

THE PARISIAN STAGE DURING THE OCCUPATION,
1940-1944: A THEATRE OF RESISTANCE?

by

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to establish whether the performance or reception of a 'theatre of resistance' was possible amid the abundant and popular literary theatre seen during the Occupation of France (1940-1944). Playwrights and critics have made bold claims for five plays that allegedly conveyed hostility towards the occupier or somehow encouraged the French Resistance movement. These premières will be scrutinised by examining the plays' scripts, the circumstances surrounding their composition, the acquisition of a performance visa, public reactions and critics' interpretations from before and after the Liberation of August 1944.

I intend to demonstrate that the extreme circumstances of war-torn Paris were largely responsible for the classification of these complex works and their authors as either pro-Resistance or pro-Collaboration, a binary opposition I will challenge. While it is understandable that certain lines or themes took on special relevance, writers would not risk attracting the attention of the German or Vichy authorities. Mythical or historical subject material was (deliberately) far removed from the situation of 1940s audiences, yet was presented in the form of 'new' tragedies that resonated with their preoccupations. Individual testimony confirms that certain plays provided a morale boost by reaffirming hope in the future of France.

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INTRODUCTION

The theatre in Paris flourished during the Second World War, with several hundred plays being performed to packed auditoriums in only four seasons. It has been common practice to conclude that the extraordinary activity and popularity of the Parisian theatre during the Occupation was made possible thanks to ignorance on the part of the Germans, bravery and uncommon subtlety on the part of French playwrights, and the public's need to keep warm and be entertained in difficult times. My research has revealed a much more complex picture of compromises and cover stories constructed after the event by those whose reputations and careers could well have been in the balance when it came to explaining at the Liberation of 1944 just how theatres could have thrived during such a time of great personal and collective suffering – particularly for those involved in the Resistance. Moreover, the huge disparity between press reviews and public opinion that has come to light during my examination of documents from the 1940s belies summary judgments about the majority consensus on these plays. Many historians also imply that the most extreme reviews in the collaborationist press were somehow a faithful barometer of public opinion. However, personal correspondence and insightful memoirs from those in attendance suggest that the opinions in published reviews were often dramatically at odds with the popular reception of plays.

Although not necessarily written in the same period, all five of my chosen plays were premiered during the Occupation: Claude Vermorel's *Jeanne avec nous*, Henry de Montherlant's *La Reine morte*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches*, Paul Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin* and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. They also had immediate or lasting success, with the

possible exception of *Les Mouches*, as the following summary of the theatrical activities during the Occupation from a Paris newspaper illustrates:

Rarement créations furent attendues avec plus d'impatience et de curiosité. Allions-nous connaître quelque chef-d'œuvre interdit pendant les quatre ans d'occupation? Quelque ouvrage inspiré par nos misères ou par nos espoirs? Si la période 1940-1944 a été, pour le théâtre, une des plus riches, si jamais l'empressement des spectateurs n'a été aussi grand et la qualité des pièces principales aussi incontestable (*Antigone*, la *Reine morte*, le *Soulier de satin* [...]), il faut avouer que les révélations de jeunes auteurs ont été rares (je ne vois guère à citer que le *Jeanne avec nous* de Claude Vermorel).¹

All of them were written by leading French authors, with the exception of the little-known Claude Vermorel. Although Paul Claudel was not yet a popular playwright, he was famous for his poetry and his role as an ambassador. Henry de Montherlant was well-known as a novelist and Sartre as a philosopher, but neither was established as a playwright in 1940.

I have chosen Paris and these five plays because, until the decentralisation of the 1950s, the French capital was the centre of theatrical activity and the site of all major productions. It was also the home of the playwrights, the directors, the major national and independent theatres, the censorship office, and the most influential critics under discussion. Even the majority of the reading public and spectators were in Paris, which remained occupied by the Germans between 1940 and 1944. Few other cities staged a substantial amount of professional literary theatre and (arguably) the best of these – such as Toulouse – were in the unoccupied zone. Occasionally, Parisian productions, such as for Claudel's *Annonce faite à Marie*, went on tour to big cities such as Lyon, or to the seat of the French government in Vichy. By far the most confident and specifically pro-Resistance claims have been consistently made for the five plays listed above, though they have never been tackled alongside each other in detail, nor with substantial analysis of the texts.

¹ Jean Sauvenay, *Courrier français du témoignage chrétien*, 15 December 1944.

The Occupation was a period of extremes during which the norms of creation and reception of literary theatre did not apply. Censorship – reintroduced for the first time since 1906 – affected all written texts and the obligatory German presence in theatres at a time of war meant that every word and gesture was scrutinised. German displeasure could result in a play being banned or the playwright and any other participants being punished. At the risk of stating the obvious, a play could not proclaim hostility towards the occupier, nor offer open support to the Resistance movement and Allied war strategy: ‘il faut en convenir, pour le théâtre surtout, le parler clair par ces temps obscurs n’était guère évident.’² It will be seen that such expression would be stamped out by the authorities or denounced by pro-Collaboration papers: ‘Parfois il y avait des Français qui ont averti les Allemands de faire attention aux réactions du public’.³ Any playwright hoping to continue a career could not produce an unequivocal call to resistance in a publicly performed play.

In order for a so-called ‘message’ of hostility to the occupier or an encouragement for the French Resistance to be conveyed across the footlights, it would have to be subtly couched in a superficially innocuous language. The subject would have to be sufficiently distant from the circumstances of the Occupation so as not to raise eyebrows with the German censorship body. Furthermore, insistence on a one-sided political statement would have to be communicated subtly by the performers. That it is hard for a director to control all of a play’s physical elements and force a specific point of view on the public is also borne out by reactions to my chosen plays; reviews did not highlight a single ‘message’.⁴

² Michel Winock’s preface to Ingrid Galster, *Le Théâtre de Jean-Paul Sartre devant ses premiers critiques: ‘Les Mouches’ et ‘Huis clos’* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), p. xi. Subsequent works in French are published in Paris unless otherwise stated.

³ Annette Fuchs-Betteridge, ‘Le Théâtre dramatique en France pendant l’occupation allemande 1940-1944’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Université de Paris III, 1969), p. 398.

⁴ Daphna Ben Chaim, *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response* (Michigan, USA: UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 65. In stark contrast, it is very hard to eliminate point of view in films and novels.

Indeed, here I have touched on perhaps the most sensitive and complex issue surrounding the theatre of the Occupation. Reception studies have been wary of the study of plays for the very reason that there are so many factors to take into consideration. Unlike literature, theatre is not simply concerned with a written text. A play is complex mixture of messages elaborated by the dialogue, gestures, the décor, stage directions and costumes, the manner of enunciation and interactions with the audience.⁵ The words alone are not the only vehicle for a possible pro-Resistance ‘message’, even if they were the only element subject to initial censorship.

Indeed, after the Liberation of France in August 1944, investigations and trials of prominent theatre professionals only affected playwrights. With the exception of the Comédie-Française’s staff, no directors or actors were targeted during this purge of alleged ‘collaborators’ (the *Épuration*). Perhaps this indicates an obsessive insistence that only the text of a play could be responsible for a specific ‘message’. It was certainly derived from a conclusion that the playwright was responsible for dominant trends in the play’s reception. However, I believe the composition of audiences, the quality of the acting (and the actors’ reputation), the leanings of the press, the nature of the hosting theatre, as well as the unique status of any single performance, must be factored into judgments of a play’s reception.⁶

Criteria for the study of reception and interpretation

My research is guided by three main assumptions. Firstly, I believe that every play is influenced by the circumstances of its composition and performance, so I will consistently reject suggestions that a play has nothing to do with the time or events of the

⁵ Mark Fortier, *Theory / Theatre: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (London and NY: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

⁶ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 98: ‘Those who have tickets for the Comédie-Française expect a conservative production with conservative values’.

Occupation as misleading or downright wrong. This is a common perception of Henry de Montherlant's *La Reine morte*, for example. Secondly, I am convinced that authorial intention is not a prerequisite for the existence and / or reception of a 'theatre of resistance'. It seems to me that the preoccupations of any audience – and one must assume these will be disparate – may cause specific interpretations to take precedence over others, or even be inevitable in such extreme circumstances. Certainly, Marxism and feminism encourage a focus on one's political struggles above allegiance to the work of art, while post-structuralism argues that faithfulness to the author's intentions is neither possible nor necessarily desirable.⁷

It should also be remembered that of my five plays, only *La Reine morte* was actually staged within a year of its composition, so in all the other cases the context of writing had changed significantly by the time the plays came to be performed. This causes particular problems when examining Sartre's *Les Mouches* in light of the author's own theories. He proposes that the communication or shared understanding of a specific message is possible only if the author and audience share the same social, political and historical context (and preoccupations). However, his play *Les Mouches* was written almost a year before its premiere. This somewhat undermines his claims that it was unanimously perceived to be a call to resistance.

Thirdly, while my research must rely heavily on newspaper reviews as the dominant source of interpretation from the 1940s, I do not necessarily consider them representative of the public in general, nor specifically of those present in the theatre. The press was a key participant in the world of the theatre as the official critical body left to voice the audience's opinion, or indeed help form it. Most theatregoers who are not looking to write

⁷ Bennett, p. 138.

an analytical review of a play, nor have wide experience of theatre or indeed the text of the play in question, are often referred to as the silent majority.⁸ The press was overrun by extreme collaborationist editors and journalists, with left-wing papers virtually absent, Resistance publications underground and several middle-ground editions completely reformed during the Occupation.⁹ A corollary of the press changeover was that a new personnel with big ambitions was willing to bring others down. Alain Laubreaux, for example, was an influential critic during the Occupation, who looked to dominate the theatrical scene and even wanted the job of administrator of France's leading national theatre, the Comédie-Française, despite his consistent opposition to the organisation.¹⁰ He is strikingly portrayed in François Truffaut's *Le Dernier Métro* (1980) by the character Daxiat (his real-life pseudonym), who maliciously uses his influence to facilitate the elimination of Jews from the theatre.

The Parisian press almost exclusively publicised the Nazi agenda and the Free Zone papers toed the Vichy line.¹¹ The political agendas of certain journalists prevented them from reflecting the wide-ranging views of the theatre-going crowds, though press intervention could have devastating effects on the career of a play.¹² Furthermore, some of the leading journalists reporting in the cultural pages of their respective publications were also playwrights, though they had not had the success they felt they merited and may have been bitter about the resounding approval audiences appeared to be giving to the plays I have studied. This was perhaps most striking in the case of Laubreaux, Roland Purnal and

⁸ Galster, p. 8. As Galster points out, individual spectators can express their reactions in letters to the author.

⁹ This was the case for *L'Illustration*, *La Nouvelle Revue française* and *Paris-Soir*. Jean Grenier, *Sous l'Occupation* (Éditions Claire Paulhan, 1997), p. 28, p. 79 and pp. 152-53.

¹⁰ Jean Yves Guérin, *Le Théâtre en France de 1914 à 1950* (Éditions Champion, 2007), p. 292.

¹¹ Grenier, p. 93: 'les journaux français déjà connus [...] continuent à paraître à Lyon ou à Clermont-Ferrand et sont fidèles à la ligne gouvernementale tandis que ceux de Paris suivent les consignes allemandes.'

¹² Guérin, p. 283: 'Il arrive que leurs dénonciations, leurs condamnations soient suivies d'effets.'

Armand Salacrou – whose plays were no longer being performed with any kind of regularity.¹³

My research aims

Throughout this thesis, I will be weighing the claims by authors and critics that specific plays during the Occupation were part of a ‘theatre of resistance’. This term is my own, but most closely resembles the French definition used by historians of the period: ‘un théâtre résistant’. It highlights a deliberate opposition to the Occupation in general and to the occupier in particular, and may denote support of the Resistance movement. Furthermore, it implies that risks were taken in order to stage such plays, as was duly claimed by certain individuals. It should be pointed out that some commentators are not comfortable with such terms and prefer to avoid links with the Resistance movement by speaking of ‘oppositional’ or ‘refusal’ theatre, both of which refer to a philosophical, ethical or moral standpoint which did not necessarily coincide with a specific political stance.¹⁴ Other writers prefer to steer clear of any politically-charged definitions and to classify the theatre of Sartre, for example, as non-conformist. In any case, there is a clear gap between oppositional writing – that is, an intellectual stance – and outright Resistance action. Even a strong message of disapproval of the occupier does not equate with underground combat.

It is not my intention to accomplish the seemingly unattainable objective of being able to both understand and condemn the five playwrights for not being active resisters or

¹³ Jean-Louis Barsacq, *Place Dancourt: La vie, l'œuvre et l'Atelier d'André Barsacq* (Éditions Gallimard, 2005), pp. 303-09.

¹⁴ For development of these two terms, see Jennifer Ann Boittin, ‘Appropriating and Politicizing Theatre during the Occupation: Anouilh’s *Antigone*, Montherlant’s *La Reine morte* and Vermorel’s *Jeanne avec nous*’ (unpublished Bachelor of Arts thesis, Princeton, New Jersey, 1998) and Gérard Loiseaux, *La littérature de la défaite et de la collaboration*, 2nd edn (Librairie Fayard, 1995), p. 538, note 27.

for not publicly declaring a message of open hostility towards the Germans and unequivocal support for the Allied forces.¹⁵ Rather I will try to paint as full a picture as possible of the unusual circumstances of the Occupation and establish what a ‘theatre of resistance’ might have looked like. Using this framework, I shall then examine the impact of five premieres which elicited bold claims that the playwrights effectively communicated a message of support for the Resistance through a dialogue set in the distant or mythical past.

The exceptional nature of the Occupation

The Occupation period brought about unique circumstances that substantially affected the potential success or failure of plays and altered the nature of their reception among Parisian spectators. The first and perhaps most obvious factor to be considered is censorship. This was a key issue affecting the content of theatre texts and therefore the potential for communicating ‘messages’. It may be that the requirement to satisfy the German (and Vichy) censorship bodies caused playwrights to be especially cautious or pay extra attention to the ways in which they might transmit covert moral lessons or force a specific interpretation upon the spectators. What is more, censorship of the press meant that there was a predominance of right-wing, anti-Semitic, pro-German, fascist one-sidedness on their part, while certain actors, stage directors and authors were excluded from the theatrical profession for racial reasons.

Secondly, artistic expression could not be as free as it previously had been. The desire to attribute extreme political positions to authors largely resulted from the unusual

¹⁵ The character Michael Berg in Bernard Schlink’s *The Reader*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (Phoenix, 2004), p. 156, expresses such a desire in relation to a trial of women guards from Auschwitz: ‘I wanted to pose myself both tasks – understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both.’

circumstances of war, whereas literary plays had usually benefited from freedom from a fixed interpretation. Finally, the deprivations experienced by the public – of money, food, fuel and paper – meant that much was expected of plays in terms of entertainment and moral sustenance, though in reality the Germans controlled the theatres and their choice of repertoire.

It will be seen that the development of French theatre was not slowed down by the extraordinary intervention of history and politics in those four theatrical seasons. Indeed, the circumstances of war led to a new vision being expressed. Playwrights were not just reusing old subjects to ‘hide’ resistant messages, but creating theatre characterised by a tragic emphasis and the beginnings of a ‘theatre of commitment’ that focused on the philosophical assertion of freedom. Even if oppositional ideas were present in the plays, the playwrights were not necessarily active resisters. Indeed, despite strong criticisms of the authors’ Occupation behaviour, one must wonder whether this should even have been expected of them. They needed to continue working, maturing and expressing themselves.

Furthermore, literary theatre is subtle and tends to avoid political affiliations: ‘Les grandes figures de l’institution, auteurs et metteurs en scène, ont refusé le théâtre militant. [...] La scène s’y prête mal, elle n’est pas vue comme un vecteur majeur de la propagande.’¹⁶ Indeed, plays written by fervent collaborators such as Laubreaux, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and Jean-Michel Rénaitour, and those by Gerhardt Hauptmann, Schiller and Goethe imposed on the Comédie-Française by the Germans, had very little success or were (on the whole) poorly attended. However, a political reading by audiences and the press of French plays based on myth and historical subjects was perhaps inevitable because of the circumstances of the Occupation. Some of my chosen plays have lasted *despite* the

¹⁶ Guérin, p. 296.

limited interpretations that were imposed upon them by those present at the first performances.

The complexities of theatrical production and reception

Unlike literature, theatre must be open and public, as must the majority of critical reviews. It cannot be disseminated in a hidden way like books and pamphlets, and is a live medium, unlike the cinema, for example. In addition to the written dialogue of a play, several paratextual factors must be taken into account. These include the actors' performances and their quality, the stage direction, the size of the auditorium and the political leanings of the theatre's administration. The director's decisions affect décor, tone of voice, gestures, eye contact and the use of direct communication with the audience. Indeed, 'a *mise en scène* is inevitably structured so as to give emphasis to a sign or a sign-cluster intended to locate audience focalization on that aspect of the drama'.¹⁷ After a play was accorded a performance visa from the authorities (based on an inspection of the script), the 1940s theatre director was in a unique position to make changes before a public showing. This was obviously not the case for books or films; once submitted to the German censorship body, they constituted finished products that would undergo no further changes.

Only in recent decades has substantial research been done on reception theory for the theatre, often accompanied by attempts to put such theory into practice. Traditionally, however, the theatre has been compared unfavourably to the cinema in the sense that the spectator must overcome the hurdle of seeing actors in the flesh and thus work harder to accept the fiction represented on the stage.

¹⁷ Bennett, p. 160.

The spectator must enter into a conspiracy (a convention) that permits real persons and things to be seen fictively; but the reality of the actor drags the imagination down, constantly threatening to eliminate distance as the spectator sees the actor as a human being.¹⁸

Sartre suggests that the spectator's hard work can be undermined and the theatrical illusion instantly destroyed if an actor directly addresses the audience, causing the latter to dwell on the actor as a human being rather than the imaginary character they represent.¹⁹ One commentator has criticised Anouilh's *Antigone* because he believes the spectator 'finds himself so near to Antigone that he is conscious even of her physical person'.²⁰

The security and anonymity sought by the spectator in the dark crowd, comfortably separated from the stage, has frequently led critics to relegate the spectator's role to a passive one, as opposed to the reader of a novel, for example, who can freely re-read and analyse the text. However, this is a concept which Bertolt Brecht and contemporary reception theory reject.²¹ Although there is some discrepancy as to the nature, extent and desirability of the distance between actors and spectators, it is now widely acknowledged that the audience has a significant role in giving meaning to a play and in contributing both to the success of the script and the career of a play.

An important feature of the spectator's engagement with the performance is his or her identification with the protagonists. On some fundamental level, reception theorists argue that there must be an internal – that is, a psychological or emotionally empathetic – connection which allows the spectator to invest in a specific character.²² In this light, it is

¹⁸ Ben Chaim, p. 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63. Ben Chaim counters Sartre's argument by mentioning the Chorus from Shakespeare's *Henry V* whose reference to the stage's limitations belongs to the conventions accepted by the paying spectator (p. 72).

²⁰ Hubert Gignoux, *Anouilh* (Éditions du Temps présent, 1946), pp. 114-15. Gignoux believes this proximity is obtained at the expense of tragedy.

²¹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (University of Minnesota: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 19, and Bennett, p.148.

²² Ben Chaim, pp. 66-67.

surely advantageous for reception theory to welcome psychoanalytical approaches in order to understand audience complicity with mythical figures in particular.²³ Such identification cannot be complete, not only because of the need for a degree of distance, but also because there is a ‘social contract’ between audience and performers according to which a certain sense of unreality is expected and an activity of decoding required on the part of the spectator.²⁴ Besides, in every single play I am studying, the main characters die or lose those closest to them and are consigned to exile. This sets them clearly apart from the audience. The very nature of tension in the theatre is derived from the balance between the spectator’s search for peace and resolution, and the pleasure of intellectual and emotional involvement with fictional characters.²⁵

In the case of Occupation theatre in Paris, the spectators brought an unusual history (or background) to the plays because they had a common investment in France’s future in the war, though by no means from the same political angle. Moreover, they were aware that all plays performed in public had been pre-approved by the German censorship body, compounded by the obligatory presence of the occupier in the auditorium. In exceptional cases, there was even extensive coverage of the event by the press prior to the premiere. Bennett points out that such notoriety, which may equally arise from press debates about the first performances, can lead an audience to focus on polemical elements at the expense of the rest of a play.²⁶ This almost certainly occurred with *Le Soulier de satin* and *Antigone*.

A particularly challenging obstacle to reception theory for the theatre is the nature of the audience. While spectators gather to form a collective body that can manifest itself by applauding, booing or listening attentively, they are also individuals who can show their

²³ Fortier, p. 82 ff.

²⁴ The term is borrowed from Bennett and quoted by Fortier, p. 137.

²⁵ Bennett, p. 78.

²⁶ Bennett, p. 116.

approbation or disapproval by calling out, leaving or falling asleep.²⁷ The number of possible interpretations of a play is most likely to equal the number of spectators present. This posed problems for those who claimed after the war that their plays had been unanimously understood by audiences as encouraging resistance to the Germans. Having said this, commentators tend to agree that the theatre encourages collective participation to a greater degree than other art forms given that it unites different social classes who share – to a limited extent, of course – the preoccupations of their time. This aspect of theatre most affected Sartre at performances of his play *Bariona* at a prisoner of war camp in late 1940.

The Occupation saw an unusually large number of Parisians turn to the theatre for entertainment and solace. It also required that the French and Germans sit alongside each other, creating an even greater disparity of expectations, not to mention a language barrier. It is significant in this regard that Gerhard Heller, a German soldier in Paris, was asked to accompany the man responsible for giving a visa to Sartre's *Les Mouches* because of his knowledge of the subtleties of French literature. According to Heller's testimony, his fellow German officer needed help to establish whether there was any truth to the rumours that *Les Mouches* was a Resistance play: 'Les censeurs militaires étaient inquiets et peu rassurés; ils ne saisissaient pas la portée de l'ouvrage'.²⁸

Theatre and the Resistance

When evaluating the alleged pro-Resistance impact of an Occupation play, it is important to take into consideration the degree to which its composition and premiere coincided with the French Resistance. The very nature of Resistance ideology is important

²⁷ Bennett, pp. 164-65. Some particularly harsh reviews of Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin* gleefully drew attention to the physical reactions of spectators: 'Il y a aussi les décors de M. Coutaud, qui ferait fuir le public s'il ne dormait si profondément'. Laubreaux, *Je suis partout*, 10 December 1943.

²⁸ Letter to Annette Fuchs-Betteridge, 12 March 1961. Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 398.

in this context, as well as the dates of the movement. The Resistance was formed gradually from a complex mix of political and ideological strands, and its cultural role is not easy to identify, though it should almost certainly be seen as a unifying force among the theatre-going public, at least from late 1943.

