] Heureusement cette blessure, dont l'étendue avoit effrayé, étant peu profonde, n'a eu aucune suite fâcheuse, et a été promptement cicatrisée, mais si la plaie du Roi est guérie, celle de nos cœurs saigne encore, et n'est pas prête à fermer. C'est un malheur bien déplorable pour la Nation, la plus fidèle et la plus attachée à ses Rois, que d'avoir pû produire un monstre, tel que ce détestable assassin. […] Hier, le Roi s'est habillé, et a tenu Conseil d'État. La Famille Royale et la Nation ont fait succéder aux pleurs et aux inquiétudes les plus vifs transports de joie.[55]

This was the official version, and over the next months, there would be many a tale of a monster who had attempted to destroy France and failed. Here, for instance, is the *attentat* and its aftermath as recounted in an anonymous piece, entitled *Le Triomphe de la France*:

> Auroit-on pu sans frémir d'horreur, entendre le récit de l'attentat sacrilège commis contre la personne même du Roi, par un misérable dépourvu de tous sentiments de respect, de raison, & d'humanité? Ce monstre sorti de l'enfer, & l'objet de l'exécration publique, ce barbare a eu la cruelle audace de porter ses mains impies sur le pere de tous tant que nous sommes & de lui enfoncer le poignard dans le sein. O nouvelle affligeante pour tant d'Enfans! [....] Epoque attendrissante & jamais mémorable: Louis revient en santé. Nous avons tous ressenti la même tristesse, le même danger nous a tous également effrayés; unissons-nous donc tous pareillement, & ne formons qu'une voix tous ensemble pour faire retentir les Temples de nos cris d'allégresse & de nos actions de graces. Faisons éclater notre joie et nos transports.[56]

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[54] 'going up', *La Gazette*, 8 January 1757, p. 22.

[55] 'execrable attack', 'How can we nonetheless recount that moment of surprise and horror? […] Fortunately, this wound, though the length had been cause for alarm, was not deep, had no serious consequences and was quick to heal. But while the King's wound has healed, the wound to our hearts is still bleeding and not ready to close. It is a most deplorable misfortune for a nation most loyal and devoted to its kings to have produced a monster such as this detestable assassin. […] Yesterday, the King dressed and held a Council of State. The Royal Family and the Nation moved on from tears and anxieties to the most intense feelings of joy', *La Gazette*, 15 January 1757, pp. 29-31.

[56] 'Who would not shudder in horror on hearing of the sacrilegious attack on the person of the King himself by a wretch devoid of all feelings of respect, reason, and humanity? This monster from hell, this object of public execration, this barbarian cruelly dared to lay his impious hands on the father to us all and plunge a dagger into his breast. What distressing news for so many children! [....] A touching and unforgettable moment: Louis returns to health. We all felt the same sadness, the same danger frightened us all equally; let us therefore all unite and speak with one voice to fill the temples with our cries of joy and our acts of thanksgiving. Let us give full expression to our joy and our transport', *Le triomphe de la France. Avec les acclamations & les cris de joie qui retentissent de tous côtés, à l'occasion de la convalescence du Roi, après l'attentat horrible et le parricide commis contre sa Personne sacrée, le mercredi cinq Janvier mil sept cent cinquante-sept, veille de la Fête des Rois*, pp. 1-2.

Most of the significant elements that we find elsewhere in the corpus of *attentat* literature are here: a monster, a barbarian, a dagger (as opposed to the knife of the *Gazette*), a father, a family, a parricide, horror and grief, followed by great joy. This was how to turn the event into an occasion for writing, an occasion when France had been attacked but emerged triumphant.

