

What the nazis saw: Les Mouches in occupied
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What the Nazis Saw: Les Mouches in Occupied Paris

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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What the Nazis Saw:

Les Mouches in Occupied Paris

Recently much debate has turned around Jean-Paul Sartre's alleged duplicity during the Occupation: did he or did he not knowingly replace, in 1941 at the Lycée Condorcet, a Jewish professor who had been deprived of his post simply because he was Jewish? Did this make Sartre a knowing, albeit passive, accomplice to Vichy racial policy—an accomplice, like millions of others in wartime France, in that he was, with an apparently clean conscience, willing to take advantage of another's—a Jew's—misfortune? ¹

At this late date, it seems difficult to adjudicate this issue and proclaim Sartre's bad faith. We can never know for certain what he knew, and when he knew it. To try to understand Sartre's problematic position under the Occupation, I think one must go to the actual writings we have at our disposal: his essays, plays, and interviews. Failing this, we will always be constrained to judge him based on innuendo, negatively: what he wasn't doing, but should have done; what he may have known, and yet did not act upon. I think if we turn to his writings, or at least one of them, we will be confronted with a different problem. The question of Sartre's shadow-collaboration turns not around what he knew, or what we can know about his knowledge, but around what we can and cannot know about what wartime audiences knew and did not (could not) know of the supposed message of Sartre's wartime drama.

Was Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Les Mouches*, published in April 1943 and first performed that June in Occupied Paris with the approval of the German censor, a Resistance play? Was it meant to convey a pro-Resistance message? The debate has swirled for a number of years, giving rise to accusatory books, such as Gilbert Joseph's *Une si douce occupation*, arguing that Sartre never was a Resistance figure, and that the works he published under the Occupation were harmless, and hardly noted for their insurrectional fervor. On the other hand, defenders—starting with Sartre himself after the war—have argued that key wartime works such as *Les Mouches* were really calls to resistance; given censorship, however, it was necessary to mask the message with, for example, the setting of ancient Greece. ² Sartre even argued that the drubbing administered by collaborationist critics was proof that they understood the play's true intent: an argument for human freedom, in opposition to the Vichy doctrine of remorse and eternal [End Page 78] penitence for the sins of the Third Republic. Sartre's foes, on the other hand, are quick to respond by recalling that *Les Mouches* was produced in a theatre whose name had been changed (from Le Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt to Le Théâtre de la Cité) to please the anti-Semitic occupier, that the director (Charles Dullin) dabbled in collaboration, that Sartre himself gave interviews to a (fairly mild) collaborationist paper (*Comœdia*), and so on. Finally, the seeming trump card: if the Resistance emphasis of the play was so clear, why did the censors pass it in the first place?

Ingrid Galster, in her book *Sartre, Vichy et les intellectuels*, has done a lot to set the record straight. After carrying out exhaustive research, which involved reading virtually every review of the play printed in Occupation-era papers—even the ones in German, published both in Paris and Berlin—she concludes that, in effect, neither side is right. On the one hand, clearly there were audience members "in the know," able to perceive the message of freedom and place it in the context of the Resistance. On the other hand, she argues, the collaborationist critics who roasted the play perceived absolutely no Resistance message: what they saw was a long, talky play that offended them mainly because it recalled Sartre's earlier works, such as *La Nausée*, perceived as a celebration of nausea—a disgusting book...

What the Nazis Saw: *Les Mouches* in Occupied Paris

Allan Stoekl

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