There are two provisos to this. Firstly, literary theatre inevitably features plural meanings. Most plays do not communicate a univocal (political) message, which would have to be clandestine in order to be resistant. Some lesser-known Occupation plays could be classified as ‘littérature de circonstance’, as they bordered on propaganda and were usually commissioned for Vichy youth camps.²⁹ However, Annette Fuchs-Betteridge suggests that such plays failed to draw audiences: ‘les Parisiens se souciaient fort peu de propagande’.³⁰ Furthermore, politically-engaged writing ages very fast. If any of my chosen playwrights had in fact intended to communicate a time-specific ideological message, they were frustrated by slow responses from the clandestine press or other unfavourable circumstances that delayed the staging of their works.

Secondly, only a tiny minority of the French population (an estimated one or two per cent) were actively involved in the Resistance.³¹ The vast majority of spectators, while not necessarily opposed to its ideals, were nevertheless passive in support. In its early days, the movement of opposition had a bad reputation because of the violent attacks on Germans. The opponents of any regime are often called ‘terrorists’, and 1940s France was certainly no exception.³²

²⁹ Patrick Marsh, “‘Jeanne d’Arc’ During the German Occupation”, *Theatre Research International*, 2 (1977), pp. 139-45.

³⁰ Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 56.

³¹ Ingrid Galster, *Sartre, Vichy et les intellectuels* (L’Harmattan, 2001), pp. 56-57. Galster suggests that there was a similar number of fervent collaborators and the rest were ‘attentistes’.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 59 and Manfred Flügge, ‘Verweigerung oder Neue Ordnung. Jean Anouilh’s “Antigone” im politischen und ideologischen context der Besatzungszeit 1940-1944’, II (thesis published by Schäuble Verlag Rheinfelden, 1980), p. 43 (1979 letter from Anouilh).

A problem I have encountered with 1940s reviewers, and *a fortiori* with recent critics of my chosen plays, is a strong tendency to classify playwrights, or plays, as either pro-Resistance or pro-Collaboration, as if no shades of grey were possible. In a similar binarising vein, Jennifer Anne Boittin suggests that ‘Resistant art could therefore fall into two general categories: literature designed to incite to combat versus literature as a flag for French culture.’³³ I believe the theatre featured every nuance in between and I will attempt to temper such polarisation in my analysis of the five plays. Commentators have frequently suggested that, in writing articles for the collaborationist press or indeed for Resistance publications, my chosen authors revealed their political leanings more than they realized. I will duly examine these writings for their part in revealing the playwrights’ stance under the Occupation, though I believe that analysis of the plays themselves is just as valuable in determining this.

It is perhaps worth issuing a warning that the very nature of theatre as an art portraying fiction precludes direct action, in the political sense. The effectiveness of a ‘theatre of resistance’ can only be measured by the testimony of those present, whether they be performers, critics or audience members. A performance can elicit many different reactions from an audience, but it is the spectators who determine its effectiveness.

The theatre can never *cause* a social change. It can articulate the pressures towards one, help people to celebrate their strengths and maybe build their self-confidence. It can be a public emblem of inner, and outer, events, and occasionally a reminder, an elbow-jogger, a perspective-bringer. *Above all, it can be the way people can find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination.*³⁴

³³ Jennifer Boittin, p. 109.

³⁴ Bennett, p. 167. The passage is quoted from John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. xxvii.

The present state of research

The study of theatre in Paris during the Occupation of France, 1940-1944, has recently attracted substantial attention through various books and theses (re-)examining the Resistance ‘myths’ that surround certain celebrated playwrights. These range from general studies of the historical trends experienced by the theatre industry to specific investigations of authors who have been – retrospectively – credited with having written a ‘theatre of resistance’ while Paris was under German rule. The historian Serge Added’s meticulous research has enabled him to establish clear patterns of attendance, management and policies for the French theatre of the Occupation, though I must contest his grounds for identifying a ‘théâtre résistant’.³⁵ He claims that a definite ‘message’ must both have been intended by the author and understood by audiences. I will contend that while it is extremely difficult to establish an understanding of authorial intention, it is not a prerequisite for the reception of a pro-Resistance ‘message’ by the spectators. Added does not allow for the influence of the paratextual elements of theatrical performance, such as diction, costumes, and the *mise en scène*. Indeed, the majority of in-depth studies on this topic have relied far too heavily on authorial intention and public opinion. Commentators tend to gauge the latter by a supposedly representative press and one or two first-hand accounts, often at the expense of thorough analysis of the plays in question.

Writers who tackle a range of plays from the Occupation, and respond to claims that they form a ‘theatre of resistance’, have perhaps inevitably felt obliged to come down clearly on one side or the other for each author in question, not really allowing for compromise or a more complex picture of these prominent French figures. While first-hand accounts from theatre professionals and historians present at the 1940s performances are

³⁵ Serge Added, *Le Théâtre à Paris dans les années-Vichy, 1940-1944* (Ramsay, 1992), p. 273.

informative, they tend to make bold and largely unsubstantiated claims, not to mention being conspicuously partisan. Béatrix Dussane, for example, was an actress with the Comédie-Française and does not fail to portray France's biggest national theatre in a somewhat flattering light.³⁶

In my view, the biggest gap in research on the topic of the Parisian stage during the Occupation is an in-depth comparison of the vastly differing postwar claims for plays premiered during the Occupation. A corresponding investigation into the similarities, flaws and unresolved elements of such claims is needed. Several of these plays quickly became part of a regularly performed canon of French theatre in the second half of the twentieth century and far too many assumptions have since been made about the circumstances surrounding their first performances. I maintain that it is crucial to paint as accurate a picture as possible of the performance context of individual plays by closely scrutinising the attitudes and activities of the playwrights, stage directors and other participants. The nature of the theatre buildings and organising bodies, the funding and publicity available for each play, the elaboration of the performance script and its examination by the occupying authorities, and the makeup of the audiences must also be considered. Overall, a greater understanding of the material and political circumstances at the time of performance is an invaluable tool for assessing my chosen plays.

Substantial analysis of the performance texts seems to me to be essential in order to establish whether postwar claims stand up to scrutiny, and to examine possible alternative interpretations. I will try to discover what each playwright may have intended, based on correspondence, recurring themes in his works, his Occupation writings and activities, and

³⁶ *Courrier français du témoignage chrétien*, 4 November 1944: '[La Comédie-Française] a réussi cette entreprise à la Don Quichotte de monter le *Soulier de Satin* au plus fort des restrictions diverses qui asphyxiaient progressivement le théâtre comme toutes choses.'

any other available evidence. However, authorial intention will not be the guiding standard for my interpretation, let alone for accepting claims that audiences unmistakably perceived a deliberate pro-Resistance message. By far the most comprehensive studies of Occupation plays to date have focused on their reception, though this still only applies to two of the most famous cases. Where the other plays are concerned, bold statements made in the 1940s have hardly been challenged since and it is my contention that for this reason the plays of Vermorel, Montherlant and Claudel in particular need extensive re-examination.

The five plays to which this study is devoted all had a political reception, often one that went counter to the author's commitments or claims to persuade otherwise. Equally, they all received conflicting praise or condemnation at the Liberation for both resistant and collaborationist intentions. Each of the chapters that follows will present the background to the premiere and the author's activities, writings and possible political stance during the Occupation. A substantial part of each chapter will be devoted to the content, reception and differing interpretations of the theatre scripts and performances, and will be followed by an examination of the post-Liberation debates and impact of the plays.

CHAPTER ONE

FRENCH THEATRE IN PARIS DURING THE

OCCUPATION

The four years of German occupation in Paris remain a very contentious period for the French, as individual and collective memories have proved to be both painful and shameful. Many trials were held after the Liberation of France and the behaviour of many writers, directors and actors in the performing arts has been put under the spotlight.³⁷ Their activities, encounters and publications have been scrutinised, as have the retrospective claims to Resistance – or, indeed, collaboration – made by authors and critics. While it is still an open question as to whether Parisian theatres can be said to have experienced ‘resistant’ activity, an undisputed fact is that an extraordinary number of plays (over 400) were performed during those four theatrical seasons.³⁸ Attendance and box office receipts also reached a record high of 318 million francs from Parisian theatres in 1943, more than three times the receipts of 1938.³⁹

Several key works of the twentieth century were written or had their premiere, leading many to label this short period a Golden Age of French theatre.⁴⁰ The Occupation saw the first plays of Sartre, Camus and Montherlant, and the first performances of plays by Anouilh, Claudel, Giraudoux, Cocteau and Guitry. It is certainly surprising that in a

³⁷ See in particular *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas*, ed. Éric Conan and Henry Rousso (Fayard, 1994). Summary arrests, trials and executions of artists were carried out at the Liberation, most notably the imprisoning (without evidence) of Sacha Guitry and the execution of the editor and writer, Robert Brasillach.

³⁸ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940-1944* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁹ Hervé Le Boterf, *La Vie parisienne sous l'Occupation* (Éditions France-Empire, 1997).

⁴⁰ This expression was coined in 1944 by Alain Laubreaux in *Je suis partout*. It has since been adopted by many critics, including Serge Added in his chapter aptly entitled ‘L’euphorie théâtrale dans Paris occupé’, in *La Vie culturelle sous Vichy*, ed. Jean-Pierre Rioux (Éditions Complexe, 1990).

time of such shortage – of food, electricity, fuel, paper and hope – there should be so many people willing to quite literally go the extra mile to be entertained, and so many artists keen to stage new and ambitious productions.

Il faut, en effet, faire preuve de bien de stoïcisme pour se rendre à pied, aussi mal nourri que l'on soit, à plusieurs kilomètres de son domicile afin de quêter l'oubli d'une guerre, rappelée une fois sur deux par le hurlement des sirènes.⁴¹

This chapter will examine the conditions surrounding productions in Parisian theatres during the Occupation. It will present the difficulties authors and directors experienced when going through official Vichy and German bodies in order to obtain approval for a performance and the compromises involved in running a theatre: 'Quel prix fallait-il payer pour être représentée sur une scène qui était si étroitement contrôlée?'.⁴²

The ideological battle over the theatre will also be analysed, examining the influence of censorship, politics and the conditions of war. An exposition of the subject matter of selected plays will explore what was permitted, the emergence of new tragedies, the attempted communication of a pro-Resistance 'message', and the disparity between authorial intention and public reception.⁴³ A glance at the importance of audience response in approving oppositional dialogue will lead to a discussion of the role of the press. Finally, a summary of all these influences upon the production and / or reception of a 'theatre of resistance' will conclude the chapter.

The concrete manifestation of a 'theatre of resistance' would be a performance that either spurs spectators on to active resistance or reaffirms the French in their desire to

⁴¹ Le Boterf, p. 175.

⁴² Jeanyves Guérin, *Le Théâtre en France de 1914 à 1950* (Éditions Champion, 2007), p. 303.

⁴³ The term 'tragique contemporain' was used by Béatrix Dussane, in her *Notes de théâtre 1940-1950* (Lardanchet, 1951), p. 118, to explain a move from classical tragedy (Giraudoux) to a 'drame de conscience' expounded by 'maîtres de pensée' such as Sartre, Camus and Anouilh. David Bradby also writes of this transition in *Modern French Drama 1940-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

oppose the Germans and express their patriotic pride. This would primarily occur by means of a hidden political message; that is, a substantial contemporary allegory disguised throughout the text of a play. Alternatively, it may take the form of specific lines which spark a vocal reaction from audiences. The least obvious or measurable manifestation of a 'theatre of resistance' would be an entire play which boosts French pride or speaks to the audience's preoccupations through its overarching themes.

It will not be considered sufficient for a play to have been written by a playwright sympathetic to the Resistance, nor contrariwise will a play be exempted because the author had ties with collaborators or associated with Germans. Some evidence of the play's impact on spectators or members of the Parisian press must be offered to support a pro-Resistance interpretation. Given the restrictions in place, such an impact is of course very difficult to determine, but a thorough examination of reviews and eye-witness testimonies will help to evaluate the majority consensus on how certain plays were received.

Life in Paris and the theatregoing public

There is no doubt that daily life was a struggle for those choosing (or forced) to live in Paris between 1940 and 1944. Permits had to be obtained for wood to burn during the winter or the right to drive around the city, and food was rationed. The latter restriction became an issue for the theatre when in 1943 Paul Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin* was performed at the Comédie-Française. The play started late in the afternoon and a dinner break served as relief during the five-hour marathon of this monumental work.⁴⁴ Only those with ration cards could be properly fed, yet this production was sold out from the first night, despite the extra expense of the tickets required to pay for the thirty-three *tableaux*,

⁴⁴ The Comédie-Française's basement became a staff canteen, 'tandis que le buffet servi par MM. Blondeau, père et fils, pendant l'entr'acte du *Soulier de Satin* devient légendaire d'emblée'. Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 35.

to say nothing of costumes and props.⁴⁵ Queuing in the cold was commonplace rather than exceptional and Jean-Louis Vaudoier, administrator of the national theatres, delighted in informing Claudel of the public's enthusiasm: 'les bureaux de location sont assiégés par une foule si avide et si démonstrative que certains matins, la force publique a été contrainte d'intervenir pour rétablir l'ordre'.⁴⁶

All of the theatres were grouped in the second, eighth and ninth arrondissements of Paris, so those living much further away would need to catch the last metro at the end of an evening play (usually 11 p.m.) in order to avoid a long walk or bike ride home. Breaching the imposed curfew was serious as people could be detained overnight and even held hostage by the Germans in the event of an attack on their soldiers.⁴⁷ From February 1943, to further compound the situation, there was the risk of being recruited at the theatre exits for the *Service de travail obligatoire* (STO) – French workers sent to Germany on the promise of the Vichy government, (initially) in exchange for the release of French prisoners.

Any performance from March 1942 onwards could be interrupted by bomb alerts, necessitating an emergency evacuation of the theatre. In addition, the presence of German officers had to be tolerated. The performer and playwright Sacha Guitry recounts that the occupying authorities had made provision for their own seats in all Parisian theatres, and that these were non-negotiable.⁴⁸ It may only have been as few as five seats in 800 (as at Guitry's 'home' theatre, La Madeleine), but it is nevertheless a significant factor to be taken into account. Every public performance of French theatre was subject to German

⁴⁵ '34 370 francs de fausses barbes!'. Le Boterf, p. 160.

⁴⁶ Le Boterf, p. 161.

⁴⁷ Jean-Jacques Gautier was arrested by the police after accompanying his friend home on foot following a trip to the theatre. Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 35.

⁴⁸ Sacha Guitry, *Quatre ans d'occupations* (L'Élan, 1947), p. 161: 'Les services de la Propagande du Reich se réservaient dans chacun de nos théâtres et à chacune de nos représentations, un nombre variable de places. Nul n'était épargné.'

scrutiny. While conditions for theatregoers were exceptionally taxing,⁴⁹ box office figures demonstrate convincingly that the period of greatest attendance in the theatre during the Occupation (the winter of 1943-44) corresponded to the time of greatest hardship in Paris. The scarcity of electricity, food and fuel was compounded by the violent assassinations of German officers by the French Resistance and the hostage-shooting reprisals.⁵⁰ The rounding-up of Jews and the increase in bomb alerts became daily realities in Paris.

At the height of these political tensions, with the threat of an Allied invasion imminent, any theatre advertising a programme was virtually guaranteed a full house: 'Rien ne décourage, en effet, un public avide de diversion à l'approche du grand bouleversement dont il se sent menacé.'⁵¹ This extraordinary motivation requires some explanation. How, for example, could the world of theatre (and the same applies to night clubs and music hall) stay so divorced from political events? Was it simply a comfortable seat away from the horrors of war, as the previous quotation suggests, or was it a rallying call for the French to cling on to hope and resist their German oppressors? Before examining these two questions in detail later in this study, it is essential to understand how theatres were run and what the opportunity of collective attendance contributed to the experience of Parisians and their verdict on 'resistant' plays.

It has frequently been assumed that theatres attracted audiences because of their warmth.⁵² However, the same restrictions or shortages of electricity and fuel were in force in theatres as in private dwellings and the only real material advantage to paying for entertainment was that it saved precious resources that might have been used at home. One

⁴⁹ This was quite literally the case when in March-April 1943 there was a 20.73% price rise in tickets due to extra tax being levied. Added, p. 20.

⁵⁰ According to Eberhard Jäckel, the end of 1943 was the point of lowest food rations. Added, p. 21.

⁵¹ Le Boterf, p. 175.

⁵² Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 34: 'le manque de lumière et de chauffage dans leurs propres foyers pousse les gens à essayer d'en trouver au théâtre ou, à tout le moins, à tenter d'oublier par la "fête collective" leurs misères individuelles'.

might argue that the collective heat of fellow citizens appealed to potential audiences, but the fact that open-air concerts of music performed by German ensembles on chilly winter days were just as well attended by the French seems to contradict such a hypothesis. Besides, the available seating was restricted, because emergency evacuation procedures forbade the use of foldaway seats, for example. It seems unlikely that much extra heat was gained from the mere presence of an audience or that it could sufficiently counterbalance the exposure to the cold occasioned by the long journey home, not to mention the frequent trips outdoors in response to bomb alerts. From February 1944, the theatre would be evacuated upon the first siren ('présomption d'alerte') without waiting for confirmation that there was a genuine emergency. Thus Alain Decaux speaks of having to find shelter three times during a performance of Anouilh's *Antigone* in the spring of 1944.⁵³

I would suggest that two other reasons were ultimately responsible for the eagerness of theatregoers. Firstly, a desire to escape harsh realities in daily life and war by being entertained. This applied particularly to theatres, where no German propaganda was forced upon the spectators, unlike the regular screenings in cinemas. The gross income from tax on the visual arts in Paris more than doubled in the theatre between 1930 and 1945, which suggests that Parisians 'voulaient se distraire à tout prix'.⁵⁴ For many performances, the available tickets were transferred to the black market, so seats could become very expensive. Secondly, there is a clear consensus among critics that the public sought an ideological sanctuary in the theatre; a means to observe, approve and identify with patriotic sentiment.⁵⁵ Perhaps the majority even wanted an opportunity to applaud heroic dramatic

⁵³ Added, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Henri Michel, *Paris allemand* (Éditions Albin Michel, 1981), pp. 339-46.

⁵⁵ Michel, p. 341. See also Dussane, p. 121, Gérard Walter, *La vie à Paris sous l'occupation 1940-1944* (Armand Colin, 1960), p. 94, and Harold Hobson, *The French Theatre of Today: An English View* (London: Harrap, 1953), p. 45.

characters standing their ground against tyranny or illegitimate authority. In the same vein, Sacha Guitry defended his decision to continue performing in Paris by stressing the need to encourage French people with an ostensibly recognisable expression of national culture. Furthermore, he chose subject material which would remind them of their nation's (former) greatness and reinforce their solidarity in the face of their German oppressors.⁵⁶

This patriotic undercurrent is as difficult to define in theatre as in other art forms. However, certain playwrights later claimed they had made subtle but subversive political statements in their plays and that audiences had collectively discerned and approved of them: 'En 1944, plus d'un auteur donne volontiers une lecture résistante de sa production antérieure et allègue une stratégie de la contrebande. Des spectateurs débusquaient leurs allusions, leurs sous-entendus et leurs arrière-pensées.'⁵⁷ Hobson also refers to the link between patriotism and the arts: 'it was in the theatre that the rising spirit of national pride and hope asserted itself'.⁵⁸

Though later generations would criticize the French public's devotion to the theatre, which had allegedly led them to turn a blind eye to the suffering of their compatriots and the inhumane regime of the Germans, René Lalou argues the exact opposite achievement of the Occupation years: 'L'honneur du théâtre de France restera d'avoir constitué, durant ces années sinistres, un centre de ralliement et de résistance.'⁵⁹ In accordance with postwar attempts to point to a collective movement of active resistance among the French majority, Lalou claims that the public was looking for more than mere entertainment. His military language suggests that they were seeking to express or experience a communal sentiment

⁵⁶ He received a poem from Maurice Donnay (who had seen a performance of Guitry's *Vive l'Empereur*) containing the following: 'On se sentait chez soi, chez vous, chez nous...en France.' Guitry, p. 280.

⁵⁷ Guérin, p. 316.

⁵⁸ Hobson, p. 41.

⁵⁹ René Lalou, *Le Théâtre en France depuis 1900* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 104.

of ideological solidarity, and create a site of deliberate resistance against the occupying authorities. The Comédie-Française actress, Béatrix Dussane, agrees at least in part with this assessment, concluding that the desperation of the war situation led audiences to ask more of the theatre than physical comfort and a good show:

Le public est venu au théâtre par besoin d'évasion: mais bien vite il a demandé au théâtre davantage. Il a guetté messages et présages à travers des textes où ces rencontres n'avaient nullement été préméditées, et il y a cherché réconfort, puis exaltation.⁶⁰

According to this eye-witness account, spectators sought a focal point and outlet for their frustration and humiliation; an ideological accomplice. They craved identification with the protagonists and, conversely, approval of negative representations of the German enemy (however well disguised by the dialogue). Moreover, spectators were searching for subtle clues that authors might be fighting or recruiting for the Resistance.

Whilst the preponderance of reactions to Occupation plays comes from reviews in the official Parisian press, the recollections of historians and theatre professionals indicate that the French public sought more than mere distraction from the war. Expectations were high, as were the political tensions in Paris, and the theatre was a live medium that was looked to as a source of hope in the reaffirmation of French pride.⁶¹ It was an oasis of French culture in a daily routine of enforced deprivations. Perhaps it was even an intellectual sanctuary where subtle codes could be passed from actors to spectators as a guide for their stance in relation to the occupier and to the French government in Vichy.⁶²

⁶⁰ Dussane, p. 121.

⁶¹ Robert Brasillach, *La Chronique de Paris*, March 1944: 'voir *Antigone*, en cet hiver de 1944, est une récompense que nous n'osions plus espérer'.

⁶² Isabelle Verucchi, *Anouilh: 'Antigone'. 40 questions, 40 réponses, 4 études* (Ellipses, 1999), p. 39: 'Écriture code, qui adapte donc le mythe au contexte historique et se sert de la légende pour explorer le malaise de toute une société.'