What *Le Triomphe de la France* does not do, however, which the poems tend to, is narrate the attack in the present tense for dramatic effect. In Baculard d'Arnaud's *La France sauvée*, the monster is seen by a horrified and intermittently dumbstruck poet: 'Du plus grands des forfaits le Monde est menacé.../ Un Monstre... un Glaive... arrête... ah! LOUIS est blessé!'.[57] And in Coger's bilingual French and Latin poem, *Sur l'horrible attentat du cinq Janvier 1757*, the poet recounts as if in real time: 'il marque déjà la place où il doit frapper; le bras est levé... Où suis-je hélas! Quelle horreur s'empare de mes esprits; le sang est glacé dans mes veines; la parole expire sur mes lévres; il frappe...'.[58] Stylistically and typographically, ellipsis and dot-dot-dot are a feature of the *attentat* literature.

How does this literature interpret the monster? He is variously presented as a punishment for sin, other recent punishments including the recent floods, earthquakes, including Lisbon,[59] and attacks by the English in advance of war being declared.[60] The same pieces ascribe the King's swift recovery to the power and sincerity of the nation's prayers.[61] Political explanations are also offered, the most insistent being that the monster showed France was vulnerable because of the ongoing dispute over the *billets de confession*, which had come to a head in December 1756 when many magistrates had resigned their offices. The anonymous *Vers sur l'attentat commis contre la personne du roi le 5 janvier 1757* speaks of 'les troubles de l'État' being exploited by a 'monstre affreux' at the moment when 'Thémis dépose sa Balance'.[62] The *Vers* assimilate the troubles to the civil war of the second half of the sixteenth century, and the monster to the two Henris' assassins:

> Funeste enthousiasme, odieux fanatisme;
> Trop monstrueux enfant de l'erreur & du Schisme,
> Avide d'attenter sur les jours de nos Rois,
> Tu trouve[s] encore accès dans le cœur d'un François!
> Le sang des deux HENRY, si cher à la Patrie,

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[57] 'The world is threatened by the greatest of crimes... A monster... a sword... stop... ah! LOUIS is wounded', *La France sauvée* (n.p., n.n., 1757), p. 20.

[58] 'He is already marking the spot where he must strike; his arm is raised... Where am I, alas! What horror seizes my mind; my blood freezes in my veins; speech expires on my lips; he strikes...', *Sur l'horrible attentat du cinq Janvier 1757, poème latin, avec la traduction en français, 15 Janvier 1757* (n.n., n.p.), pp. 6-8. There were four editions of the poem. I quote from the first of the two bilingual editions. It is worth noting not only that the knife has become a sword, but also that the sword is held aloft and brought down, whereas the knife was thrust upwards.

[59] *La France sauvée*, p. 15.

[60] An explanatory footnote to Coger's poem reads: 'Tout le monde sçait les injustices criantes que les Anglois ont commises pendant la Paix à l'égard de nos Vaisseaux & de nos Colonies' (p. 6).

[61] *Le triomphe de la France*, p. 1.

[62] 'the troubles of the state', 'awful monster', 'Themis lays down her scales', *Vers sur l'attentat commis contre la personne du roi le 5 Janvier 1757* (n.p., n.n.), p. 2.

N'a donc pu, Monstre affreux, assouvir ta furie[.][63]

Coger has his poet watch in horror as the ghosts of past regicides, 'des phantômes effrayans […] les Mânes exécrables de ces horribles Assassins qui enfoncerent autrefois le couteau dans le flanc de leurs Monarques', rise up to watch the latest episode.[64] And the abbé Porquet, similarly harking back to the civil war in his *Épître à la nation*, refers to the monster in question as 'un Ravaillac nouveau',[65] which is to say a new religious fanatic.

A totally different explanation is offered by Baculard d'Arnaud in his 600-line poem, *La France sauvée*, which is of interest for our purposes here because it situates the *attentat* in an explicitly Enlightenment landscape. It tells of France's persecuting demon, to whom the prosperity, happiness and virtue of Louis XV's France, which the poet describes in a manner that recalls the terrestrial paradise of Voltaire's *Le Mondain* (1736), are as an endless series of 'attentats'.[66] Assailed by the sight of a monument to 'le Bien-Aimé', the demon plans a counter-*attentat* and seeks out Satan's help. Having echoed Voltaire in his description of France as a terrestrial paradise, Baculard now echoes Milton in his description of Hell,[67] where the demon finds Satan to be sceptical of the success of his plan: France is not the divided place it once was, and it will be hard to find anyone who is up to the task. Satan does eventually manage to locate France's one last remaining monster – 'un seul... je l'ai trouvé'[68] – and hands him over to the demon for radicalisation. He brings him judderingly to life like an automaton – 'il s'éveille, il frémit'[69] – places a dagger in his hand and, having taught him how to use it (he keeps dropping it at first), sends him up to France, where he makes his attempt on the king's life, which fails. Satan laments:

Les Arts sur-tout les Arts, mes mortels Ennemis,
M'ont enlevé ce Peuple à mes fureurs soumis,
Ils ont ouvert les yeux, ils ont changé son être....
Ma gloire est éclipsée et ne peut renaître![70]

These arts that prove so dangerous to the devil have one practitioner who is named in the poem: Voltaire. A footnote explains: 'ses Ecrits ne respirent que l'amour de l'humanité, l'obéissance & le respect dûs au Souverain, la bonté du Maître dûe à son Peuple. Nul Auteur n'a sçu mieux que

[63] 'Fatal enthusiasm, odious fanaticism;/ Such a monstrous child of error and schism,/ Eager to attack the lives of our Kings,/ Still you find your way in to a Frenchman's heart!/ The blood of the two Henrys, so dear to the Fatherland,/ Could not, you hideous monster, satisfy your fury', ibid, p. 1.

[64] 'frightening ghosts […] the execrable spirits of those horrible assassins who once plunged a knife into their monarch's side', *Sur l'horrible attentat*, p. 9.

[65] 'a new Ravaillac', [Abbé Porquet], 'Épître à la nation', in *Année littéraire*, 25 January 1757, p. 191.

[66] *La France sauvée*, p. 13.

[67] Ibid.

[68] 'just one… I have found him', ibid., p. 17.

[69] 'he awakes, he shudders', ibid., p. 19.

[70] 'The Arts above all, the Arts, my mortal Enemies,/ Have robbed me of this People who were subjugated to my furies,/ They have opened their eyes, they have changed their being.../ My glory is eclipsed and cannot never come again', ibid., p. 17.

lui combattre le Fanatisme et la Sédition, il les a rendus également odieux & ridicules'.[71] Combining Voltaire's *Le Mondain* with Milton's *Paradise Lost* to tell the tale of a worldly paradise that was only momentarily threatened, Baculard makes Voltaire responsible for France's continuing survival as a worldly paradise.

A monster, a dagger, dot-dot-dot, regicide, fanaticism, the triumph of Voltairean reason and humanitarian care, the civilising effect of the arts: these all appear in Constance's speech, to which it is time now, in conclusion, to return.

VI.

When Constance departs from Voltaire's poem to speak of today's dagger-wielding regicidal monster, there can be no question but that in mid-February when *Le Fils naturel* first appeared, she sounded as though she was referring to the *attentat* of 5 January 1757, which was still under construction as a literary occasion. She introduces it, however, as a hypothetical – 's'il parassait aujourd'hui… parmi nous… un monstre' – which, according to the framing narrative, it could only have been, her original exchange with Dorval having occurred a year earlier. One of the distinctive features of Diderot's contribution to the *attentat* literature, then, is this work of distancing: where the Parlement would call for writers to make the *attentat* seem as though it could never have happened, Constance conjures up her dagger-wielding regicidal monster in the conditional, then moving into the present and the future in the form of a rhetorical question, disarming him as she goes. Her monster is the central character in a thought-experiment designed to make Dorval confront his fear that France might see a return of the religious violence that had engulfed France in the past, and to view that fear as unfounded: even if, so her argument goes, a monster were to appear (for there is the odd monster and when won't there be?), their time is over, an enlightened age has arrived, thanks to Voltaire.[72]

The other distinctive feature of Diderot's contribution to the corpus of *attentat* literature is the recourse to theatre.[73] Constance's thought experiment is a performance, a play within a play. The frequent ellipses in her speech give Dorval time to imagine the appearance of the monster 'aujourd'hui… parmi nous…', and give her time to make it appear before him, for although her lines might be performed in any number of ways, when she says '… qu'on vît ce monstre s'avancer', she could clearly begin to walk towards Dorval, raising her arm aloft, invisible

[71] 'His writings exude nothing but love for humanity, obedience and respect for the Sovereign, and the kindness of the Master towards his People. No author has been better than him at combating fanaticism and sedition, rendering them both odious and ridiculous', ibid., p. 8.