The political context

The difficulty for the French of accepting the 1940 situation can hardly be exaggerated. An unexpected German penetration of their eastern defence (the Maginot line) was shortly followed by an embarrassing capitulation of the improvised government that had fled from Paris. The resulting Armistice was tantamount to collaboration with the Germans, whose rule maintained the continual threat of violence, as the merciless round-up and slaughter of hostages was soon to prove. The first German soldier was killed on the streets on 21 August 1941. Within 24 hours, 11,000 Jews, communists and others had been sent to concentration camps.⁶³ The French felt abandoned by their Allies and their growing suspicion of the press was well warranted; many self-confessed collaborators and pro-Nazis dominated the official papers. Laubreaux led the charge in *Le Petit Parisien*, Robert Brasillach edited the collaborationist paper, *Je suis partout*, the fascist Drieu La Rochelle obtained German permission to resurrect the *Nouvelle Revue Française (NRF)* and Alphonse de Chateaubriant was the pro-Nazi editor of the weekly paper, *La Gerbe*.⁶⁴

As the war progressed, circumstances worsened for the French. Under the terms of the Armistice, the Germans ordered the exclusion of undesirables (Jews, Communists and Free Masons) from all walks of life, and the theatre was by no means exempt. Anyone wishing to travel, work, obtain fuel and food, see relatives or even send letters had to obtain permission from the occupying authorities. Personal details could be scrutinized or made public. Hope raised by a potential leader, Philippe Pétain, in 1940 was immediately dashed by his submission to German will and the presence of a violent French militia from 1943.

⁶³ Hobson, p. 36.

⁶⁴ Laubreaux wrote the most theatre reviews (at least 62) in occupied Paris. *Le Petit Parisien* also sold by far the most copies. Fuchs-Betteridge, appendix V, and Galster (2001), p. 96.

The role and functioning of the theatre

It may be argued that the theatre's only means of satisfying the elevated demands of the suffering French was to portray an allegorical world. Resurrecting familiar historical and mythical characters enabled a reflection on the contemporary situation and focus on the author's specific angle.⁶⁵ It is certainly true that the four years of occupation saw an unusual number of 'new' tragedies and mythological plays which have (since) been heralded as a 'theatre of resistance'. Dussane says of Sartre's *Les Mouches*, 'De nouveau, la fable antique servait à donner accent de pérennité à l'aventure contemporaine, et à déguiser prudemment les personnages et leur pensée actuelle aux yeux de la censure.'⁶⁶ Tom Bishop also claims of the same play, 'Undoubtedly, it was the mythological frame of reference that enabled this subversive play to obtain the green light from the German authorities.'⁶⁷ Whether one agrees with such bold statements or not, it was more than coincidence that brought so many historical and mythological plays to light during such a short period. They clearly suited the theatre's capacity to create multiple layers of meaning and subtly communicate hidden ideas through allegory and innuendo.

If theatre had simply been limited to entertainment, the French would logically have seen it in the same light as their victors, for the occupying forces quickly reopened theatre houses. Indeed, by the end of 1940, thirty-four theatres were functioning.⁶⁸ Not only were the Germans desirous of showing their own cultural knowledge and superiority, but they were also content to see the French distracted from the political situation. Their policies

⁶⁵ Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 209: 'le spectateur, connaissant déjà la trame du sujet [...] peut prêter toute son attention aux idées que l'auteur veut exprimer'.

⁶⁶ Dussane, p. 124.

⁶⁷ Tom Bishop, *From the Left Bank: Reflections on the Modern French Theater and Novel* (NY and London: NY University Press, 1997), p. 30.

⁶⁸ Patrick Marsh, 'The theatre: compromise or collaboration?', in *Collaboration in France: Politics and Culture during the Nazi Occupation, 1940-1944*, ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld and Patrick Marsh (Oxford, NY and Munich: Berg, 1989), pp. 143-44.

during the occupation of Paris demonstrated a desire to keep the status quo, bordering on excessive politeness (keenly encouraged by the French press), convincing the French of their good intentions and extracting local resources wherever possible.⁶⁹

German decisions governing the theatre were quite liberal. For example, they overturned Vichy's veto for Henry Becque's *La Parisienne*. Pétain and the Paris Council wanted this play banned on the grounds of immorality, as the heroine had two lovers. The allusion to prostitution in the title was side-stepped by renaming the play *Clothilde de Mesnil*. The occupier was also happy for the French to oversee the organisation of various artistic fields. In the area of publishing the German ambassador Otto Abetz ordered certain banned books to be removed from shelves or destroyed. The first 'Liste Otto' in September 1940 included 1060 Jewish and (allegedly) anti-German works, and was followed by more extensive lists in March 1942 and May 1943. Outside of this restriction, French publishers were free to decide on the suitability of books, submitting doubtful cases to the German authorities. A certain level of auto-censorship was thus ensured, allowing for and even encouraging denunciations from fellow Frenchmen, whilst being seen as lenient.

Similarly, in the theatre any concerns about subversive plays were referred to the *Propagandastaffel* and a semi-private German viewing would be arranged. In some instances the collaborationist press vehemently objected to plays which were perfectly acceptable to the Germans and provoked admiring comments from their ranks. French artists could easily be seduced by so-called Francophile German officers in Paris, believing that a mutual exchange of ideas and culture was taking place. In reality, Germans caught showing inappropriate affinity with the French were called out to serve on the eastern Front or Berlin, as Vercors so strikingly illustrated in *Le Silence de la mer* (February 1942). This

⁶⁹ Michel, p. 346.

is exactly what happened to Karl Epting (Institut allemand) and Lieutenant Frank (*Propagandastaffel*).⁷⁰

The importance of these observations is two-fold. Firstly, theatrical activity was actively encouraged by the Germans, though certain topics were patently taboo. Secondly, if the occupying forces were happy for the French to be entertained – indeed, distracted – by the theatre, escapism in and of itself cannot account for the spectators’ propensity to seek solace there. Hobson even claims that the reopening, patronizing and attendance of Parisian theatres by the Germans were among many mistakes made in their treatment of the French.⁷¹ The strains of war and the unique nature of the theatre caused the French public be alert to allegorical references in the dialogue, gestures and décor presented on stage.

Comment oublier en effet les soirs de ces dernières années où on s’arrachait les places, pourvu que la pièce fût, d’une manière ou d’une autre, exaltante? Un mot, le détail le moins attendu faisaient brusquement vibrer la sensibilité de l’auditoire, tendue à l’excès et tout le jour irritée.⁷²

Anything that might spur them on in difficult circumstances, fill them with hope for the future of France, or encourage unity in the face of oppression was bound to appeal to spectators. The French and German perspectives were markedly different when it came to the purpose of entertainment through topics apparently divorced from the contemporary situation.

Ces jeux subtils, échappent en règle générale à l’occupant ou, s’il les comprend il n’en a cure. L’important, pour lui, c’est que le théâtre, comme le cinéma, fournisse aux Parisiens assez de pâture de rêve pour qu’ils en soient chloroformés.⁷³

⁷⁰ Galster, p. 80. See also Jackson, p. 309.

⁷¹ Hobson, p. 38.

⁷² *Courrier français du témoignage chrétien*, 4 November 1944.

⁷³ Michel, p. 341.

However, the Germans had substantial oversight of artistic activities in Paris; increasingly so as resources became more scarce. For example, from 1942, the Germans were in charge of distributing paper and therefore controlled all publication requests. Indeed, one of the difficulties for anyone wishing to pursue research into this period is the lack of rehearsal scripts for plays performed under the Occupation, as only the national (subsidised) theatres could afford prompt copies. Certain interrogations will remain forever unanswered because the Occupation archives for all theatres beginning with the letters ‘A’ to ‘G’ have been destroyed.⁷⁴ This is particularly frustrating for *Antigone*, *Les Mouches*, and *Jeanne avec nous*, which were performed respectively at the Théâtre de l’Atelier, the Théâtre de la Cité and the Comédie des Champs-Élysées. In this light, it is useful that the 1942 edition of Vermorel’s play shows deleted lines in brackets and Barrault’s shortened stage version of *Le Soulier de satin* has survived in the 1944 Gallimard edition.

The Germans mediated with theatre directors to negotiate the performance of new and revisited works, as well as the promotion of French and – especially – German culture. The German cultural office, the *Propagandastaffel*, resided at number 52, avenue des Champs-Élysées, and regulated theatrical activity by liaising with the French organisation of theatre directors. The *Propagandastaffel*, being a regional body, was then answerable to the Propaganda-Abteilung de France, also located in Paris, at the Hôtel Majestic. Lieutenant Raedemacker, succeeded by Lücht, oversaw the activities of Parisian theatres. They enforced textual cuts, attended dress rehearsals, excluded allegedly left-wing actors and rooted out suspected Jewish professionals. Guitry and Harry Baur were required to prove their ‘aryanité’. The latter was arrested in 1942 and died just after the Liberation.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Galster, p. 84.

⁷⁵ Guérin, p. 289. Baur was an actor who had performed many Jewish roles on stage.

The Germans also commandeered the stages of the ABC, Casino de Paris, Concert Mayol, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and the Folies Bergères for their exclusive use. The primary function of such theatres was to entertain their troops, but these buildings were also useful for arranging meetings with prominent French artists. In this way, the occupying forces simultaneously provided their own cultural activities and kept a close check on French performances. Not only had they set apart high-priority seating for themselves in an article of the 1940 Armistice, but they also had the final say for any visa to be granted to a play.⁷⁶ They demanded that plays be performed immediately after the re-opening of the Comédie-Française in 1940 under threat of bringing a German theatre company in to reside there permanently. As things stood, there was no choice but to work alongside the Germans and bend to their will if theatres were to stay open, or indeed to stay French. This is not to say that playwrights and theatre directors did not attempt to change the Germans' mind on smaller matters, such as the selection of certain artists for labour reinforcement in Germany (*La Relève*). For example, the director of the Théâtre de la Cité, Charles Dullin, intervened successfully on behalf of the composer Jacques Besse who later provided the incidental music for Sartre's *Les Mouches* at the same theatre.

The popular actors' choice for a general administrator of the national theatres, Jacques Copeau, was overturned by the Germans and the Vichy government refused to appoint his successor, Jean-Louis Vaudoier, for another two months. According to Dussane, Copeau had not understood the need for cooperation imposed upon civil servants by the unfortunate circumstances and direct opposition to the occupier had caused his termination. On the other hand, Vaudoier was more subtle in his dealings with the Germans: '[J]e l'ai vu à mainte reprise occupé [...] à réduire, à rogner, à dissoudre, comme

⁷⁶ Le Boterf, p. 112. In the national theatres, they requisitioned the box formerly reserved for the Président.

il le pouvait, le plus possible de ce que les influences allemandes prétendaient conquérir dans la vie de la Comédie-Française.⁷⁷

Vaudoyer was a key figure from 1940 to 1944, backing significant theatrical premieres such as *Le Soulier de satin* and *La Reine morte*. He applied himself to the promotion of French culture, despite the negative press to which he was subjected. He was accused, for example, of slowing down the preparation of *Le Soulier de satin* in order for it to become a pro-ally gala.⁷⁸ The choice of verb is certainly significant in the above quotation; Vaudoyer was allegedly *active* in undoing the work of the Germans. Similarly, it is no coincidence that Guitry chose to entitle the account of his Second World War activities *Quatre ans d'occupations*. The play on words is obvious and the point clear: many French writers, directors and performers deliberately chose to promote French culture for the benefit of the public, even though it inevitably involved going through the Germans.

The occupier was not alone in taking steps to regulate theatrical activity. The Vichy government set up the *Comité d'organisation des entreprises de spectacle (COES)* on 7 July 1941, under the direction of René Rocher. The purpose of this body was to create laws and restrictions under Vichy's wide-ranging policies of the National Revolution. In theory Vichy had jurisdiction over at least the private theatres, but in practice the Germans had the last word on any request for visas to perform. While Vichy had no clearly defined cultural policy, it seems that the *COES* submitted to the government's New Order (leaning heavily towards the Nazi concept of the same name) and bended to German will. Indeed, this organisation received violent criticism from both the clandestine press and certain

⁷⁷ Without naming the paper, Dussane refers to 'le plus virulent hebdomadaire parisien d'alors' as the source of such allegations. Dussane, p. 30.

⁷⁸ Dussane, p. 31.

collaborationist writers. The sole publication of the Resistance paper *La Scène Française*, in December 1943, bemoaned the dictatorship of René Rocher whilst the pro-German *La Gerbe* blamed the inter-war government and Vichy management of the theatre for all existing problems.⁷⁹

Needless to say, the Germans were happy to exploit tensions between Vichy and Paris, which distracted the French from the grim realities of their policies. A good example of this is provided by Henri-René Lenormand in his outrage at the fascist purging of the theatre by the French government: ‘Pour comble d’humiliation, aucune de ces mesures n’est imputable aux Allemands. Elles émanent toutes de certains puritains de Vichy.’⁸⁰ Rocher’s permission had to be obtained in order for theatre professionals to work, travel, obtain subsidies and receive up-to-date identity cards. However, there were positive aspects to his organisation and it still has a legacy in the French theatre: a set of regulations written by the *COES* on 27 December 1943. More helpfully for performers in the 1940s, these laws took some control away from the occupier and notably helped those in the theatre profession – ‘travailleurs du spectacle’ – to avoid being recruited for the STO.

The *Association des directeurs de théâtre de Paris (ADTP)* was the French censorship body overseen by Fernand de Brinon (responsible for the ban on Cocteau’s *Machine à écrire*).⁸¹ From 1941, Charles Dullin, Gaston Baty and Jean Renoir served as a link with the German *Propagandastaffel*.⁸² Directors had to conform to the nationwide purge of Jews, including the ban on translations and plays by Jewish authors. The lead for collaborating with the occupier was given not only by the press, but also by theatre

⁷⁹ *Collaboration in France: Politics and Culture during the Nazi Occupation, 1940-1944*, p. 150.

⁸⁰ ‘La Terreur Puritaine’, *Comœdia*, November 1941. His bitterness comes partly from bans on his own plays.

⁸¹ Added, pp. 43-44.

⁸² They took over from Robert Trébor (15 May), then resigned a year later. When Sacha Guitry refused the post of director, the triumvirate cancelled their resignation.

directors. Dullin, for example, publicly approved Vichy's repressive policies, and the 'moral lesson' of Michel Daxiat's violently anti-Semitic *Les Pirates de Paris* was hailed as necessary by the Parisian press.⁸³ It was originally named *L'Affaire Stavisky* after a Russian Jew who was a swindler. Daxiat was a pseudonym used by the critic, Laubreaux, who gave influential and positive summaries of his play in *Le Petit Parisien*, *La Gerbe* and *Comœdia*.

The inevitable result of such a system was that theatre directors, journalists and authors compromised themselves by their writings and dealings with the Germans: 'it is very rare to find a man who, during the Occupation years, never allowed a personal attitude or political bias to colour in some way his activities in the theatre'.⁸⁴ The theatre was a place of unavoidable compromise and therefore the site of a complex mixture of ideologies that made a fertile breeding ground for mixed responses to so-called 'resistant' plays.

Activity or silence?

The dilemma of whether or not to participate in Parisian cultural life under German rule remains a bone of contention to this day. In a harsh criticism of those who continued working in relative comfort, Henri Michel suggests that all those distracting Parisians from the terrible reality of the war were nothing short of accomplices, dishonouring France in passive – or worse – approval of the German occupation policy.⁸⁵ Serge Added complains, on the other hand, that we have a historical tendency to place protagonists in opposite camps – Resistance or Collaboration – without allowing for nuance. It certainly seems convenient, especially with hindsight, to classify the activities of a particular author,

⁸³ According to Galster, p. 69, *Antigone* obtained a performance visa immediately because Barsacq 'appuyait publiquement la politique raciste de l'occupant en se prononçant pour l'exclusion des juifs au théâtre'.

⁸⁴ *Collaboration in France*, p. 161.

⁸⁵ Michel, p. 346: 'Cette flamme qui brille dans Paris [...] elle est plus que de la résignation de la défaite: la volonté d'en tirer égoïstement avantage. Distraire les Parisiens de leurs difficultés insurmontables était un des buts que poursuivait l'occupant; tous ceux qui s'y prêtaient, même dans la conviction qu'ils ne lui devaient rien, se faisaient en définitive ses complices.'

performer or stage director into one of the two, based on an incomplete profile. In some cases, such bipolar interpretations could prove potentially dangerous for the future career of a play or playwright once the Occupation was over.

The farcical trial of Guitry is good evidence of this, as no justification could be provided for the accusations of collaboration thrown at him so soon after the Liberation. His memoirs are an extended document – five hundred pages – clearing his name. It is extraordinary that he was obliged to defend himself despite the lack of any concrete proof to support the charges against him. Only one journalist (Pierre Descaves) actually accused Guitry of being a collaborator. When investigated, he blamed the editor of *Figaro*, who in turn passed the buck on to another writer. A simple consultation of the list of participants in the ‘Groupe-Collaboration’ would have revealed the absence of his name, but the French press refused to print it. This underlines the risks for public figures during the Occupation and the need for extensive investigation into the activities of theatre professionals, and into the reasons behind choices they made.⁸⁶ A study of their writings must take into account the source, content and reception. It was easy to write for collaborationist papers, but not to communicate from the stage undistorted messages of hope and resistance to a French public closely observed by the occupying officers and a multitude of German sympathizers.

The content of theatre scripts

For those who wished to continue their professional activities in the theatre, contact with the occupier was bound to affect their daily lives. Every month, theatres had to submit a bilingual questionnaire declaring that none of the staff was Jewish. The season calendar, two copies of each play, posters and programmes had to be submitted to the

⁸⁶ For example, Julian Jackson points out that Guitry’s desire to thrust himself constantly into the limelight, to be seen and heard in public, contributed to his problems at the Liberation. Jackson, p. 311.

Propagandastaffel, where all theatre texts were read in advance of rehearsals.⁸⁷ It is tempting, and indeed common, to claim that the Germans did not – or could not – pick up on the subtleties within French texts. However, despite initial approval from the authorities, an outcry of derisive laughter at the words ‘Adolphe, l’ignoble Adolphe!’ in Labiche’s *29 degrés à l’ombre* got the character in question rechristened Alfred for the next performance. A cultural difference – rather than lack of critical insight from the censor – meant that the occupier was happy to see Joan of Arc plays re-enact the forced retreat of the English from France, while the Parisians may have understood that a German retreat was being implied because of the circumstances. ‘La censure [...] n’avait pas deviné que le public [...] entendait “Allemands” chaque fois que Jeanne disait “Anglais” – et approuvait en conséquence.’⁸⁸ The Germans allegedly stopped performances of *Jeanne avec nous* because of the over-excited audiences. Yet it would be fair to say that virtually no play referring directly to contemporary events successfully got through the German censor.

A noteworthy exception was Montherlant’s *Fils de Personne*, described as ‘une œuvre politique d’une brûlante actualité, dictée par un nationalisme intransigeant’.⁸⁹ It was premiered on 18 December 1943 at the Théâtre Saint-Georges and directed by Pierre Dux. Brasillach wrote in the January 1944 edition of *La Chronique de Paris* that it was the first play to be inspired by contemporary events. The play refers openly to the *laissez-passer* needed to cross into occupied territory, exiled family members and the problems of correspondence overcome with coded language.⁹⁰ Allusions are made to prisoners, the 1940 exodus, ration tickets and young men avoiding army service.

⁸⁷ Galster, pp. 76-77

⁸⁸ Dussane, p. 121-22. Dussane is referring to Vermorel’s *Jeanne avec nous*.

⁸⁹ Le Boterf, p. 153.

⁹⁰ Changes in health could indicate bombing alerts. Montherlant, *Fils de Personne* (Gallimard, 1944), p. 144.

More than anything else, Montherlant seems to be criticising mediocrity among young Frenchmen, which would hardly have posed any problems for the German censorship body.⁹¹ It was extremely unusual for a play to be allowed to express the harsh consequences for the French that the German Occupation forced upon them, so one or two statements that slipped through the supposedly rigorous editing process are not without pertinence.

[O]n s'en souviendra, de l'été 1940 [...] lorsqu'on a vécu ce qu'un Français a vécu cet été, on est un homme atteint, à la merci de ses nerfs. [...] Rentrer dans le Paris de l'armistice, au début de l'hiver, dans le Paris du froid sans chauffage, des restrictions, de l'occupation, des bombardements peut-être....⁹²

The blame for these difficult physical circumstances (in the capital city) is not clearly apportioned, but may well be imputed to the Germans by implication. In any case, such quotations are evidence that it was possible for the theatre to comment on the contemporary situation. No claim can reasonably be made that this play forms part of a 'theatre of resistance', but for those plays examined in the following chapters, the *Propagandastaffel*'s capacity to pick up on metaphorical allusions in the play's dialogue must be addressed.

Serge Added claims that one can only allow for the possibility of a 'theatre of resistance' if the Germans are assumed incapable of understanding innuendo in the French language, or implications hidden in a mythological or historical context. In a curious attempt to discount the possibility of a 'theatre of resistance', he considers such a view to be tantamount to xenophobia and he categorically states that, 'Les censeurs guettaient toute allusion et étaient capables de lectures allégoriques des textes.'⁹³ Furthermore, he suggests

⁹¹ '[L]e héros de *Fils de Personne* rejette son enfant et, partant, toute une catégorie de compatriotes assoupis dans la résignation confortable de la défaite.' Michel, p. 153.

⁹² *Fils de Personne*, p. 28, p. 49 and p. 37.

⁹³ Added, p. 255.

that any cryptic meanings that might conceivably have escaped their vigilance would have assuredly been denounced enthusiastically by the collaborationist press. Indeed, numerous denunciations from fellow Frenchmen attest to such willingness.⁹⁴ This was the case for Jean Yonnel, later to perform in *La Reine morte*, and Guitry – named by both the *Au Pilon* and *La France au Travail* papers. Jean Grenier explains that Cocteau was also a favourite target: ‘Des journaux le dénoncent en même temps que Gide, Mauriac, etc., comme un des responsables de la défaite. Par exemple, *Le Matin*, *Aux écoutes*, *Le Pilon* (hebdomadaire antisémite). Sa secrétaire est Israélite.’⁹⁵ The Germans also pointed out that Édouard Bourdet had been elected administrator of the Comédie-Française at the instigation of Blum, Jean Zay and Huysmans. This, apparently, was sufficient grounds for the accusation: ‘Bourdet n’échappe pas à cette qualification de sémite.’⁹⁶

Between the official censorship bodies and the ‘conscientious’ efforts of the French themselves, Added believes that there was no room for ambiguity or Resistance messages.⁹⁷ To explain the ban on his play *Mon auguste grand-père* (1941), Guitry provided an official German letter that shows the occupier was alert to subtleties in French theatrical writing.

Non, M. Guitry, nous ne pouvons pas tolérer que vous tourniez en dérision les lois raciales. Vos intentions sont claires et *nous ne sommes pas dupes* de la légèreté apparente de l’ouvrage. Vous nous croyez vraiment trop bêtes! [...] et nous n’acceptons pas qu’on se moque de nous.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Jean Grenier, *Sous l’Occupation* (Éditions Claire Paulhan, 1997), p. 122: ‘avec les dénonciations de la presse, c’est la terreur blanche.’