[72] Voltaire would later make that argument himself in a letter to Thieriot of 26 March, which appeared in the *Mercure de France* in May: 'Est-ce là, me dit-on, cette nation que vous avez peinte si aimable, et ce siècle que vous avez peint si sage? A cela je réponds (comme je peux) qu'il y a des hommes qui ne sont ni de leur siècle, ni de leur pays. Je soutiens que le crime d'un scélérat et d'un insensé de la lie du peuple, n'est point l'effet de l'esprit du temps' [To which I reply (as best I can) that there are men who are neither of their age nor of their country. I maintain that the crimes of a villain and a madman from the dregs of society are not in the spirit of the age] (*Voltaire's Correspondence,* ed. Theodore Besterman, 107 volumes (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1958), vol. 13, p. 113 (letter 6517)).

[73] The only other play in the corpus of *attentat* literature is a comedy in which a marriage has to be postponed because the King is indisposed. See Tunstall, 'The Knife and the Pen', pp. 50-54.

dagger in hand, acting the monster and even positioning him as the designated victim.[74] The ellipses also give her time to hold her pose in what would be a striking *tableau* both for Dorval and including Dorval, although the monster attack itself is better understood as a *coup de théâtre*. Articulating Dorval's response to her words and gestures as surprise as well as horror, Constance presents her gestures as tragic and the event they represent as sudden and unpredictable, the kind that Dorval later explains in conversation with the encyclopedist-narrator has no place in the new bourgeois domestic drama.[75] Perhaps we are to understand that there will undoubtedly always be the odd *coup de théâtre*, but like monsters, their time is past.

In any case, her *tableau* now dissolved and the monster seen in the light of modern day, Constance delivers the triumphalist speech that has attracted quite so much critical opprobrium. She tells Dorval that the government has a duty, 'plus que jamais', to protect men of letters, like the poet Voltaire and Dorval the playwright (who has just seen himself, like the king, threatened with a dagger), men whose productions, those of an enlightened age, work to foster human empathy and set men free from sectarian violence. Seen in the context of the *attentat* and as a contribution to the *attentat* literature, which likewise mobilises Voltaire, her speech is no less preachy, but it can hardly be judged untimely. For there can be no doubt that the *philosophes* immediately understood the *attentat* to put their work in danger: Voltaire wrote to d'Alembert on 16 January, saying, 'J'ay bien peur que Pierre [sic] Damien [sic] ne nuise baucoup à la filosofie'.[76] He would be right, but not for another year or so, and in mid-February, Diderot seems to have thought it worth making the case for philosophy in public and even on stage, imagining an annual performance in which a family, national and domestic, re-enacts its virtue on trial.

[74] I wondered whether it might be possible for Constance to play the scene in a comic register, using ridicule to disarm what she takes to be Dorval's phantom fanatic. If so, this would be another Voltairean move: in the poem Constance has just heard Dorval quote, Voltaire praises the Regent for having ridiculed the religious hardliners that the ageing Louis XIV had indulged and thereby made them disappear (OCV, 32B, p. 80), and it is worth noting that Baculard not only mentions Voltairean ridicule in *La France sauvée* but also deploys it himself when he has France's last remaining monster keep dropping the dagger. However, insofar as Constance goes on to suggest that Dorval reacts to her performance with horror and astonishment, ridicule may be out of place.

[75] *Le Fils naturel*, pp. 154-55.

[76] 'I am rather afraid that Pierre Damiens will do great harm to philosophy', *Voltaire's Correspondence,* vol. 31, p. 16 (letter 6426).