⁹⁵ Grenier, p. 121.

⁹⁶ Le Boterf, p. 111.

⁹⁷ Added, p. 290: ‘La censure et l’autocensure veillaient à étouffer tout ce qui eût pu ressembler à une parole résistante.’

⁹⁸ Guitry, p. 230 (my emphasis). The letter was written by Karl Epting, director of the Institut allemand.

However, it appears that some allegorical references slipped through their net. On occasion, the contemporary relevance of specific lines only became obvious in performance, but the most effective means of communicating with the audience was probably through overarching themes, and usually under the cover of a mythical or historical plot.

A private performance of Edmond Rostand's *L'Aiglon* at the Comédie-Française, commissioned by an unknown German emissary, was attended by the *Propagandastaffel*. There were some thirty Germans present, with their wives, and they politely applauded a play which would probably have caused a majority French audience to cheer enthusiastically. Dussane was in attendance and says of the occasion, 'C'est pour ma part un des jours où j'ai le mieux mâché la saveur de la défaite.'⁹⁹ Some lack of communication between the Germans had led to this play being staged, despite its references to French grandeur and the defeat of its enemies. Needless to say, performances were subsequently banned. Similarly, Raymond Caillava's *Retour d'Ulysse* at the Odéon was sufficiently disguised in mythological costume to obtain a visa, despite an impression at performances that, 'les occupants vilipendés tout au long de la pièce ressemblent étrangement aux soldats de la Wehrmacht'.¹⁰⁰ The disorientation caused by the distance in time and place between antiquity and 1940s France was possibly enough, in some cases, to dissimulate contemporary social and political concerns from the watchfulness of the Germans, and it seems the latter regretted allowing this play to be performed.¹⁰¹

The above instances are concrete examples of textual interpretation. However, other aspects of performance, which can no longer be directly observed, must also be taken into account. The way in which a word or phrase is communicated can alter the message

⁹⁹ Dussane, p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Michel, p. 133.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.133.

conveyed to the audience, as can the use of (anachronistic) costumes, meaningful gestures and deliberate emphasis. The guards in Anouilh's *Antigone*, for example, reminded critics of the French militia. The choice of décor or costumes could also distract audiences from a potential pro-Resistance play; this may well have been the case for Sartre's *Les Mouches*.

Historians of propaganda (censorship boards too) are of course faced with a peculiar difficulty when it comes to the interpretative art of theatre, since generally only the plain text is available for examination, while it is obvious that all manner of signals and messages can be made to appear when actors garnish it on stage.¹⁰²

While few definite conclusions can be drawn from an area where so little evidence can be – or actually has been – gathered, the cases in point are a reminder that one should tread carefully when tempted to make sweeping generalisations. It is an over-simplification to assume that the Germans could not pick up on subtle metaphorical illusions from French authors, or indeed that it was impossible to catch them off guard. Where innuendo had been neither intended by the author (as far as this can be determined), nor spotted by the *Propagandastaffel*, a third body was to be reckoned with: the French public.¹⁰³

The role of the audience

If no spectator or newspaper review picked up on subtle allusions in so-called resistant plays, the 'message' risked remaining theoretical rather than being effective in modelling, promoting and encouraging involvement in the Resistance. On the other hand, even if an author declared that he was not deliberately choosing to comment on the contemporary situation with allegory, it would not necessarily prevent the spectators from

¹⁰² *Vichy France and the Resistance: Culture and Ideology*, ed. by Roderick Kedward and Roger Austin (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 109.

¹⁰³ Anouilh, 'Propos déplaisants', *La Gerbe*, 11 December 1941: 'Une pièce se joue avec des acteurs, et l'un de ces acteurs, qu'on le veuille ou non, c'est le public.'

interpreting the contrary and appropriating – even hailing – its ‘resistant’ overtones or impact.

Many commentators suggest that the theatre-going public was desperate to find cryptic meanings in plays, especially – one may surmise – if they knew the Germans were attempting to suppress any passing comment that might spark sympathy with the Resistance or arouse hostile feelings to the occupier. ‘On retourna au théâtre: ce fut d’abord pour y guetter les moindres allusions qui, d’un coup, auraient rendu toute la salle hostile ou complice. On épiait les sous-entendus.’¹⁰⁴ A current of understanding between the stage and the auditorium may well have accounted for certain incidents where the audience reacted suddenly and collectively to specific words or phrases in the dialogue. There must have been great appeal to the possibility of outdoing the Germans by spotting something they might have missed, or laughing (quietly) behind their backs – even right under their noses.

Some critics claim that it was feasible to fool the *Propagandastaffel* simply by implying the transposition of a historical or mythical subject / dilemma onto the contemporary situation. A good example of this can be found in Sartre’s *Bariona ou le fils du tonnerre*. Written and first performed in a POW camp, this play was designed to bring people together at Christmas time. It was the collective element that enabled – indeed, encouraged – a contemporary reading of the play, given the circumstances of war and the overriding presence of Frenchmen. ‘[B]y portraying the Romans as masters of Judea and the Jews as a conquered people, he suggested the situation of contemporary France in a manner clear to the prisoners yet shielded from German censors.’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ *Collaboration in France*, p. 152.

¹⁰⁵ James D. Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 35.

It is clearly no coincidence that the most popular and longest-running plays were *dramas de conscience*. They feature characters who not only weigh their lives and principles against each other in extreme circumstances, but also obtain freedom from foreign oppressors or release from tyrannical leaders. These were the very issues at the heart of Parisians' daily fears and experiences and they needed to purge such emotions through the catharsis offered by a meditation on moral dilemmas. 'We have seen that during the Occupation the French public was indeed engaged in a conspiracy with the theatre. The theatre was the permitted spokesman for its aspirations and its anguishes and its searchings of the soul.'¹⁰⁶ Loaded language is used here. The idea of such a conspiracy would certainly have appealed to the French when looking back over the Occupation period after the war. Realization of the full horrors of Nazi atrocities would surely have caused them to seek examples of French pride. That the French theatre could have reflected the profound desires of the French to express their patriotism, outwit the Germans or even oppose them outright, might indeed provide some comfort.

Certain accounts of plays imply that the actors sought to engage with the spectators, reinforcing the idea that the plays were relevant to their preoccupations, despite the often significant distance in time from the events represented on the stage. Claudel requires the Annoncier, in *Le Soulier de satin*, to directly address the audience and remind them of their active role in constructing the play's dramatic reality. The occupying forces were apparently aware that the audience is responsible for the interpretation, reception and success of plays. They ordained that no theatre director in Paris should allow a performance to spark political tensions by encouraging a 'misleading' interpretation. Their remit was defined as the 'élimination, sur la scène, de toute polémique politique susceptible de

¹⁰⁶ Hobson, p. 45.

provoquer des malentendus ou des interprétations pouvant causer des tensions entre les peuples allemand et français'.¹⁰⁷

The experience of the Occupation was tense and difficult for the French. Daily life was no longer routine, but full of risks, sacrifices, suspicions and dangers. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that audiences were more naturally inclined to have moral and intellectual dilemmas boiling at the surface.¹⁰⁸ Along with the author and performers, the spectators form perhaps the richest source of interpretation and potential complicity in the theatre, showing up in vast numbers at the time of greatest adversity in Paris during the winter of 1943-1944. Such commitment left no-one who could afford a ticket excluded from the possible euphoria of a 'theatre of resistance'. 'The man in the street could even enjoy moments of spiritual and intellectual resistance in innumerable and often unexpected ways which often escaped the vigilance of the German censure.'¹⁰⁹

'Si le despotisme conspire | Vengeons la France et ses lois | Liberté! Liberté!' was sung as a refrain in Balzac's *La Rabouilleuse*, staged by the Comédie-Française, and met with an outcry of approval from the audience.

[Ils] se dressent à chaque représentation pour applaudir ce verset allégorique répondant à leur haine de l'occupant. Bons enfants, les Allemands claquent, eux aussi, des mains. Il ne leur viendrait pas à l'idée que cette profession de foi patriotique soit tortueusement dirigée contre leur Führer.¹¹⁰

Despite the mediocrity of the play as a whole, spectators wanted to express their patriotism and desire for rebellion. '[Le public] cherche avidement, dans les répliques de scène, de

¹⁰⁷ This extract comes from an undated note in the French national archives. Galster, p. 78.

¹⁰⁸ Dussane, p. 136: 'Ce public des années noires [...] et au ventre creux fut peut-être, par là-même, un public plus intelligent, ou, pour le moins, plus volontiers intellectuel.'

¹⁰⁹ *Collaboration in France*, p. 151.

¹¹⁰ Le Boterf, pp. 131-32.

quoi satisfaire son désir de fronde et manifester son refus de l'occupant.'¹¹¹ This ability to show spontaneous approval of any particular line spoken on the stage is an opportunity not to be underestimated.¹¹² The chance to give an outward sign condoning specific ideas communicated in the dialogue could even be said to border on resistance activity. In much the same spirit, Hobson says of Sartre's public, 'Applauding his plays was like joining a secret society'.¹¹³ Guitry noticed the intervention of the Germans whenever his plays sparked vocal outbursts of approval from the public. Even if the specific words of a play did not overly concern the Germans, the boost it might give to an excitable audience was, in the occupier's eyes, unacceptable.¹¹⁴

Sadly, it seems that a complete record of such incidents of public unrest in the theatre has been lost or was destroyed by the Germans before leaving Paris. However, thanks to the diligence of certain theatre-goers and the existence of police archives, we know that (apparently) spontaneous responses on the part of the French to allegedly hidden messages in theatrical texts actually occurred. Audiences were keen to 'manifester une salubre impertinence'.¹¹⁵ This is noteworthy because such outbursts could create serious diplomatic problems for theatres like the Comédie-Française that were obliged to cooperate – that is, collaborate – with the Germans. One may assume that those put in charge of the theatre by the Germans, as well as the Vichy government and Parisian police, were keen to avoid incidents that might attract unwanted attention or intervention from the occupiers.

The Parisian public was a crucial vector in determining the 'resistant' nature of certain plays and their vocal manifestations vital to the reception of my five chosen works.

¹¹¹ Michel, p. 341.

¹¹² Guitry, p. 167: 'Le théâtre procure à des gens assemblées le loisir d'affirmer ce qu'ils pensent en frappant dans leurs mains. Incomparable privilège.'

¹¹³ Hobson, p. 42.

¹¹⁴ Guitry, p. 203: 'la Propagandastaffel me fit demander de bien vouloir jouer de manière à ne pas provoquer de manifestations'.

¹¹⁵ Dussane, p. 37. 'Plaisirs des idées, plaisir du théâtre, plaisir de la désobéissance: plaisirs français' (p. 159).

Reactions to *Les Parents terribles*, Guy Rotter's *Kiddou* (November 1942) and Racine's *L'Andromaque*, staged by Jean Marais in May 1944, even provoked official intervention.¹¹⁶ More importantly, perhaps, they could give a very different verdict from the press.¹¹⁷ Cocteau's *Renaud et Armide* was extremely well received despite being castigated by the press. In the April 1943 issue of *Révolution Nationale*, Pierre Ducrocq criticised not only Cocteau's style and poetry (classical verse), but also the audience present at the performance. The multiple meanings of theatre texts and the unpredictability of an audience's reaction frequently provide a fascinating study of the potential 'resistant' content or reception of plays performed during the Occupation of Paris. While the spectators' response certainly contributed to determining the destiny of a play, perhaps the greatest sphere of influence in Parisian society was the fourth estate.

The power of the official press

It is not possible in this thesis to write a history of the French press during the Occupation, and this ground in any case has already been comprehensively covered.¹¹⁸ However, this section will highlight the journalists, papers, reviews and events which had the biggest impact upon the theatre. The most influential editors and their publications will be presented for their contribution to the majority consensus on the five plays I have selected. Propaganda, verdicts on plays and articles by my chosen authors, and accusations diffused by the press will also be put under the spotlight in the subsequent chapters.

¹¹⁶ *La vie culturelle sous Vichy*, ed. Jean-Pierre Rioux (Éditions Complexe, 1990), p. 322: 'des problèmes dans l'assistance sont à l'origine des arrêts préfectoraux interdisant certaines pièces'.

¹¹⁷ Le Boterf, p. 157: 'Une fois de plus, le public ne ratifie pas le jugement de la critique.'

¹¹⁸ Pascal Fouché, *L'Édition française sous l'Occupation: 1940-1944* (Bibliothèque de littérature française contemporaine de l'Université Paris 7, 1987).

The most outspoken papers devoted to culture were run by proactive collaborators. It was even normal to see Third Reich propaganda on the streets in Paris. ‘Au cours de l’été 1940 apparut l’édition parisienne de *Signal* qui allait contribuer à la diffusion de l’esthétique nazie pendant toute l’Occupation.’¹¹⁹ Anouilh said *Antigone* was inspired by the picture of a young resister in *Signal* and its prominence is evident in a photo of a Parisian newsstand that features an enormous sign extolling its reliability for the latest events.¹²⁰

Concerning the French-run papers, pan-German ideals were praised somewhat more subtly, but no less enthusiastically. Laubreaux wrote frequently for *Je suis partout* as well as for the Vichy-run *Le Cri du Peuple*. His standpoint of arch-collaboration led to many harsh reviews and fights in public with theatre directors and actors whose reputations suffered from his vindictive articles. Edouard Bourdet, ‘contôleur général’ at the Comédie-Française, even publicly slapped Laubreaux outside the Théâtre Athénée in response to his virulent publicity. Jean Marais, the principal actor in Cocteau’s *La Machine à écrire*, also attacked Laubreaux outside a restaurant opposite the Théâtre Hébertot following a derogatory review.¹²¹

Marais and Cocteau were easy scapegoats for the allegedly corrupting influence of the theatre, due to their homosexuality and the latter’s opium addiction.¹²² Initially banned by Vichy, *Les Parents terribles* underwent cuts by Cocteau and the Germans intervened on his behalf to get it staged again in December 1941 (Cocteau had befriended Ernst Junger and Gerhard Heller, among others). However, insistent attacks on the Gymnase theatre by

¹¹⁹ *Paris-Paris 1937-1957* (Gallimard, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1992), p. 147.

¹²⁰ Galster, p. 99.

¹²¹ This incident was used in François Truffaut’s 1980 film, *Le Dernier Métro*, using different names.

¹²² Grenier, p. 121: ‘Il avait en effet recommencé à fumer de l’opium.’

the Parti Populaire Français (PPF), including the release of rats when the public applauded the performance, prevented it being performed again for another four years.

Laubreaux's unashamed criticism of the Jews subsequently brought the anti-Semitism of Louis-Ferdinand Céline into the limelight with the approving remark, 'Raison de race doit surpasser raison d'État.'¹²³ Both men condemned Cocteau's plot, likening it to the 'immorality' of Jewish theatre. However, Laubreaux's influence extended much further than mere journalism. He increased his hold on public opinion by promoting his own violently anti-Semitic play, *Les Pirates de Paris*. Serge Added confirms in no uncertain terms that, 'La presse pouvait donc orienter la vision des spectateurs.'¹²⁴ For example, not a single paper read by Parisians during the Occupation contained a favourable, or indeed politically astute, review of Sartre's *Les Mouches*.¹²⁵ This was bound to influence the point of view of spectators already confused by the Surrealist décor and costumes, and by the unusually racy language.

Lucien Rebatet, another writer for *Je suis partout*, likewise turned his hand to publication, writing an astonishingly successful pro-German novel, *Les Décombres*, in 1942. A sensational 65,000 copies were sold in the first month. There were also many calls to violence and anti-Semitism in Brasillach's wartime journalism, largely brought about by his 'conversion' to fascism at the 1941 Weimar Congress of Writers. His *Chronique de Paris* was inevitably stained by the fascist leanings of the majority of its writers, as were *La*

¹²³ *Je suis partout*, 12 November 1941. Grenier, p. 322, quotes Céline's boast to a circle of artists and writers in December 1943: 'Je suis le seul antisémite. Hitler ne l'est pas; il protège les Juifs.'

¹²⁴ Added, p. 288.

¹²⁵ Added, pp. 259-60. For the complete set of reviews, see *Sartre devant la presse d'Occupation: Le dossier critique des 'Mouches' et 'Huis clos'*. *Textes réunis et présentés par Ingrid Galster*, ed. Ingrid Galster (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005).

Gerbe and *Comœdia* – ‘the theater magazine of the Occupation’.¹²⁶ One can justifiably wonder, ‘Was it ever innocent to write purely literary and unpolitical texts if they appeared in collaboration journals like *La Gerbe*?’.¹²⁷ It is noteworthy that all of the five playwrights under examination in the following chapters contributed to at least one of the above publications, which must counterbalance any claim that they were model resisters or writing unadulterated ‘resistant’ theatre.

During the *Épuration*, the files from trials and investigations of authors made virtually no reference to the plays they had written, even the select few that were actually composed during the Occupation. ‘Les gens de théâtre, auteurs et critiques, sont donc peu nombreux à être voués à l’opprobre, au silence et à la solitude et, quand ils figurent sur la liste, c’est pour leurs articles partisans, non pour leurs partitions scéniques.’¹²⁸ The blacklist in question was published in the September and October issues of *Les Lettres françaises*, and featured only authors for whom theatre was not the major contributor to their success: Montherlant, Drieu La Rochelle, Brasillach, Laubreaux and Rebatet, for example. Dullin, Guitry, Lenormand, Montherlant, Vermorel (as a regular critic), Cocteau and Anouilh all contributed to *La Gerbe*. Sartre, Claudel, Barrault and the composer Arthur Honegger wrote in *Comœdia*. Jean Giono was officially reproached for his association with the *NRF*. However, during the *Épuration*, his pro-Vichy *Le Bout de la route* – performed at the Noctambules theatre in 1941 – was not even mentioned, even though it was one of the most frequently performed plays of the Occupation period, totalling nearly a thousand showings.

¹²⁶ Bishop, p. 30. Michel, p. 346, also speaks of a stain on France: ‘[C]ombien aurait été plus pure et plus chaleureuse, à la Libération, la lumière d’une culture française qui, dans la capitale des arts et des lettres, aurait refusé *toute souillure* de la dépendance et de la collaboration’ (my emphasis).

¹²⁷ Jackson, p. 315.

¹²⁸ Guérin, p. 328.

Montherlant was sanctioned for his writings in the Parisian press without reference to his two plays, though the punishment was only nominal given that the one-year publication and conference ban from October 1944 had already expired by the time of passing the sentence. Subjected to both the *Comité régional interprofessionnel d'épuration* and the *Comité d'épuration des gens de lettres*, Jean Anouilh was reprimanded for publishing articles in compromised papers, though his writings revealed no political convictions. The decision by writers such as Malraux and Vercors to abstain from all authorised publication – indeed, any contact whatsoever with the Germans – was therefore understandable. ‘The moral was that the only way to avoid compromising oneself was to abstain from any public gestures.’¹²⁹ Any concrete evidence of meetings, correspondence or writings tainted with collaboration was bound to cause problems for authors during the intensely vengeful period of the *Épuration*.

Another alternative was to be involved in clandestine publications. Vercors and Pierre de Lescure founded the underground publishing house, Les Éditions de Minuit, in 1941. Vercors’s subversive short story, *Le Silence de la mer*, addressed the duplicity of the German ‘interest’ in French culture. Through the compulsory hosting of a German soldier in a French home, Vercors shows that the daughter’s purposeful silence in the face of the occupier is the only appropriate, honourable and consistent attitude for the defeated French. Any hope of compromise or union between the two nations is presented as naïve and illusory.

Jean Marc Bruller used the pseudonym Vercors in order to publish and diffuse this Resistance message, though he was by no means the only person to do so. Jean Paulhan also used many different *noms de plume* in order to publish calls to Resistance. In February

¹²⁹ Jackson, p. 313.

1944, for instance, he wrote 'L'Abeille' in *Les Cahiers de la Libération* under the name of Juste.¹³⁰ Furthermore, in 1942 he formed the clandestine review, *Les Lettres Françaises*, with Jacques Decour. The latter was arrested by the Gestapo and executed by German firing squad 30 May 1942, thus delaying its first appearance (September). Not until the twentieth issue was it openly published in September 1944. In this paper, political and literary topics were covered from a Resistance perspective and in August 1943 12,000 copies were circulated, before being passed on to more readers by hand. Its heroes were Resistance victims and its villains those who had benefited from intellectual collaboration. Its remit was entirely unambiguous: '*Les Lettres Françaises* will be our arm of combat. By its publication we intend to integrate ourselves, in our role as writers, in the struggle to the death begun by the French nation to free itself from its oppressors.'¹³¹

If the collaborationist press targeted individuals, as much as plays, the same may be said of clandestine Resistance publications. Drieu La Rochelle had taken on the job of editor of the *NRF* at the Germans' behest; he became friends with Otto Abetz, the German Ambassador, and his pro-New Europe sentiments were well-known and approved of by the occupier. He was the subject of a lengthy unsigned castigation in the April 1943 edition of *Les Lettres françaises*, which later became Sartre's 'Portrait d'un Collaborateur.' Drieu committed suicide in 1945. He had tried to recruit French authors for the *NRF*, but according to François Mauriac – writing in 1949, 'La majorité des écrivains sont hostiles à l'occupant et la plupart ont un rôle dans la Résistance. Ils préfèrent se tenir à distance d'un projet taché de nazisme.'¹³²

¹³⁰ *Paris-Paris 1937-1957*, p. 507.

¹³¹ Wilkinson, p. 44.

¹³² *Paris-Paris 1937-1957*, p. 519.

Gerhard Heller, present as interpreter for a November 1940 meeting between Abetz and Drieu, claimed that most ex-writers for the *NRF* contacted by Drieu were keen to support its reforming. However, there is evidence to show that, with Gallimard excluded, Paulhan refused joint management and André Gide later pulled out, with Malraux blankly refusing to contribute.¹³³ Drieu turned the *NRF* into a(nother) collaborationist stronghold: ‘sous l’autorité de M. Drieu La Rochelle, cela va devenir le pivot de la collaboration franco-allemande.’¹³⁴ However, clandestine publications were few and far between in the cultural sphere. *La Scène Française*, for instance, produced only a single issue during the entire Occupation period, and there was no organized resistance in the theatrical arena.¹³⁵

It seems that the Parisian press, like audiences, was searching for a playwright who would bring something new, challenging and exciting to the stage, to arouse the rebellious urges of the reading public. If the papers were unable or disinclined to pick up on a Resistance message, maybe the authors of plays were simply not willing to take unnecessary risks or be reckless, given the circumstances and inevitable repercussions. ‘La presse réclama du théâtre qu’il enfantât un auteur “nouveau”. Il ne vint pas.’¹³⁶ Indeed, Claude Vermorel was perhaps the only young playwright to be praised by the press. *Jeanne avec nous* was performed by a young theatre company under the manifesto of the Théâtre d’Essai, which claimed to promote new authors but fell back on adaptations (and plays by George Bernard Shaw) once Vermorel’s play had run its course.

Overall, the influence of the press was such that it could get actors arrested, plays banned and propaganda spread, but its role in the success and interpretation of my five

¹³³ Gerhard Heller, *Un Allemand à Paris* (Éditions du Seuil, 1981), p. 42. See Grenier, pp. 152-53 and p. 297.

¹³⁴ Heller, pp. 45-46.

¹³⁵ Guérin, p. 286 and p. 289, points out that the theatre barely features in even the most comprehensive accounts of either the Collaboration or Resistance movements.

¹³⁶ Added, p. 337. See also *Aujourd’hui*, 9 January 1943, and *La Semaine à Paris*, 16-23 January 1943.

chosen plays was considerably more complex. Anouilh's *Antigone*, in 1944, provoked the mostly clearly contrasted reviews and interpretations. The press alternatively hailed the play for communicating an effective oppositional message or saw it as a pro-Nazi plea for fascist government. Sartre's *Les Mouches* was, embarrassingly, praised in the German paper *Signal*, receiving 'a lukewarm reception from the collaborationist press. It encouraged, of course, the nascent spirit of resistance in Paris.'¹³⁷

The complex reaction sparked by my chosen handful of plays, all of which were first performed during the Occupation, is a key element in addressing their various Resistance claims. The role of the Parisian press cannot be discounted, as its influence was far-reaching. Along with the spectators, it helped to determine the wartime reception of plays. In addition, the press was capable of seriously compromising the reputations and situations of those participating in, opposed to, or even targeted by the official collaborationist publications.

Conclusion

In order to tackle further the complex question of whether or not a 'theatre of resistance' was possible during the Occupation, it will be necessary to examine in detail the various participating factors presented in this chapter. The term could be said to cover many aspects of performances, including public outbursts sparked by plays which would not otherwise have pretensions to such a title. Also, many 'undesirable' foreign plays were adapted, translated and often performed privately (such as Picasso's *Le Désir attrapé par la queue*), though they do not form the subject of this thesis. The five selected plays, to each of which a chapter is dedicated, are marked out by their impact during the Occupation and

¹³⁷ Hobson, p. 86.

their identification by critics as landmarks in theatrical creativity. The pro-Resistance claims for each one will be analysed using the scripts, evidence of audience response, reviews and any concrete indications of German reactions or interventions.

The circumstances surrounding each production will be presented as accurately and comprehensively as surviving documents allow, as will their effect on the public and the press. Potential allusions to the contemporary situation will be tested for their credibility, taking into account the moment of writing and the author's probable intentions. Discussion of the many meanings contained within each play will be accompanied by an examination of the benefits of purely French artistic projects for the theatre-going public and the profession itself. '[T]enu sous une cloche pneumatique où l'air respirable se raréfiait un peu plus chaque jour, [le public] accourait chercher quelques gorgées d'oxygène, quelques accents *authentiquement français*, dans le répertoire de la Comédie'.¹³⁸

This exploration of five plays covers the final three theatrical seasons of the Occupation, beginning with Vermorel's *Jeanne avec nous* in January 1942 when the beginnings of Resistance activity were first being seen. Frequent pro-Resistance claims have been made for this play and it was allegedly withdrawn by order of the Germans only a few months after it was first staged. The Joan of Arc story had already been imported, exploited by Vichy and approved by the Germans. The following interrogation will attempt to discern how such bold claims could be made that a play written before the war contributed to a 'theatre of resistance'.

¹³⁸ *Courrier français du témoignage chrétien*, 4 November 1944 (my emphasis).

CHAPTER TWO

CLAUDE VERMOREL: *JEANNE AVEC NOUS*

Although no list of plays banned during the Occupation has survived, and the German *Propagandastaffel* records were destroyed, Patrick Marsh has analysed the performance scripts held at the Comédie-Française.¹³⁹ The blacked-out lines in these copies give an indication of what the occupier intended to edit from French plays. Almost without exception, they are allusions to the material circumstances of the early 1940s, derogatory references to the Germans or positive ones concerning the Allies, Jews or ‘negroes’. Obvious mention of material shortages, German activity (such as the occasional unexplained ‘disappearance’ of French hostages) or the tactics of war were usually forbidden. Therefore, if dramatists wished to communicate oppositional ideas in a theatre text, they had to find other ways of doing so. The most readily available, as suggested in the previous chapter, was the use of myth or historical events reaching far back into the past. A shared understanding of such themes between French performers and spectators could make use of plural meanings or allegory inherent in the text – whether or not this was intended on the part of the playwright by using anachronisms, implications or double meanings.

The first play for consideration as potentially belonging to a ‘theatre of resistance’ is Claude Vermorel’s 1938 dramatisation of Joan of Arc’s trial, first performed on 10 January 1942. In 1945, a second production of *Jeanne avec nous* was performed at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier with the dedicatee, Paula Dehelly, restored to the title role.

¹³⁹ Patrick Marsh, ‘Censorship in France during the German Occupation’, *Theatre Research International*, 4 (1978), pp. 27-31.

For this occasion, the playwright wrote an article in *Opéra* explaining the genesis and career of his play, and identified a pro-Resistance message in *Jeanne avec nous*, claiming it had been banned by the occupying authorities. Certainly, the story of Joan's rebellion, trial and martyrdom, which had been exploited from many different political angles over the previous centuries, was ideal material to please French audiences on the lookout for subversive content to fuel their anti-Occupation sentiments.

Although it was written before 1940, a considerable proportion of Vermorel's text is concerned with the topics of occupation, collaboration, torture by an oppressor, the legitimacy of the French leader and the appropriate response to invasion by a foreign power. These features enabled the Joan of Arc theme to be transposed or manipulated so that the invader was implied to be Germany rather than England. The diverse representations of the fifteenth-century saint during the Occupation of France will be discussed in this chapter, followed by an examination of Vermorel's politics and Occupation activities, in order to see how they may have coloured not only the audience's reception of the play but the legacy of its interpretation. First, however, it is necessary to study the staging of Vermorel's text and the differing interpretations it has provoked.

The premiere and an overview of the play

The story of Joan of Arc is open to many different interpretations, not least because of the unknowns and ambiguities surrounding her character, trial and trial strategy. It is therefore understandable, even inevitable, that people defending vastly different and conflicting ideologies should exaggerate certain aspects of her life in order to promote their own interests. The reception of Vermorel's *Jeanne avec nous* was never more enthusiastic than during the Occupation of Paris. 'À l'époque, on s'en souvient, les représentations

d'œuvres sur Jeanne d'Arc se multipliaient dans la capitale.'¹⁴⁰ On this basis, it is possible to argue that the play is a *pièce de circonstance*, benefiting from the unusual conditions of the early 1940s which brought an extra significance to bear on the text.

Those who opposed the Vichy government and wished to defy and expel the Germans might have read a message of resistance into the text, though it would be far from obvious to those more convinced by other aspects of Joan's character, such as her strength, country values or her mockery of the English. 'Dans le cas de *Jeanne avec nous*, les circonstances prédisposaient les différents publics à y voir ce qu'ils voulaient.'¹⁴¹ 1942 was a definite high point for Joan of Arc in this respect, as many facets of her story seemed to be reflected in the conflicts of the Occupation.

De Gaulle l'invoqua, et Pétain également: Dieu étant toujours de tous les côtés à la fois. [...] Ainsi, Jeanne se trouvait dans toutes les bouches et dans tous les cœurs: sur les autels et dans les théâtres, dans les discours des officiers réactionnaires et dans les chuchotements de la Résistance. Le mythe semble avoir atteint ici son apogée, fait d'ambiguïtés et d'incertitudes.¹⁴²

Curiously, not a single Joan of Arc play actually written during the Second World War was performed on the stage of occupied Paris. Vermorel's play was the last on the subject to be produced and was possibly responsible for the subsequent lack of *Pucelle* plays because of its potential to encourage French audiences on the lookout for subversive content.¹⁴³

Debate about *Jeanne avec nous* not only resulted from its subject material, but was also a feature of the events leading to its premiere.

¹⁴⁰ *La Croix*, 28 October 1956.

¹⁴¹ Laurent Broche, 'Médiévales et actuelles. Investigations sur quelques pièces de théâtre du temps de la tourmente (1939-1945)', conference paper for the *Société Internationale pour l'étude du Théâtre Médiéval* in Lille, 2-7 July 2007.

¹⁴² Edith Thomas, *Jeanne d'Arc* (Éditions Hier et Aujourd'hui, 1947), p. 266.

¹⁴³ Named *La Pucelle* (the Maid) in French, Vermorel's Jeanne departs from historical records as she is raped by the guards.

Vermorel made several attempts to get his play staged, including writing a letter commending a new version of the Joan of Arc story to Georges Pitoëff, who was to stage Shaw's *Sainte Jeanne* in 1940 and was the director of the Théâtre des Mathurins, the intended venue for Vermorel's play.¹⁴⁴ In the event, however, delays prevented the premiere from taking place there. Although *Jeanne avec nous* was not staged in its entirety until January 1942, Vermorel adapted it for the libretto of André Jolivet's cantata, *La Tentation dernière de Jeanne d'Arc*, which was broadcasted on the radio on 16 May 1941 and again in 1942.¹⁴⁵ The visa for the play was given in 1940, although problems with funding and the cast delayed the first performance. In the 10 January 1942 issue of *Comœdia* Vermorel conveyed the distress caused by the departure of Joèle Le Feuvre, who was due to play the title role.

Jeanne avec nous ran for more than three months at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. The 4 April 1942 edition of *Comœdia* dates the final performance at the Champs-Élysées to 29 March. Gabriel Jacobs mysteriously speaks of a transfer to the Théâtre de l'Ambigu at the end of February, though his remark is unsupported by 1940s documents referring to the play.¹⁴⁶ The weekly adverts in *Comœdia*, for example, mention no change of venue. After a hiatus, it was staged again at the Théâtre Pigalle from 26 June to the end of August 1942, achieving its milestone hundredth performance on the weekend of 4-5 July. Postwar stagings of the play took place in 1945, 1946 (Théâtre Verlaine), 1954 (on the cathedral square of Notre-Dame) and 1956 (Théâtre en Rond), as well as 'une série de représentations acclamées dans les villes libérées d'Alsace et de Lorraine' before the

¹⁴⁴ 3 February (1939?). Paris, BnF Richelieu, *Lettre de Claude Vermorel à Georges Pitoëff*, COL 17/320.

¹⁴⁵ *Comœdia*, 9 May 1942: 'Sept poètes et sept musiciens se sont réunis sous le patronage de la radiodiffusion nationale' (my emphasis). The broadcast was thus officially sponsored by Vichy.

¹⁴⁶ Gabriel Jacobs, 'The Role of Joan of Arc on the Stage of Occupied Paris', in *Vichy France and the Resistance: Culture and Ideology*, ed. Kedward and Austin (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 114.

Parisian *reprise* in December 1945.¹⁴⁷ The initial restriction on the number of performances was imposed by the Vichy-funded Théâtre d'Essai.

Le règlement du Théâtre d'Essai de la Comédie des Champs-Élysées imposait une durée limitée aux représentations des pièces retenues. Aussi, après trois mois, les représentations cessèrent. Vermorel, soutenu par la presse qui regrettait l'arrêt de sa pièce, sollicita des subventions pour couvrir le déficit.¹⁴⁸

This organisation comprised the triple administration of the Société des auteurs, the Association des directeurs and the Union des artistes. Its purpose was to showcase and support new talent: stage directors, actors and dramatists. Designed to facilitate the difficult first contact with the theatre-going public, the Théâtre d'Essai made its own début with *Jeanne avec nous*.

The Comédie des Champs-Élysées was made available by the Germans, who had reserved it for their exclusive use throughout the first year of their stay.¹⁴⁹ The *Propagandastaffel* was housed on the same avenue and the Germans retained the smaller Théâtre des Champs-Élysées until the end of the Occupation.¹⁵⁰ The Théâtre d'Essai was also designed to appeal to young people, only charging between five and forty francs for the seats and advertising the play to students.¹⁵¹ Indeed, the company that performed Vermorel's play, *Le Rideau de Jeunes*, was made up of little-known actors near the beginning of their careers. The troupe had already had success on the stage with Giono's *Le Bout de la Route* and Shaw's *Candida*. By all accounts, there was much admiration for their spirit and work ethic.

¹⁴⁷ Laurent Broche.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, note 91. Broche is referring to official documents housed in the French archives.

¹⁴⁹ *Les Nouveaux Temps*, 13 October 1941: 'Ce théâtre a été mis à la disposition de la Société du Théâtre d'Essai par les autorités occupants qui se l'étaient jusqu'ici réservé par voie de réquisition.'

¹⁵⁰ Annette Fuchs-Betteridge, Appendix I.

¹⁵¹ 'Les jeunes avec nous', *Comœdia*, 24 January 1942.

Chacun a senti que la soirée avait révélé deux nouvelles personnalités: un auteur dramatique et un metteur en scène: Douking, et a vanté les mérites d'une troupe de talent, disciplinée, cohérente, dévouée à l'œuvre noble qu'elle interprète et, par surcroît, désintéressée puisqu'elle n'est rétribuée que sur les bénéfices qu'elle a éventuellement à se partager.¹⁵²

The rules laid down by the Théâtre d'Essai stipulated the provision of a stage, a short rehearsal period of three to six weeks and the self-sufficiency of the theatre company. The organisation was not looking for commercial gain, and the actors were only given a small percentage of the eventual profit. 'The venture was rather meagrely funded, and the actors of the Compagnie du Théâtre d'Essais [*sic*] worked without pay during the rehearsal period; but their obvious enthusiasm carried them through, and the play opened to a warm reception.'¹⁵³ It was evidently worth braving the harsh winter for the premiere and reviewers warmly praised both play and playwright. 'La presse a reconnu en [Vermorel], avec une quasi-unanimité assez exceptionnelle, un tempérament personnel et vigoureux d'auteur dramatique et chaleureusement vanté les mérites de la pièce, de l'interprétation et de la présentation.'¹⁵⁴ Although there were mixed reactions to Berthe Tissen in the role of Jeanne, Lucien Blondeau's performance as Cauchon was singled out as one of the real highlights; he was to steal the show when reappearing in the same part for the 1956 production.¹⁵⁵

It appears that the initial success of the Théâtre d'Essai did not continue in the same vein. The next project was an adaptation of Lope de Vega's *L'Étoile de Séville*. Complaints were expressed that the organisation was no longer fulfilling its mission of encouraging

¹⁵² *Paris Soir*, 3 February 1942.

¹⁵³ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 114.

¹⁵⁴ *Comœdia*, 24 January 1942.

¹⁵⁵ *Figaro*, 18 October 1956: 'J'ai retrouvé avec plaisir Lucien Blondeau. Il était, à la création, un excellent évêque Cauchon. Il l'est resté.'

unperformed young playwrights.¹⁵⁶ After such a promising start, ‘Les plus légitimes espérances étaient permises. Hélas! réussite sans lendemain.’¹⁵⁷ Indeed, even towards the end of the first month of performances, the number of spectators for *Jeanne avec nous* dwindled significantly.¹⁵⁸ Pierre Fresnay, a director on the Comité du Théâtre d’Essai, attributed this to the name of the host organisation, wondering if the audience ‘ne confond “essais” et “balbutiements”, s’il ne se dit “Trop d’essais nous ont déçus, nous voulons des garanties”’.¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, one may assume the numbers picked up as sufficient interest – and presumably funding – enabled a further staging of the work at the end of June of the same year, ‘réclamée par le grand public qui venait alors en foule l’applaudir’.¹⁶⁰ In a report on the 1941-1942 theatre season, a special place was reserved for Vermorel’s first theatrical success.

A la Comédie des Champs-Élysées, M. Claude Vermorel, avec *Jeanne avec nous*, a eu le mérite de reprendre hardiment un sujet architraté et de le renouveler. M. Vermorel voit, d’un œil exercé et sûr, le fond des âmes et les nuances les plus subtils des événements. Une si incontestable réussite...¹⁶¹

A new perspective on Joan of Arc, written in a modern yet noble style, seems to have been exactly what the stage of Occupied Paris needed.¹⁶²

A bursary was allocated to Vermorel, following a successful application to – and viewing by – Louis Hauteœur, the man in charge of distributing Vichy funding for the arts. The seemingly paradoxical mixture of Vichy subsidies legitimising the performance,

¹⁵⁶ *La Gerbe*, 16 April 1942, and *Comœdia*, 19 August 1942: ‘si le Théâtre d’essai ne nous révélait à chaque saison qu’un jeune auteur aussi méritant que M. Vermorel, et une œuvre aussi digne d’intérêt que *Jeanne avec nous*, il ferait beaucoup mieux de justifier son utilité’.

¹⁵⁷ *France Socialiste*, 31 March 1943.

¹⁵⁸ Audiberti, *Comœdia*, 11 July 1942, remembers the ‘petit nombre des spectateurs’ at winter performances.

¹⁵⁹ *Comœdia*, 24 January 1942.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, June 1942.

¹⁶¹ Jean Silvani, *L’Appel*, 20 August 1942.

¹⁶² *Combat*, 5 October 1956: ‘il n’a pas craint d’exprimer par un langage moderne des mouvements psychologiques particuliers à notre siècle.’

the use of a German-leased theatre, approval from the collaborationist press and an alleged Resistance message provide for an array of mixed messages matched by the play's dialogue and paratextual elements.

In the 1942 programme for *Jeanne avec nous*, Vermorel wrote about the limited sources available to consult on the play's subject material.¹⁶³ However, he stays close to the trial transcripts first collected in as complete an edition as possible – given doubts, for example, about the authenticity of Joan's signed confession – by Quicherat in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶⁴ Vermorel's play opens with hearsay about the identity and innocence of Jeanne, then exposes the tensions between ranks of the French and English armies with the arrival of Warwick and Bedford.¹⁶⁵ They discuss the background to the trial and prepare the entrance of Cauchon, whose reputation as a champion of justice precedes him.¹⁶⁶ The chairman lays down the charges and a heated argument about witchcraft and the conflicting portraits of Jeanne takes place.¹⁶⁷ The trial begins about halfway through the first act and ends as the curtain falls on the second act. Here Jeanne is in her element, playing the judges off each other and making them look somewhat ridiculous.¹⁶⁸ She exposes the flaws in their accusations, provoking them to silence or anger by her intractability, surprising stamina and digressions from the trial.¹⁶⁹

The final two acts are set in Jeanne's prison where she is taunted and tempted in turn by the guards, Bedford, Nicolas (her confessor) and Lemaître (the inquisitor). The

¹⁶³ *Comœdia*, 17 January 1942: 'Ce que se demandent les historiens divers et successifs qui n'ont de certain sur elle, s'ils n'ont la foi, que deux ou trois pièces d'archives, deux ou trois chroniques de propagande, et les minutes du procès, douteux comme tous les procès de tendance.'

¹⁶⁴ J. Quicherat, *Procès de condamnation et de réhabilitation de Jeanne d'Arc dite la Pucelle* (1841-1849).

¹⁶⁵ Claude Vermorel, *Jeanne avec nous* (Éditions Balzac, 1942), hereafter referred to as *JAN*, p. 15.

¹⁶⁶ *JAN*, p. 19.

¹⁶⁷ *JAN*, pp. 29-31.

¹⁶⁸ *JAN*, p. 67, for example.

¹⁶⁹ This is the case for Warwick (*JAN*, p. 42), then Estivet (*JAN*, pp. 44-48), Courcelles (*JAN*, pp. 71-74) and Cauchon (*JAN*, p. 73).

combined pressure and threats of Courcelles, the prosecutor Estivet, the monk Martin Ladvenu, the Count of Warwick and Cauchon finally force Jeanne to sign a retraction.¹⁷⁰

The first scene of the fourth act is a long, melancholic exchange between Ladvenu and Jeanne where we learn that she has been raped by the guards and is resigned to her fate.¹⁷¹

The closing scene returns to the courtroom, where blame is apportioned for the sloppy manner in which the execution was handled.¹⁷² Several eye witness accounts are shared and opinions given as to the legacy of Jeanne and the international consequences of her death.¹⁷³

The final twist is a change of political situation in England that renders Jeanne's murder utterly pointless and a fright is given by a sculptor carrying in a statue of 'Faith', which is mistaken for Jeanne. The ambiguity of Jeanne's identity is summed up by Bedford.

Le plus beau pour la fin: c'est nous, Anglais, qui l'avons mise à mort, et sans procès. Cela devient une plaisante histoire, n'est-ce pas? Pauvre fille! Que vas-tu devenir, tirée ainsi à nos quatre mensonges. Dans cinquante ans d'ici, s'il advient qu'on parle de toi, en quelle étrange image t'aura-t-on travestie? Qui étais-tu? Le savais-tu toi-même?¹⁷⁴

Perhaps this reminder of 'Allied' culpability was sufficient to satisfy the 1942 occupying forces: 'The theme of Jeanne d'Arc was popular with the Germans, as for them it represented France oppressed by the English.'¹⁷⁵ The unresolved theses on peace achieved by armed force or collaboration leave much room for interpretation. The play ends with a characteristic note of uncertainty from the sculptor's question: 'Quelle Jeanne d'Arc?'.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ *JAN*, pp. 121-23.

¹⁷¹ *JAN*, p. 131.

¹⁷² Cauchon is deemed responsible for this. *JAN*, p. 147.

¹⁷³ *JAN*, p. 152.

¹⁷⁴ *JAN*, p. 153.

¹⁷⁵ Patrick Marsh (1977), p. 142.

¹⁷⁶ *JAN*, p. 155.

The political message of Joan of Arc during the Occupation

Most periods of recent history in France have laid claim to the legacy of Joan of Arc, inevitably emphasising certain of her qualities whilst playing down others. Countless versions of her story have been written, sung, spoken and staged, and its appeal is ongoing. She can be seen to represent the defence and legitimacy of French rule, the importance of rural values or salvation from foreign oppression. The anti-English angle holds great appeal for the French, as does the military nature of Joan's revolt. The trial, fraught as it was with corruption and carefully constructed lies, maintains the theatrical impact it must surely have had in 1431. The Occupation saw a rich output of works about the legendary heroine, with vast celebrations organised for 'Joan of Arc Day' on 11 May each year often featuring performances of French (and other) plays, musical compositions or books in dialogue form.

Aucun personnage n'aura si souvent brûlé les planches que Jeanne, si nous osons dire, depuis la Libération. Ce fut pourtant durant la guerre que la tragédie de Vermorel aura affronté les feux de la rampe pour la première fois, et l'on s'interrogea alors sur sa vaillance. [...] Nous eûmes la *Jeanne d'Arc* de Péguy, chez Hébertot, *Jeanne et les juges*, grâce à Thierry Maulnier, la *Jeanne au bûcher* de Paul Claudel et Darius Milhaud.¹⁷⁷

1942 was a key year for festivities, marking the publication of a (controversial) tome edited by Guitry, entitled *1429-1942. De Jeanne d'Arc à Philippe Pétain*.¹⁷⁸ The superficial similarities of these two figures as saviours of France in the context of foreign occupation were frequently highlighted. Various interpretations of the Johannic legend flourished in Paris as parallels were made with the contemporary situation. This section will examine a brief selection of the foremost political messages expounded using this

¹⁷⁷ *Le Monde*, 19 October 1956.

¹⁷⁸ The book included contributions from eminent French writers such as Giraudoux and Cocteau.

historical framework and will summarise the changing trends seen in the official and popular banners for Joan of Arc waved by the French in Paris.

Perhaps the most crucial factor in obtaining approval for a Joan of Arc play during the Occupation was the Anglophobic angle of her story. Indeed, many postwar articles suggested that the Germans must have been blinded to the double meanings in the play because of a short-sighted interpretation of its message. One reviewer, imagining the reaction of the German censor, postulates their reasoning: ‘Ca, [c’est une] très bonne pièce. Pièce contre Anglais. Une pièce pour Jeanne d’Arc, c’est forcément une pièce pour Allemands.’¹⁷⁹ The argument is certainly appealing, given the representation of the English as unwanted occupiers who must be kicked out of France and Joan’s evident sarcasm (shared by the French soldiers) towards the invaders from across the channel. The English also burnt Joan at the stake, breaking the Treaty formed between the two countries. Indeed, at various points in 1942 animosity towards the allied forces would have been particularly strong, given the fresh memory of the sunken French fleet at Dunkirk and Mers-El-Kébir. The Allied bombing of factories at Billancourt in early March of the same year caused 623 deaths and a day of national mourning was announced for 7 March, followed by anti-English campaigns in the press.¹⁸⁰

A reading of this topic needs only to be literal in order to implicate the English. The first big success for Joan of Arc in the theatre of occupied Paris was Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, performed in French (*Sainte Jeanne*) in 1940, which posed no problem whatsoever for the Germans. Quite the opposite, perhaps: ‘Double malice, devaient penser les censeurs de l’armée occupante, puisqu’il s’agissait d’une héroïne française dressée contre les Anglais et

¹⁷⁹ Jacques Mauchamps, *Spectateur*, 2 January 1946.

¹⁸⁰ Added, p. 266.

célébrée par le plus irréductible des Irlandais.’¹⁸¹ On 4 January 1946, in *Minerve*, François le Roux surmised the probable German response to *Jeanne avec nous*:

Je suppose que lorsque tout le monde comprenait ‘Allemands’, eux, selon le texte littéral, entendaient: ‘Anglais’. Il est même possible qu’un de leurs censeurs, moins épais que les autres, en devinant les allusions, ait jugé qu’après tout la pièce était historique, que c’était bien les Anglais qui avaient martyrisé Jeanne d’Arc et qu’il pouvait donc en rester une idée anti-anglaise dans l’esprit des spectateurs.

Given the absence of surviving German administrative records concerning the censorship of plays, or any live recordings to gauge the audience’s reactions, such explanations are of course limited to conjecture. However, they are based on very real evidence. For example, there must be a reason why the Germans allowed the play to continue being performed for almost eight months without requesting any text cuts. It seems that they were willing to provide a theatre, raw materials (fuel, props, costumes and scenery) and their blessing for plays about Joan of Arc. Overall, it seems that the official German attitude towards Joan of Arc was one of acceptance, if not enthusiasm. Vermorel’s play was by no means the first on the subject to obtain the green light; he was preceded in this by Shaw and extracts from Charles Péguy’s *Jeanne d’Arc*, performed in 1941.

La vision allemande de Jeanne d’Arc était antibritannique. Les occupants furent d’ailleurs promoteurs de la première pièce de la période sur ce thème. L’objectif propagandiste était clair. Cette vision à dominante anglophobe était partagée par les collaborationnistes parisiens.¹⁸²

Those in favour of Collaboration were keen to emphasise the purity of the French race in danger of being tainted by the English. The fascist slant on the theme was seen in Joan’s military bearing and her masculine appearance. The right-wing claims on Joan of

¹⁸¹ Dussane, p. 121. Shaw’s *Saint Joan* (1924) was available in French translation before the Occupation.

¹⁸² Added, p. 263.

Arc were founded on her character; her refusal to compromise or accept defeat was accompanied by her rejection of democracy or even solidarity and reform among the common people. Jean Jacoby's 1941 *Scènes de la vie de Jeanne d'Arc* focused on these aspects of Joan's legacy and the overtly pro-German Brasillach condensed his *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* into dialogue form in 1941.

However, it may be said that in the first months of the Occupation, no clear stance on Joan of Arc had been established by official French propaganda and, despite the greater success and popularity of Shaw's play compared to those of Péguy and Vermorel, it did not elicit the same interest or excitement sparked by later versions on the same theme.¹⁸³ Most critics focused on its theatrical and literary qualities, rejoicing in the cynicism aimed at English government and society, though Gabriel Jacobs claims that, 'the play does truly abound in what might have been taken as allusions to contemporary circumstances.'¹⁸⁴ Whether the French chose not to see references to their political and military shortcomings or the Germans allowed implied calls to a Free France to remain in the text, it seems that an official position on Joan of Arc was required in order to rouse audiences and spark specific breeds of nationalistic fervour.

Interestingly, the remarks (written in German) concerning the 1940 visa for the two copies duly submitted to the ADTP described Jeanne as a providential envoy bringing much-needed order in difficult times.¹⁸⁵ A pro-Pétain interpretation is clearly in operation here and was to be further exploited by the Vichy government. The distinction between pro-German and pro-Vichy sympathies grew fainter as the war progressed, and the collaborationist viewpoint began to merge the two. If the Germans approved the Joan of

¹⁸³ Jacobs believes Shaw's version to be superior to the other two. *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 109.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁸⁵ *Added*, pp. 263-64.

Arc theme, it may be said that Vichy went several steps further in that they appropriated the immortalised nineteen-year-old as their standard bearer. Pétain was praised as the saviour of France and the parallel with Joan of Arc was promptly made by the propaganda arm of the regime. As early as 11 May 1941, Pétain declared, ‘Martyre de l’Unité Nationale, [...] Jeanne d’Arc est le symbole de la France’.¹⁸⁶

Using Joan as a figurehead of French identity and legitimacy was one of Vichy’s tactics in promoting Pétain as a leader, seen in the multifarious posters defying any other potential figure of authority (ultimately Charles de Gaulle) in the race for the public’s loyalty. A typical example was a picture of the *Maréchal* in his military uniform – to remind the French of his famous First World War victory at Verdun – with the challenge: ‘Êtes-vous plus Français que lui?’. In the same way that the German interpretation of the theme necessarily avoided the issue of ridding the country of an illegitimate occupier, Vichy downplayed the armed rebellion led by Jeanne in favour of a more peaceful image of the peasant girl humbly tilling the soil for her nation.

Vichy required a very specific message to be disseminated for its National Revolution, whose slogan was ‘Travail, Famille, Patrie’.¹⁸⁷ Johannic plays by Péguy and Pierre Shaeffer/Pierre Barbier were promoted and patronised by the government. Both were recommended reading for Vichy’s ‘Chantier de jeunesse’ and the latter, *Portique pour une jeune fille de France*, contained several refrains intended for communal performance. It was evidently a priority for the Vichy government to indoctrinate youngsters with theatrical propaganda relating to the regeneration of France under the auspices of a benevolent spiritual leader. That the two had very little in common – one a peasant girl

¹⁸⁶ These words were reproduced by Marcel Vioux on the title page of his *Jeanne d’Arc* (1942).

¹⁸⁷ *Combat*, January 1943, sarcastically referred to Vichy’s policy as ‘le paradis de la Révolution Nazonale’.

burned alive for treachery and the other an octogenarian *ancien combattant* attempting to maintain French rule in unoccupied territory – seemed of little importance.

It was important for the French of 1942 (in particular) to pin their hopes on a figurehead and only logical that both Vichy and the Resistance should seize on Joan of Arc as a national symbol. As a postwar critic suggested, this has always been her fate: ‘chacun de ces hommes d’armes ou d’église la tue pour la posséder.’¹⁸⁸ Vermorel also recognised his nation’s capacity to manipulate the theme for its own political ends: ‘Jeanne se trouvait habillée aux couleurs de tous les partis. C’est le sort de l’héroïne nationale, le sort peut-être de tous les héros, d’être écartelée ainsi entre quatre mensonges.’¹⁸⁹ Contemporary reviews of Vermorel’s play praised the (apolitical) sense of heroism present in the performance: ‘une pièce écrite dans le sens de la vraie grandeur, voie dans laquelle nous aimerions tant, en cette époque, voir le théâtre de France s’engager’.¹⁹⁰ Whether or not Anglophobic lines appealed to audiences, parallels made with Vichy’s figurehead were far more prevalent.¹⁹¹

During the *Épuration*, productions patronised by the Germans or Vichy between 1940 and 1944 had to be explained away. Péguy’s play was consigned to oblivion and the Occupation production not even mentioned during postwar performances of the work. It was tainted by associations with the Vichy regime and its use in the government’s youth camps. Péguy’s Joan of Arc was ostensibly rural and working to build a New France, and it had been convenient at the time to hold Péguy up as a national hero in a similar light to Pétain. Although no copy of the heavily edited version of the play is extant, one may surmise that, ‘With so much to cut, Marcel Péguy was perhaps able to manipulate this

¹⁸⁸ *Combat*, 5 October 1956.

¹⁸⁹ Jean-Jacques Gautier, *Paris sur scène* (Éditions Jacques Vautrain, 1951), p. 26.

¹⁹⁰ André Castelot, *La Gerbe*, 15 January 1942.

¹⁹¹ Stéphanie Corcy, *La Vie culturelle sous l’Occupation* (Perrin, 2005), p. 131: ‘En fait, ce n’est pas l’angle anti-britannique qui a séduit le public, mais plutôt l’assimilation de Pétain à Jeanne d’Arc, deux sauveurs de la patrie, un des classiques de la propagande de Vichy.’

theme of armed revolution [...] and that audiences associated it with the ideals of Pétain's National Revolution'.¹⁹² Given this background, it would have been virtually impossible to reconstruct a favourable account of the play at the Liberation, and a conspiracy of silence surrounded the 1941 showings, despite the media attention it initially attracted.¹⁹³ Both a 1947 critic and the author's son, Marcel Péguy – who wrote abridgments for the play – expressed their disappointment that the work had not been previously staged (that is, since 1897!).¹⁹⁴

Despite its government funding and German host, Vermorel's play straightforwardly passed the test of the *Épuration* because of the author's subsequent Resistance activity. However, extracts of Vermorel's play were performed at various events sponsored by Vichy, such as a gala held at the Palais de Chaillot that featured scenes from several other Joan of Arc plays, including one by Schiller. This fact that is somewhat overlooked when claiming that the authorities prevented *Jeanne avec nous* from being staged after its initial run.¹⁹⁵ Another element in Vermorel's favour was that, undeterred by Vichy's attempted monopoly of Joan of Arc, Charles de Gaulle was calling on the French to pour into the streets and look at each other in silence. This was intended as a sign of solidarity with Joan and the Resistance at the time of the special celebrations organised by Vichy to hail her as queen of the New Order in 1941: 'des manifestations hostiles se sont déroulées [...] lors de la fête de *Jeanne d'Arc* à Paris et à Lyon'.¹⁹⁶ Although clandestine reports of this incident may be slightly flattering, it is crucial that an alternative political angle on Joan of Arc was surfacing to challenge Vichy propaganda.

¹⁹² *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 113. Initially lasting eight hours (three plays), it was cut to just three.

¹⁹³ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 113 and note 19.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113. The critic in question was Marc Beigbeder.

¹⁹⁵ Patrick Marsh, "'Jeanne d'Arc' During the German Occupation', p. 142.

¹⁹⁶ Grenier, p. 89. This report is from Gabriel Marcel, who claimed the protests were in fact against Darlan.

While Vichy's appropriation of Joan as a symbol of their regime might have deterred French spectators from plays on the theme, such negative associations were not necessarily unavoidable. 'Once the subject had become officially acceptable, it could be used in a more frankly subversive way, as was evidently the case with the production of Claude Vermorel's *Jeanne avec nous*.'¹⁹⁷ Unqualified praise of its 'evident' Resistance content is perhaps misleading, especially given the date of composition. Nevertheless, there was considerable potential for using a rubber-stamped historical account to create plural meanings and communicate (or indeed perceive) a hidden message. Many postwar reviews and witness accounts insist on the Germans' supposed ignorance of contemporary allusions, blinded as they allegedly were by literal and 'official' interpretations:

[C]ette pièce [...] témoignait à la fois de la bêtise sans nom des censeurs allemands, du courage de l'auteur et de l'adhésion du public à la bonne cause. [...] L'œuvre est un long cri de révolte contre l'oppression, contre l'occupation étrangère, contre toutes les formes de la soumission à l'ennemi.¹⁹⁸

Whether evidence for such an interpretation is actually available in Vermorel's text or not, Parisian audiences clearly applauded certain sentiments they saw in the play, affected as they were by the circumstances of the Occupation. The changing view of Joan of Arc meant that the official Vichy party line likening her to Pétain and the strictly anti-English stance understood by the Germans could be relied on less and less. This was perhaps what condemned her to a short-lived career on the Occupation stage, as audiences became encouraged and excitable, thus arousing the suspicion of the authorities: 'La

¹⁹⁷ David Bradby, *Modern French Drama 1940-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 23.

¹⁹⁸ Jacques Mauchamps, *Spectateur*, 2 January 1946.

censure avait appris, non peut-être à deviner tous les sous-entendus, mais à se méfier de tout ce qui paraissait réjouir trop vivement le public.’¹⁹⁹

That in Joan could be seen the figure of de Gaulle was intrinsic to a pro-Resistance interpretation, based on the theme of legitimate French rule so characteristic of Joan’s mission. However, Vermorel confessed that potential references to the exiled leader of the Free French were only really a happy coincidence, given that he happened to share the same first name as the fifteenth-century king.²⁰⁰ On the other hand, the cross of Lorraine (Joan of Arc’s signature) was adopted as the emblem for the Free French who rejected the 1940 Armistice as an admission of defeat, in much the same way as Joan did the Treaty of Troyes.²⁰¹ Much of the Resistance’s focus was on Joan’s militant reaction to oppression, liberating France from an unwelcome occupier; the transition was not difficult to make. However, it did involve somewhat disregarding English responsibility for Joan’s death, a fact which clashed somewhat with De Gaulle’s residence in London and use of the BBC as his propaganda tool.

When addressing the various interpretations of Joan of Arc, it is essential to remember not only that individual lines gave rise to reactions that were out of keeping with the overall tone of plays, but also that the same line could be interpreted several different ways. ‘Many of Jeanne’s heroic, patriotic lines could have been interpreted equally as justifying the National Revolution or the cause of the Resistance.’²⁰² Added argues that it was unlikely that audiences in January 1942 would read a Resistance message into the play because the movement had not yet won people’s hearts and De Gaulle was far from

¹⁹⁹ Dussane, p. 122. This echoes the Germans’ warnings to Guitry mentioned in the first chapter of this study.

²⁰⁰ *Opéra*, 19 December 1945: ‘Et jusqu’au hasard de ce même prénom de Charles pour le général de Gaulle et le roi de Bourges.’ Interestingly, the Germans banned François Coppé’s *Severo Torelli* (written in 1883) because help is brought by a *Charles de France* to a nation occupied by a tyrant. Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 185.

²⁰¹ *JAN*, p. 40 and p. 34: ‘votre paix de honte [...] À bas le traité de rapine!’.

²⁰² *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 117.

unanimously acknowledged as France's true leader. Similarly, there was almost certainly no widespread approval of armed attacks on the occupier. The phenomenon of a popular insurrection evoked in *Jeanne avec nous* was not to occur until late in the summer of 1944: 'Ce peuple sait encore descendre dans la rue, s'ameuter contre l'injustice.'²⁰³

Moreover, Maurice Delarue, who was present at the 1942 performances, suggests that those who were well-disposed to the Resistance would have expected much more bile from a play claiming an anti-Occupation Joan, and that such hopes were actually dashed by *Jeanne avec nous*. 'Nous cherchions, bien que la pièce datât d'avant guerre, l'allusion sous chaque mot. [Mais] il faut dire que ces thèses si intelligemment, si justement présentées, ne pouvaient absolument satisfaire nos réserves de haine.'²⁰⁴ The retrospective act of attributing Resistance values to Vermorel's Jeanne was probably partly influenced by the changed role of the teenage martyr in the national consciousness, which was reinforced by the Liberation of France. Joan of Arc was the ideal standard bearer for efforts to paint a more redeeming picture of French activity during the preceding dark years of the Occupation.

Vermorel's activities and political allegiances

At the beginning of 1942, Vermorel was only 32 years old; a young and virtually unheard-of author. It seems that he was a somewhat unknown quantity and had difficulty in attracting financial support. Speaking of these obstacles in 1945, the playwright claimed the Germans had banned his text and prevented Paula Dehelly from working as an actress. Patrick Marsh attempts to elucidate this claim by suggesting that the Germans may have objected to Dehelly being Jewish, though he mentions no evidence in support of this

²⁰³ *JAN*, p. 81.

²⁰⁴ *Terre des Hommes*, 19 January 1946.

claim.²⁰⁵ However, Ingrid Galster has recently unearthed documents from the French national archives which prove that Dullin, Gaston Baty and Pierre Renoir jointly obtained German permission on 19 June 1941 to except Dehelly from Vichy's October 1940 *Statut des juifs* designed to eliminate all Jewish professionals from the theatre.²⁰⁶ In addition, one can be sure that she was not excluded from professional activity at this time because she featured in the Robert Bresson film, *Les Anges du péché*, in 1943. Rather, it seems that Dehelly and Marie Déa were unavailable, while Michèle Alfa changed her mind and Joèle Le Feuvre was unhappy with the part.²⁰⁷ The writer of an article in *Comœdia* from 27 December 1941 complained – and was mystified – about delays to the premiere of *Jeanne avec nous*, given that Vermorel had auditioned some thirty young actresses for the title role. The time needed to prepare a replacement delayed the public dress rehearsal that had been planned for 13 December 1941.²⁰⁸ It was the inexperienced actress Berthe Tissen who finally took on the role of Jeanne.

It should be noted that the interwar years had led to a certain stagnation of theatrical activity, in the sense that large-scale theatres generally opted for guaranteed commercial success with popular plays. The largest national theatre in Paris, the Comédie-Française, had a reputation for only staging repeats of previous works, so it was particularly difficult for new authors to be taken seriously or become established. Vermorel suffered from this trend and was to campaign for greater equality for, and investment in, new plays and talented writers. Although his motivation may well have sprung from political views on the purpose and accessibility of theatre, there is little doubt that the stakes were high for him on

²⁰⁵ Marsh, “‘Jeanne d’Arc’ During the German Occupation”, p. 143, note 19.

²⁰⁶ Galster, (2001), p. 72 (and note 179). Truffaut's *Le Dernier metro* underlines the life-threatening situation of a Jewish theatre director attempting to remain in Paris.

²⁰⁷ Michèle Alfa refused the part of Jeanne, instead playing the main role of Rosalie in Marcel Achard's *Mademoiselle de Panama* in the same month (January 1942).

²⁰⁸ *Comœdia*, 3 January 1942.

a personal level. From the outset, *Jeanne avec nous* was limited to a small number of performances and restricted by the funding he was given and its career was short-lived, if highly successful.

Most of Vermorel's creative output falls on either side of the Occupation. He had written scripts for a few films in the 1930s and was to make his name in the cinema rather than the theatre. However, he also wrote several novels and two other published plays: *Thermidor* (1948) and *Un jardin sur mer* (1964). He helped to found the Fédération Nationale du Spectacle (initially a clandestine organisation), which took significant steps towards reforming the theatre after the Liberation, by which time Vermorel had been nominated director. Perhaps the most significant project to be presented by the federation was its proposals for change entitled 'Pour la prospérité du théâtre', which looked back on the Occupation as a period when audiences were coaxed through the doors because of difficult living conditions created by the war situation. It was suggested that the influx of spectators was mostly due to black market ticket sales and that audiences were therefore cultural philistines and likely to abandon the theatre as soon as public transport was working properly again. Jean-Jacques Gautier made similar complaints about the muttering of ignorant spectators disturbing his appreciation of high-quality theatre, itself a rare occurrence in occupied Paris. 'La plupart des spectateurs utilisaient des billets de faveur et semblaient croire qu'on les avait exemptés d'être polis'.²⁰⁹

The main thrust of the proposals bemoaned dependence on the State for staging new works, the virtual dictatorship of so-called famous theatre directors, the excessive programming of the classics and the lack of training available, especially outside Paris. It was clear that Vermorel, among others, wished the theatre to be accessible to all and for

²⁰⁹ Gautier, p. 26.

professionals to be paid more equally. His criticisms of bourgeois monopolies, unfair pay and opportunities, and reputation privileged over youth simultaneously betray certain socialist sympathies.

There are few documents available to help construct a complete picture of Vermorel's political leanings or activities, though many articles attest to his regular writings for the fascist newspaper *La Gerbe* and the collaborationist journal *Comœdia*. Inevitably, Vermorel and Georges Douking had to liaise with the Germans in order to perform at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, though this should not be equated to a pro-German attitude. Indeed, not only did every French play have to make its way through German censorship, but a viewing also had to be arranged in the presence of the occupier. Sacha Guitry, to give but one example, distinguishes clearly between meeting with the Germans on their territory and inviting them back to one's house (in order to improve one's reputation).²¹⁰ The very fact that yet another stage was being used to perform a French play under the aegis of the Germans is surely more than just mitigating evidence; maybe it can even be called a triumph. Once the Germans had approved the play for performance and contracted the theatre to the company's use, the play entered the public domain and its interpretation was beyond the occupier's control.

Vermorel's involvement in clandestine organisations earned him immunity from trial at the Liberation, though it also masked his earlier attempts to unite French and German youth in the theatre. This project solicited support from the Germans for a joint participation in staging works by playwrights from both countries and aimed to pool resources both to benefit the French cultural landscape and to boost the morale of the German troops. This structure would also have catered well for Vermorel as a prospective

²¹⁰ Guitry, p. 536: 'Pourquoi nous rendre inconsidérément responsables, nous, des rencontres qu'ils provoquent, eux [les Allemands]'?

author, and he certainly couched his proposal in a language fit to flatter the Nazis. Added approximates the date of this application to March 1941 and exposes some of the ambiguous language used by Vermorel to persuade the *Propagandastaffel* to allow the 'Project Jungen Theater' to go ahead.²¹¹

Vermorel employed politically-charged words in his application, such as 'renouveau' and 'européen', remaining in line with Nazi terminology concerning a New Order and Hitler's 'Europe'.²¹² Another argument he put forward was that a joint cultural venture would enable the staging of more German works, by Schiller and Goethe for instance. He even suggested inviting German opera, ballet and theatre companies to Paris in order to perform for their soldiers and the French public, using Goebbels's views on organisations within the arts to support his case. Another aspect of the project that aimed to appeal to the occupying forces was the suggestion that this collaboration – also to be understood with a capital 'C' and its compromising implications – could later be reciprocated by Berlin, who would host the inter-cultural exchange in turn.

It need hardly be said that if this intended 'collaboration théâtrale' had actually come to fruition, Vermorel's undisputed status as a committed member of the Resistance would have come under serious review at the Liberation.²¹³ Many artists were indicted for less. In the event, neither audiences attending *Jeanne avec nous* nor the Parisian press were aware of the project. Had they been alerted, the reception and interpretation of Vermorel's play would almost certainly have been drastically altered.²¹⁴ However, I believe that one must be cautious in assigning a political persuasion to Vermorel on the basis of the above

²¹¹ Added, p. 268. The German project title was given by the person in charge of reading Vermorel's proposal that concerned the shared use of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées alongside a youth theatre organisation.

²¹² Ibid., p. 269.

²¹³ Added, p. 270.

²¹⁴ Broche: 'En effet, les démarches de l'auteur auprès des Allemands rendues publiques, la pièce aurait [*sic*] à coup sûr subi un autre accueil.'

documents alone. Added helpfully points out that, ‘Sollicitant une faveur, l’auteur a tendance à écrire ce que le destinataire souhaite lire’.²¹⁵ Despite the playwright’s postwar reputation, tensions are evident in his dealings with the Germans and Vichy which are very difficult to add up; they are mirrored by the contrasting interpretations of *Jeanne avec nous*.

It appears that Vermorel was just as willing to seek financial help from the Vichy government as he was to seek German approbation for the youth theatre project. Unlike the other four authors examined in this study, he did not have an established reputation as a writer in the early 1940s. He therefore needed funding and the structure of the Théâtre d’Essai to provide a stage for his new play on the understanding that the theatre company would cover its own costs. Louis Hauteœur, the principal secretary of the Vichy cultural office – the Administration des Beaux-Arts – was employed by Vichy to allocate funding for plays based on a successful viewing. Not only was he impressed with *Jeanne avec nous*, to the extent of releasing the substantial sum of 20,000 francs, but a performance in the spa town of Vichy itself was envisaged.²¹⁶

Evidently bolstered by this initial success, for which he did not neglect to show his appreciation, Vermorel applied a second time to Hauteœur on 20 June 1942 for funds to stage his latest play, *Messaline*. Undeterred by a first refusal on the grounds that support was not available for projects that had not yet come to fruition, Vermorel wrote to the Minister of Education, Abel Bonnard, at the Académie-Française. In all probability, Vermorel was never given an audience as a question mark was pencilled in next to his praise of Bonnard’s ‘vertus dédaignées’ – a possible allusion to his pro-German sympathies – that Vermorel claimed to share. A note of suspicion about Vermorel’s presumptuous

²¹⁵ Added, p. 271.

²¹⁶ I have not found any evidence to suggest that such a performance ever materialised.

parallel with Vichy's top-level administrator is evident here; the letter was stamped 'à classer' and filed away for the records.

In any case, it is a measure of Vermorel's persistence that in both of these letters he at least feigns to share the same ideals as his addressee, the former boasting, 'Je suis trop publiquement partisan du patronage moral et matériel de l'État sur le théâtre pour ne pas demander à l'État son appui.'²¹⁷ Whether Vermorel believed what he was declaring or not, his language is compromising and would not have ingratiated him to audiences before or after the Liberation had this stance really been proclaimed as publicly as he suggests. That the play is an indictment of the République (the kind of democracy decried by Pétain) and was printed – in part – in *Comœdia* the following year, only serves to corroborate Vermorel's claim of allegiance to Vichy's moral guidance. However, caution is once more advised in regarding Vermorel as a collaborator, as his subsequent writings and actions belie such summary judgments.

Edith Thomas was a journalist in the Parti communiste français (PCF) and hosted the Front national des écrivains.²¹⁸ When speaking of the different political mouthpieces for Joan of Arc in Occupied France, she labelled Vermorel 'un jeune communiste'.²¹⁹ His petitions for changes in the theatre certainly involved the common people uniting to overthrow the dictatorship of a handful of well-established directors. The latter allegedly prevented the spread of new works and failed to encourage all but upper-class spectators.

Je connais pratiquement – hélas – les difficultés de l'exploitation théâtrale. Quelles qu'elles soient si, sur trente spectacles, quinze sont des reprises ou des traductions, quand des

²¹⁷ Added, p. 271.

²¹⁸ This was renamed the Comité national des écrivains (CNE) when *La Scène française* was published in the clandestine journal *Les Lettres françaises* from September 1943. Corcy, p. 207.

²¹⁹ Edith Thomas, *Jeanne d'Arc* (Éditions Hier et Aujourd'hui, 1947), p. 266.

œuvres de valeur ne trouvent pas de scène, et si n'importe qui, s'il est riche, peut faire jouer n'importe quoi à peu près n'importe où, la corporation est mal organisée.²²⁰

In his public call for individually named young playwrights to join the 'Jeune théâtre' organisation presented in *Comædia*, Vermorel also outlined measures intended to create better opportunities for upcoming French playwrights and to re-open theatres that were closed or being used for film projections and other purposes.

The 'programme de travail' for the newly-formed 'Comité du Jeune Théâtre' was published a month later in *Comædia* as a plan of action for these young authors to shake up the world of theatre.²²¹ It is interesting that, fresh on the heels of success with *Jeanne avec nous*, Vermorel should risk his reputation by speaking out against the governing bodies of the theatre industry.²²² His language, which speaks about demonstrating a common voice and uniting the key figures of contemporary French theatre (including Douking and Anouilh) in order to provoke a response, smacks of a Communist uprising.

Nous espérons au moins une contre-attaque. Rien n'a bougé sur le cocotier. C'est qu'il faut secouer plus fort. Et s'y mettre à plusieurs [...] parce que nous avons des intérêts communs, et je l'espère le commun désir de donner le pas à l'art sur le commerce, pour faire entendre la voix de ce jeune théâtre auprès des autorités présentes et à venir, qui vont s'occuper de la réforme de la corporation.²²³

These indications of Vermorel's political position are by no means conclusive. A journalist reviewing a 1950s performance of *Jeanne avec nous* at the Théâtre en Rond bemoaned the tendency to use political extremes to classify the play, saying such judgments are distorted by the circumstances of a specific period. 'Certes, de 1940 à 1944, les occupants utilisèrent Jeanne d'Arc au profit de leur propagande. Certes, actuellement,

²²⁰ *Comædia*, 25 April 1942.

²²¹ *Comædia*, 23 May 1942 and 4 April 1942.

²²² Vermorel mentioned colleagues' surprise at his precocious 'don-quichottisme'. *Comædia*, 25 April 1942.

²²³ *Comædia*, 25 April 1942.

les communistes célèbrent volontiers, de concert, Jeanne d’Arc...Et, face à ces annexions abusives, M. Vermorel a raison de réagir.’²²⁴ Regardless of Vermorel’s private convictions and attempts to elicit support from Vichy and the occupier in his personal correspondence, the theatre-going public was to see his play in a completely different light, further encouraged at the Liberation by the playwright’s divulged membership of the Resistance.

Interpreting the play and the 1942 public reaction

It appears quite likely that spectators who attended the first performances of *Jeanne avec nous* had very little idea of what to expect. The title was word-for-word the 1936 rallying cry of the Front populaire and the language of the dialogue often misleading, or at best unclear.²²⁵ ‘La France aux Français’, for example, was a fascist slogan.²²⁶ Indeed, the pro-German Lucien Rebatet, writing in *La Gerbe*, envisioned Vermorel’s Jeanne becoming with little trouble, ‘la patronne d’un fascisme français’, though he admitted ignorance of Vermorel’s political leanings.²²⁷ The Théâtre d’Essai, by definition, was testing new works and allowing new authors their first contact with the public, so the audience could not anticipate the quality or nature of the performance.

Il fallait traverser l’hiver pour arriver...À la nage, dans la boue, dans la neige, et *dans l’ignorance de ce que ça serait*. À la Comédie des Champs-Élysées, on trouvait quelques personnes, aussi, qui, comme vous, avaient tenté l’aventure, *en dépit du nom de la pièce*, de ce nom qu’on pouvait redouter en cheville avec des propagandes...²²⁸

²²⁴ *La Croix*, 28 October 1956.

²²⁵ Alain Laubreaux alludes to rumours of such allegiance on Vermorel’s part: ‘On m’affirmait qu’il avait flirté avec le Front populaire.’ *Je suis partout*, 21 February 1942.

²²⁶ *JAN*, p. 34.

²²⁷ *Le Cri du peuple*, 14 January 1942.

²²⁸ Audiberti, *Comœdia*, 11 July 1942 (my emphasis).

Public opinion of Vermorel was heavily influenced by those of his activities which followed the success of *Jeanne avec nous*. In 1942 he commissioned Jean Darcante, an actor and stage director, to organise a clandestine actors' union. Vermorel also held the presidency of the formerly clandestine Fédération Nationale du Spectacle from 1945 to 1947. In other words, there is concrete evidence to show that he was involved in Resistance activity. This would later 'confirm' his claims that *Jeanne avec nous* was a subversive play, and later reviewers were at a loss to understand how the Germans could have missed such obvious allusions to the 1940s situation. 'Un beau cri de révolte, un stupéfiant défi lancé à l'occupant et à sa lourde censure. Comment a-t-il pu se méprendre, ignorer le danger de ces répliques capables d'arracher les pavés des rues?'.²²⁹ However, as shall be observed at length, close scrutiny of the play shows such transpositions to be far from obvious, and Vermorel's political stance far from fixed.

The dialogue of *Jeanne avec nous* was written before the 1940 invasion of France and took on special relevance because of the situation of foreign occupation, as new parallels with fifteenth-century France were created. Cuts made to the text seem to have been devised out of the need to distil the action for theatrical purposes and to shorten the performance, which had to finish before the public transport closed down for the night. However, certain lines were potentially risky, even alluding to Hitler's war campaign. A few examples of extracts deleted from the original text for the first performances will help to illustrate this point. During the trial, when Jeanne recalls the guidance of the 'voices' that she claims spoke to her, she mentions the disaster brought by the arrival of the English: 'La nuit tombée sur nos provinces quand leurs quatre énormes armées s'allongeaient sur la

²²⁹ Van der Esch, *Le Pays*, 29 December 1945.

France saisie comme un oiseau dans cette serre'.²³⁰ She uses the same metaphor of a trapped bird when suggesting that any trust she may have accorded her judges was misplaced: 'et je me rassurais, comme un oiseau blessé, dans la main qui caresse avant d'étouffer'.²³¹ To interpret this line as a warning to the passive French about the Germans' true intentions does not seem to stretch the imagination too far.

Jeanne also speaks with nostalgia of the joy of battle, when one is swept up with a common purpose, despite trampling on the enemy.²³² An implied reference could be seen here to the merciless invasion by the Germans. However, one of the problems faced by reviewers interpreting lines such as this – for contentious words certainly remained in the performance text – was the mouth from which they came. Jeanne's praise of armed combat could be seen either as approval of the invasion and Nazi occupation or as an incitement to the assassination of Germans. In the same way, confusion lay in how to understand criticism (of the French, for example) from the voice of the enemy.

The 1942 audiences cannot have been insensitive to such remarks, but since they came from the mouth of one of Jeanne's oppressors, the critics seem to have been at a loss as to how they should be received, and abstained from discussing them.²³³

A further potential reference to the contemporary situation, of the kind censored by the Germans in other texts, is found in Bedford's description of the French humiliated by the occupier as 'le [peuple le] plus arrogant jadis, écrasé de rancune et de désespoir'.²³⁴ Some caution is advised here, as the previous line, which remained for the performance, also describes the French with compassion: 'un peuple ruiné, famélique, tourneboulé par la

²³⁰ *JAN*, p. 37.

²³¹ *JAN*, p. 120.

²³² *JAN*, p. 102: 'abattant l'épervier de tes vagues d'assaut sur ce grouillement de gueules ouvertes qu'on n'entend pas hurler.'

²³³ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 117.

²³⁴ *JAN*, p. 58.

défaite.’ Nevertheless, the example I have chosen is not isolated; ‘ce peuple, pourris par le dénigrement, le doute’ implies foreign responsibility and was cut from near the end of the play.²³⁵ At one point, Lemaître describes the effectiveness of torture and incarceration over long periods for manipulating prisoners. He also makes allusions to denunciations, albeit obliquely.²³⁶ This was to become a sensitive issue in France when members of the Resistance were anonymously revealed to the government by letter. Louis Malle addresses such occurrences in his 1974 film, *Lacombe Lucien*.

It would be quite a leap to infer political bias from these few passing words written in 1938 but, as previously demonstrated, the war situation was perfectly capable of attributing loaded meanings to the most innocent of texts. Besides, a further allusion can be seen later in the play which more closely resembles the plight of an active resister. ‘[U]ne Jeanne qui s’entête, qui refuse, qui accuse – une gêneuse – et bientôt diffamée, calomniée par les siens, injuriée par son peuple, excommuniée par son parti.’²³⁷ Fuchs-Betteridge suggests that Vermorel’s play was prophetic in its evocation of the Occupation, though she believes he could well have been aware of Nazi atrocities in concentration camps at the time of writing. ‘Ce qu’il y a d’extraordinaire, c’est la manière dont il a prévu ce qu’allait être l’occupation allemande.’²³⁸

A similar kind of transposition could be made with other lines spoken by Lemaître, the most fierce and unrelenting of Jeanne’s opponents. ‘Écraser des crapauds me soulève le cœur. [...] Je préfère que les victimes demeurent pour moi des patients, des adversaires, des

²³⁵ JAN, p. 137.

²³⁶ JAN, p. 60: ‘s’engluant à chaque défaillance, à chaque aveu de leurs amis, de leurs valets, de leurs maîtresses.’

²³⁷ JAN, p. 132.

²³⁸ Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 224.

numéros dans un rapport'.²³⁹ If there was any hint that the spectators, especially the Germans, might understand such statements as alluding to the Nazi regime's *modus operandi* (in their treatment of Jews or hostages, for example), those responsible for allowing the line to be spoken publicly could be in serious trouble. Added has remarked that *Jeanne avec nous* passed its 'postcensure' with flying colours. This term refers to the editing of lines, or banning of a play, based on a German viewing after the initial examination of the written text.²⁴⁰ This means that no inflammatory elements were perceived in the realisation or communication of the text.

However, any passages edited from the play were presumably not included in that particular hearing. It is generally accepted that the 1942 edition is like a prompter's script, and there is certainly no evidence of the Germans blacking out lines or opposing the text in any way.²⁴¹ Therefore, it is impossible with hindsight to know why these lines were removed, though it is not inconceivable – in light of the above analysis – that the author and stage director in fact took care to eliminate content which may have attracted unwanted attention from the Germans. If this were the case, it would seriously undermine their postwar claims that *Jeanne avec nous* was unmistakably pro-Resistance.

Lines in *Jeanne avec nous* that referred to torture as part of the trial and used the term 'camarade' were interpreted by the press as Bolshevik propaganda.²⁴² While this may be flawed or misleading, the text certainly allows for such a reading and is typically unclear on this point. Vermorel's letter to Pitoëff states that the 'procès de Moscou' have probably changed the impact of Joan of Arc's trial since Shaw wrote his own powerful version of the

²³⁹ *JAN*, p. 76 and p.139. '[L]es cadavres, au fil de notre caravane de montreurs de routes nouvelles' calls to mind dead bodies left on the roads by the Germans during the 1940 French exodus to the Free Zone (p. 112).

²⁴⁰ Added, p. 268.

²⁴¹ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 116.

²⁴² This was a criticism aimed at the play early on by Alain Laubreaux in *Je suis partout*, 21 February 1942.

legend. Added also confirms the intentional allusions to – and influence of – the Moscow trials on the basis of an interview with Vermorel.²⁴³ Admittedly, some of the details of torture and interrogation methods were omitted from the first performances, but sufficient indications remain which elaborate on the historical facts – not least the rape of Jeanne by the prison guards.²⁴⁴

Jacobs further suggests that the negative portrayal of the Church and the Inquisition encourages a Communist reading.²⁴⁵ The word ‘camarade’ was frequently used by Vermorel in his correspondence, usually to refer to fellow theatre professionals, though again Vermorel points to this word as a potentially subversive contemporary allusion in the text.²⁴⁶ He implied, in a conversation he allegedly had with Douking, that the Germans may not have understood the word’s significance and therefore let it remain in the dialogue for a second performance. As far as I know, this cannot be authenticated, as no documents attest to the conversation. The fact that the word ‘camarade’ is used by the judges – that is, the enemy – negates any claims (and accusations) of Communist or Resistance propaganda and clearly confused contemporary critics who were at a loss as to how to interpret it. Such ambiguity can also be seen as intentional on Vermorel’s part; a clever ploy to create doubt about the play’s (or his own) specific political stance.²⁴⁷

Suffice it to say that many unequivocal eulogies of Vermorel as the Occupation’s foremost Resistance playwright were forthcoming at the Liberation, when he was hailed as the author of a play that had made brave statements in defiance of the Germans. Below, for

²⁴³ Added, p. 294, note 35.

²⁴⁴ The omissions in question can be found in *JAN*, p. 13, p. 60, p. 84 and p. 143.

²⁴⁵ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 118.

²⁴⁶ *Opéra*, 19 December 1945.

²⁴⁷ Laurent Broche.

example, is a recent appreciation of the play's achievements in the arena of theatre understood as hostile to the occupier.

As a Resistance counterpart to th[e] 'collabo Joan', Claude Vermorel's 1939 [*sic*] four-act play *Jeanne avec nous* (*Joan Among Us*) represents the most valiant effort. [...] Actually staged in Paris in 1942, it was quickly suppressed by German censors, only to reappear in 1945-46. Vermorel, like Brasillach, based his play on the trial records and modeled his Joan on Shaw's, infusing the whole with Communist touches (having the judges address each other as 'comrade', allusions to Moscow trials).²⁴⁸

What is striking here is not only the confident identification of Communist propaganda in the play, but also the persistent error in explaining its short-lived career on the Occupation stage. The German censorship body did not in fact refuse a visa for the text, nor prevent its continued performance. Suffice it to say that a hostile reaction from the Germans has been attributed to this play, and a confirmed verdict of Resistance hero conferred on Vermorel based on just one play and his subsequent participation in underground movements.

While the edited passages contain allusions which did not reach the stage, the text used for those first performances is by no means free of ambiguous elements or potential references to the contemporary situation. Patrick Marsh confidently and, according to him, randomly quotes eight such examples in a footnote to his 1977 article, '*Jeanne d'Arc During the German Occupation*', though far fewer were spotted by the critics of 1942. An early review tempers the eagerness of those who would classify Cauchon as the archetypal Collaborator, condemned by the author for his scheming and opportunism.

Il faut savoir gré à l'auteur d'avoir su bannir de son entreprise toute espèce de *parti pris* à l'endroit de ces Docteurs dont la responsabilité sera lourde devant Dieu. J'applaudis spécialement à la réhabilitation de Mgr Cauchon. [...] L'image qu'il nous donne de

²⁴⁸ *Joan of Arc, A Saint for All Reasons*, ed. Dominique Goy-Blanquet (Ashgate, 2003), p. 102. Brasillach's *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (1932) was condensed and re-issued in 1941.

l'évêque de Beauvais laisse bien loin derrière elle les sommaires attributs qui font de lui le type même du juge inique.²⁴⁹

It would be ambitious, to say the least, to argue that this collaborationist journal was aware that Cauchon might be seen as a despicable compromiser and was consequently attempting to justify him in anticipation of potential attacks from the clandestine press.

The official reception was one of unanimous approval, to the extent that Vermorel's second attempt at obtaining Vichy funding was supported by his own inventory of some twenty favourable reviews from different sources.²⁵⁰ No germ of oppositional content or allusions to the Resistance was spotted in the text. It was therefore down to spectators, individually or collectively, to interpret the text in a way that had not been spotted or considered by the censorship bodies. With hindsight, however, the reader has every right to be surprised that certain lines were not seen as comments on the contemporary situation. Perhaps the most astonishing example of this, in my opinion, is Bedford's reflection on the appeal – to the French – of welcoming an occupying presence. 'Rappelez-vous, cela n'est pas si vieux, *deux ans à peine*, ces gens finis, désemparés, si résignés à la débâcle et l'anarchie, que le pays, dégoûté d'eux, nous accueillait, nous étrangers, en libérateurs.'²⁵¹

Given that the play was first performed in 1942, an implied reference to the defeat of France in 1940 (assuming that the English are understood to represent the Germans) seems hard to overlook. If the mention of King Charles had been taken to mean De Gaulle, further implications can be drawn for a contemporary reading. 'Savez-vous à quoi je pense: si Charles, un jour, était vainqueur. [...] Sa France sera grande. Derrière lui un peuple

²⁴⁹ *Comœdia*, 17 January 1942 (my italics).

²⁵⁰ Added, p. 264.

²⁵¹ *JAN*, pp. 15-16 (my emphasis).

monte, rajeuni, la flamme aux yeux, et sûr de la victoire'.²⁵² Just because the official view sanctioned *Jeanne avec nous*, it does not necessarily follow that other readings were not possible, or indeed prevalent, among the theatre-going public of 1942.

Gabriel Jacobs argues that if there was a grain of truth to the claims of postwar critics, it could be found in the Occupation audiences' perception of the papal inquisitor, Lemaître, whose exposition on the use of torture could have brought to mind the violent practices of the Gestapo or the French militia. No intent can be imputed to the author, given that the unedited text had been approved in 1940, before these two organisations were publicly feared. Also, Vermorel's Jeanne is only *threatened* with torture. Nevertheless, Jacobs sees a possible parallel in the mistreatment of the innocent Jeanne and her rights at the hands of, 'the State, in this case itself a puppet of a ruthless foreign regime'.²⁵³

Although the colour and material of the guards' uniforms were mentioned in 1942, their political significance was not addressed. On the contrary, 'Houseaux, ceinturons, pattes d'épaules, etc., ne choquent pas'.²⁵⁴ Nevertheless, later reviews were less reluctant to draw inferences from this aspect of the staging. '[L]'uniforme haut sanglé de Warwick, tout avait été fait pour nous rappeler une occupation non plus anglo-saxonne, mais germanique'.²⁵⁵ Some were unequivocal when assessing the impact of those first performances: 'L'occupant seul s'y trompa, qui ne vit point que les Anglais de Rouen ressemblaient furieusement aux Allemands de Paris'.²⁵⁶ Direct parallels were also made between the judges and political figures of 1942, particularly Pétain and Marcel Déat.²⁵⁷

²⁵² JAN, p. 151 and p. 137.

²⁵³ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 118.

²⁵⁴ Gautier, p. 27.

²⁵⁵ *Le Parisien Libéré*, 18 October 1956.

²⁵⁶ *Franc-Tireur*, 18 October 1956.

²⁵⁷ Maurice Delarue, *Terre des Hommes*, 19 January 1946.

Various writers present at showings of the play during the war point – retrospectively – to supposedly obvious anti-Nazi sentiments portrayed in Douking’s production, without referring to specific lines. Such comments tend to be sweeping generalisations and offer no factual evidence in support.

Vermorel avait écrit une pièce adroite; elle attaquait les Anglais, mais ceux-ci apparaissaient comme ‘les occupants’, Cauchon et sa clique comme leurs collaborateurs; si bien qu’en applaudissant les fières répliques que leur décochait Jeanne, on manifestait sans équivoque contre les Allemands et contre Vichy.²⁵⁸

It is worth sifting the text for such ‘fières répliques’, which can indeed be taken as a protest against oppression, though there is perhaps a touch of exaggeration in Beauvoir’s description of spectators demonstrating ‘sans équivoque’ against the authorities.

One of the few lines frequently highlighted by 1942 commentators is Jeanne’s outcry reported by Cauchon: ‘La France aux Français. Les godons à la porte!’²⁵⁹ However, while it can be seen as a triumphant outburst against the occupying forces, it has also been understood as an apology of fascism.²⁶⁰ The pejorative term used to describe the English also communicates a strong Anglophobic content, showing that the line is ambivalent at best.²⁶¹ Similar – often prophetic – fighting talk can also be found in some of Jeanne’s bolder lines. ‘Ce que je sais bien, c’est que [les Anglais] seront bientôt tous hors de France...sauf, bien sûr, ceux qui seront morts. [La France,] c’est un peuple vaincu, fourbu, désemparé, qui sur un ordre refait face et gagne la bataille’.²⁶² Another example, which resembles Gaullist nationalism more than that of Vichy, has also been hailed as pro-

²⁵⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l’âge* (Librairie Gallimard, 1960), p. 470.

²⁵⁹ *JAN*, p. 34.

²⁶⁰ Lucien Rebatet, *Le Cri du peuple*, 14 January 1942.

²⁶¹ ‘Godons’ is a corruption of the English swearword, ‘goddamn’.

²⁶² *JAN*, p. 42 and p. 99.

Resistance: ‘Comme il est doux le mot patrie quand il s’allie au mot révolte, au mot jeunesse! Tous ensemble!’²⁶³

Laurent Broche points out that postwar critics recognised a more general objection to totalitarian regimes that was not limited to Vichy and the Nazis. This interpretation is further supported by the allusions to Soviet and Church dictatorships used as inspiration in the play. Broche suggests that Vermorel deliberately twisted this interpretation after the war to target ‘les ennemis qu’il convenait d’avoir combattu’.²⁶⁴ It was the extreme contrast of the political situation in 1945 which put pressure on authors to justify their Occupation writings, particularly where they had been approved and disseminated by the authorities in force at the time.

Postwar (re-)interpretations

Pro-Resistance claims attributed to *Jeanne avec nous* have commonly been based on articles written by the playwright in 1945, in which he gave his view on the subversiveness of his play during the war and the risks entailed in staging it. He mentions a prophetic comment he allegedly heard from his *metteur-en-scène*, Douking. ‘Même si il n’y a qu’une générale, si nous sommes encore en vie en trois ou quatre ans, ça ne sera pas tout de même pas mal de pouvoir se dire: voilà ce qu’on a eu le culot de monter en janvier 42 à Paris.’²⁶⁵ This statement implies that Douking predicted Hitler’s downfall in December 1941, when most of Europe was occupied and Pearl Harbour was being bombed.

²⁶³ Added, p. 263.

²⁶⁴ Laurent Broche. Note 107 of his essay has extracts of reviews from the postwar critics mentioned above.

²⁶⁵ *Spectateur*, 19 December 1945.

Added and Broche have dissected his ambitious argument, which does not stand up to scrutiny.²⁶⁶ The implausibility of Vermorel's testimony has recently led to much cynicism about the allegedly unanimous reception of his play as a call to Resistance. Rather than cover the same ground convincingly argued by these writers, I will analyse another no less ambitious claim made more than three decades after the premiere of *Jeanne avec nous*. My purpose is twofold: to show the power of a Resistance myth that dispenses liberally with facts and to attempt a reconstruction of the events as they occurred, with the help of documents from the 1940s.

Here, first of all, is the bold claim in question from Patrick Marsh. The highlighted passages will be scrutinised in detail throughout the following section of this chapter.

Claude Vermorel's *Jeanne avec nous* was perhaps **the only 'resistance play'** that was put on during the occupation that effectively got its message across to the audience. Although it had been **written in 1938**, the parallels between the France of Charles V [*sic*] and the occupied France of 1940 were very striking; its message became all the more powerful and poignant once France had fallen.

Originally the play was to have been put on at the Théâtre des Mathurins **by Georges Pitoëff**, but **the war** interrupted their plans and Vermorel had to wait until 1942 **for permission from the censors** to put on the play, which finally opened at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées on 10 January 1942, and was produced by Georges Douking, who also designed the décors. The play only ran for three months, **closing on March 10th – the censor had perhaps understood**; moreover business had been poor, partly because the conditions in the theatre were arctic. When the play was **published in 1943**, it was awarded the 'Prix de la Société des Auteurs Dramatiques'.²⁶⁷

First of all, if one accepts the reception by an audience of a perceived message of hostility to the occupier as sufficient grounds to define a 'resistance play', *Jeanne avec nous* was most assuredly not the only one of its kind during the Occupation. Montherlant's *La Reine morte* and Anouilh's *Antigone*, in particular, also enter this category, whether one agrees with the spectators' understanding or not.

²⁶⁶ Added, pp. 267-68, and Laurent Broche.

²⁶⁷ Marsh, "'Jeanne d'Arc' During the German Occupation', p. 142.

Secondly, while Patrick Marsh and the playwright himself insist that the play was written in 1938 and that it remained unchanged for the 1942 performances, we are instructed (in the 1942 published edition) that the lines in brackets were cut for the first production. Given that the edited passages fill several pages this is not a small error. While it would be convenient to take the author at his word, it should be pointed out that his memory is unreliable at best. Interviewed in 1956, he failed to correct his interlocutor who recalled the 1941 premiere, and thought he was right in saying there were forty-five performances, whereas the fiftieth occurred in the middle of its first run (21 February 1942) and its one hundredth at the Théâtre Pigalle in early July.²⁶⁸

An identical mistake was made in *La Croix* a week later. Interestingly, the same article questions the author's affirmation that the play was written in 1939 – yet another discrepancy: 'Ce n'est guère vraisemblable: en tout cas, il retoucha probablement son texte.' Whether or not this was true, it is nevertheless a salutary reminder to think twice before writing off potential changes to the 1942 text merely on the authority of the author. While there is no reason Vermorel should lie about the date of writing his play or about it remaining unchanged for the performance (which would, if anything, undermine his Resistance claims), critics are rightly concerned to investigate his so-called assurances in other areas. 'J'ignore si l'auteur dit vrai quand il assure qu'il n'a pas retouché son texte depuis 1939, mais, dans ce cas, il était en 1939 curieusement averti de nos sentiments d'à présent.'²⁶⁹

Thirdly, although permission was granted to perform *Jeanne avec nous* at the Théâtre des Mathurins, it would not have been under the auspices of Georges Pitoëff. He died on 7 September 1939 before the visa was even given for the play (at the end of 1940).

²⁶⁸ *Le Monde*, 13 October 1956.

²⁶⁹ Gautier, p. 25.

Moreover, while Vermorel clearly wanted to win Pitoëff to his cause, he also categorically stated: ‘vous ne monterez pas une troisième Jeanne d’arc [*sic*].’²⁷⁰ By showing the respect his generation owed to the theatre director, Vermorel may well have been looking for a recommendation from his famous addressee, but we may straightforwardly deduce that Pitoëff was not due to stage *Jeanne avec nous* in 1940.

The reasons for the delayed premiere have already been elaborated, but the arrival of war was, if anything, favourable to the staging of Vermorel’s play. The subject was quickly approved and funding accorded by Vichy, despite the money only being handed out after the completed performance. The stage was readily provided by the Germans at a time when resources were scarce. ‘Dans ces temps où tout manquait à Paris, on pourrait presque dire qu’il suffisait d’annoncer le projet de monter une *Jeanne d’Arc* pour obtenir locaux, chauffage, toile de décors et tissus de costumes.’²⁷¹ In any case, shortage of fuel would not have stopped performances. Several critics have mentioned the extreme cold of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées; even if heating was provided, it may well have been severely insufficient. As far as I know, the delay to *Jeanne avec nous* can be attributed to the time needed to find a theatre and a lead actress. This became a sore point for Vermorel, who had trouble finding somewhere to stage his play after the first three-month run.

These facts expose the claims of Patrick Marsh as false; a dithering censorship board cannot be blamed for putting off the premiere. No German objection to the play was formalised either in their translation of the ADTP approval in 1940 (given by Vichy’s censorship body, the COES) or in their 1942 report.²⁷² Fuchs-Betteridge’s claim that Vichy was alert to oppositional dialogue in *Jeanne avec nous* and banned the play in the

²⁷⁰ Letter to Georges Pitoëff, 3 February (1939?), op. cit.

²⁷¹ Dussane, p. 121.

²⁷² Added, p. 264.

unoccupied zone remains unsubstantiated. Moreover, it is seriously undermined by evidence of financial support from the French administration and officially approved performances of extracts in the spa town of Vichy itself.²⁷³

To state so confidently that *Jeanne avec nous* ran until 10 March 1942 before it was ‘understood’ and therefore banned – or so it is implied – by the Germans, is misleading in the extreme. Indeed, Jacobs suggests that official opposition to the play is a figment of later commentators’ imagination.

Jeanne avec nous cannot have had the immediate impact as a Resistance play implied by post-war critics, since it ran almost continuously for nearly eight months without being banned by the *Propagandastaffel* or its French theatrical equivalent, the Comité d’Organisation des Entreprises de Spectacle.²⁷⁴

However, Marsh is by no means alone in assigning a hostile reaction to the play on the part of the occupying powers. A 1956 review also comes to the conclusion that the play was performed, ‘45 fois à la Comédie des Champs Elysées avant son interdiction par la censure allemande’.²⁷⁵ It would be extremely difficult to explain how permission was granted later in the year to perform the play if it had been banned by the Germans.²⁷⁶

The coveted award won by Vermorel in 1943 for *Jeanne avec nous* reflects its widely accepted qualities, but also somewhat masks the nature of the play’s 1942 publication. The first edition appeared in October of that year and was published by Balzac, the recently ‘aryanised’ press formerly named Calmann-Lévy after its Jewish management. Having been quickly shut down in 1940, it was reopened as a collaborationist publishing house. The same was true for Éditions Denoël (renamed Nouvelles Éditions françaises) and

²⁷³ Fuchs-Betteridge, p.33. See also above, p. 58.

²⁷⁴ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 118.

²⁷⁵ *La Croix*, 28 October 1956. See also Dussane, p. 122.

²⁷⁶ *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 118.

Éditions Ferencsi (renamed Éditions du Livre moderne). The legal dissemination of *Jeanne avec nous* leads Gérard Loiseaux to classify it as ‘littérature de refus’, as opposed to the clandestine publications of Vercors, for example. In any case, the press label attached to Vermorel’s play ought surely to be acknowledged when discussing its postwar reception as a supposedly undisputed Pro-resistance play.²⁷⁷

In my view, an unmitigated pro-Resistance interpretation of *Jeanne avec nous* does not stand up to analysis. One must be wary of unwavering claims which have little recourse to the documents of the early 1940s, but should not hastily overrule the possibility of a Resistance message being understood by audiences during the Occupation, influenced as they were by extreme circumstances. The evidence points to a more complex picture of the author and the events surrounding the premiere. It also reveals a much more complex text than at first might be supposed, and one that was not even accessible to the first spectators.

Conclusion

The grounds set out for judging a ‘theatre of resistance’ have recently been defined as follows. ‘Pour qu’une œuvre littéraire soit une œuvre résistante, c’est-à-dire hostile à l’occupant allemand et parfois favorable à la Résistance, son auteur doit avoir la volonté de faire passer un message.’²⁷⁸ However, such criteria deny both the huge influence of the circumstances and the particular impact of individual lines given contemporary relevance due to the war situation.

Although Claude Vermorel wrote *Jeanne avec nous* before the outbreak of hostilities, once France was occupied the play came naturally to be seen as a piece of anti-German propaganda. [...] Whatever the *intentions* of Péguy and Claudel [and Vermorel] were when

²⁷⁷ Loiseaux, p. 538, note 27.

²⁷⁸ Corey, p. 198. This hypothesis is confirmed by Added, p. 257: ‘La notion du message se dissout ici par absence d’émission.’

they wrote their plays about Jeanne *are unimportant*; [...] what is important about all these three plays is that they were taken by the audience to be an attack on the ‘occupier’ – obviously in this case the Germans; the circumstances surrounding their production turned them into ‘pièces de circonstance’ which had a very poignant message for contemporary French audiences.²⁷⁹

The situation of war and the spectators’ active imaginations appeared to have conferred special meaning onto the dialogue. ‘Je gage que si *Jeanne avec nous* a suscité, lors de sa création, certaines réactions et a joui d’un certain retentissement, c’est que les spectateurs de cette époque prêtaient à chaque réplique un double sens.’²⁸⁰ This is echoed by another 1956 review: ‘Dépouillée de ce qui en faisait une pièce de circonstance, je veux dire privée de *l’écoute qu’on lui prêtait* alors, elle ne se soutient plus que par ses qualités propres.’²⁸¹ Once again, it should be remembered that once a play is performed, it is in the public domain and no longer the exclusive property of its author. Its interpretation is not fixed, nor dependent on the playwright’s (declared) intentions.

In the case of *Jeanne avec nous* it is logical and consistent to disregard the author’s intention, restricted as he claims it was by an unchanged 1938 text, because the spectators were perfectly capable of having their own expectations of the play. ‘Since the play’s message was determined largely by the preformed attitudes of its audience, Vermorel’s own objectives are probably rather beside the point. But *Jeanne avec nous* caught the mood of the times.’²⁸² Until very recently, it has been common to (retrospectively) suggest that the Occupation spectators were unanimously party to a pro-Resistance performance. Loiseaux’s definition of refusal literature, ‘recouvre aussi toutes les œuvres de “contrebande” perçues sans hésitation comme des écrits de résistance par le public: [...]’

²⁷⁹ Marsh, “‘Jeanne d’Arc’ During the German Occupation’, p. 144 (my emphasis).

²⁸⁰ *Paris Presse*, 18 October 1956.

²⁸¹ Guy Verdoy, *Franc-Tireur*, 18 October 1956 (my emphasis).

²⁸² *Vichy France and the Resistance*, p. 119.

Jeanne avec nous de Claude Vermorel, *Les Mouches* de Sartre, par exemple, appartiennent à cette catégorie.²⁸³ As we have seen, it is no small feat to locate individual examples of spectators understanding such messages in *Jeanne avec nous*, let alone attribute such an understanding to the entire gathering in attendance.

Nonetheless, it is revealing that performances in the following decade suffered from attempts to recreate the same atmosphere as the 1942 production, especially in the use of costumes. ‘Ici, de nouveau, les responsables ont eu tort de trop se souvenir des représentations de 1942. Douking avait, alors, “germanisé” les vêtements des gardes.’²⁸⁴ Such details no longer appealed to the preoccupations of Parisian audiences nor fed their expectations: ‘Les spectateurs ne sont plus complices’.²⁸⁵ Try as one might to write off a ‘Resistance’ message, the enormous success of Vermorel’s *Jeanne avec nous* cannot be easily explained away. While much uncertainty surrounds the text and the contemporary allusions afforded by the Occupation situation, it clearly fascinated the Parisian public.

For whatever reason, Vermorel’s heroine found a warm welcome in occupied Paris. ‘Jeanne d’Arc fustige les envahisseurs de son pays, pour la plus grande joie du public. [...] Cette Jeanne bien en chair, véritable reflet de la paysannerie française, est ainsi l’une des figures les plus attachantes du théâtre de cette année.’²⁸⁶ A reviewer in 1956 made a clear distinction between the first performances – which communicated an allegedly brave attitude of revolt framed in a refined, heroic language that appealed to the disheartened French of 1942 – and later versions which seemed somehow distanced from the preoccupations of their audiences. He concludes that there are sufficient qualities in the play for it to be of interest again, at a time when circumstances are hard.

²⁸³ Loiseaux, p. 538, note 27.

²⁸⁴ *La Croix*, 28 October 1956.

²⁸⁵ *Arts*, 24 October 1956.

²⁸⁶ Le Boterf, pp. 139-40.

Claude Vermorel a présenté, sous l'occupation, une *Jeanne avec nous* qui clignait de l'œil. *C'était* une pièce solide et courageuse qui méritait la sympathie: cette sympathie que nous devons à tous *ceux qui jouent avec le feu*. [...] Cette histoire d'impostures, ces histoires de trahison, ces cas de conscience ne sont plus à la mode. [...] Curieux Vermorel, il a construit l'honnête pièce des temps difficiles. Qu'il se tranquillise, elle resservira. Pour l'instant, elle est encore hors de saison.²⁸⁷

Jean-Jacques Gautier was present at a 1942 performance and was surprised at the audacity of the text and its author. 'L'étonnant, c'est qu'elle soit jouée à Paris, qu'on lui ait permis de voir le jour.'²⁸⁸ Although his disgust at the behaviour of the majority of those present is evident, he nevertheless mentions their reactions to individual lines: 'Le public [...] ricanait aux petites allusions circonstancielles.'²⁸⁹ No more explanation is given; nor, perhaps, is it needed. Debates and doubts about Vermorel's play persist, and it clearly sparked diverse interpretations compounded by the unusual circumstances.²⁹⁰ To some, no doubt, it constituted 'a theatre of resistance' and fuelled French hostility to the Germans or admiration for Jeanne as an advocate for a France free from foreign occupation.²⁹¹ That this interpretation was adopted by the majority seems unlikely from the evidence available, though this in no way diminishes the power of a reconstruction created to redeem a Parisian stage deprived of obvious Resistance activity during the war.

²⁸⁷ Pierre Marcabru, *Arts*, 24 October 1956 (my emphasis).

²⁸⁸ Gautier, p. 25. His comments are dated 6 March 1942 and, although they were not published in the occupied zone, he insists they remain unchanged (see his 'Avertissement', p. 9).

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁹⁰ Laurent Broche: 'En 1945, la pièce apparût comme un geste hardi et habile de Résistance, un incroyable pied au nez aux autorités, et déjà, sans doute, il en fut de même, pour certains, en 1942.'

²⁹¹ André Altier, *L'Actualité théâtrale*, 30-31 December 1945: 'nous y avons reconnu, à la barbe des Allemands, le procès de la collaboration'.

CHAPTER THREE

HENRY DE MONTHERLANT: LA REINE MORTE

Henry Million de Montherlant (1895-1972) was perhaps one of the most prolific writers during the Occupation of Paris, earning some 140,000 francs for his journalism alone.²⁹² Not only did he frequently publish essays commenting on the contemporary political situation and his impressions of the French, extracts of which were quoted in the columns of cultural papers, but he also wrote – or embarked upon – several plays. After the Liberation he was punished with a year’s publication ban for his contributions to the collaborationist press (*Le Matin*, *La Gerbe*, *Aujourd’hui* and *Panorama*). The main criticism of him was his inability to stay silent.²⁹³ Despite his great admiration for Montherlant, Camus criticised his loquaciousness, finding it dangerous and inappropriate.²⁹⁴

The postwar accusations and trial of Montherlant, based entirely on his controversial essays dealing with the defeat of the French army in the summer of 1940, *Le Solstice de juin*, will be examined in greater detail at the end of this chapter. His Occupation activities will also be investigated to see how they shed light on interpretations of his first major play. First, it will be necessary to trace the events which led to the creation of *La Reine morte* on 8 December 1942 at the Comédie-Française. This will be

²⁹² Jackson, p. 315.

²⁹³ Guérin, p. 329: ‘Sa vraie faute est sans doute de ne pouvoir se taire jamais.’

²⁹⁴ Jean-François Domenget, *Montherlant critique* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2003) pp. 361-62: ‘Montherlant écrit beaucoup et je ne suis pas sûr que ses articles soient opportuns. Je suppose qu’il a ses raisons mais j’aimerais les connaître.’

followed by a summary of the play's content, an analysis of possible interpretations and study of its initial reception.

Critics and spectators respectively have labelled it a pro-fascist and a pro-Resistance play, giving much credit to the view that Montherlant's writing is complex at best, and self-contradictory at worst.²⁹⁵ In any case, the extraordinary success of Montherlant's first publicly performed dramatic work, which reached its one hundredth performance within a year, needs to be accounted for. Under its new administrator, Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, France's largest national theatre began its project of staging three new works by contemporary authors for the 1942-1943 season (including Cocteau's *Renaud et Armide*), under the watchful eye of the occupier. The Germans had already favourably intervened in Montherlant's literary activity and – crucially – the Resistance was beginning to take shape at this time.²⁹⁶

The creation of the play

Montherlant's reputation preceding the Second World War was that of a mature novelist, though he had tried his hand at the theatre with two early attempts. He wrote *L'Exil* at the age of eighteen (1914), though it was never performed – at the author's insistence that it was simply too private.²⁹⁷ A second attempt to write for the stage produced fragments for a 'poème dramatique' called *Les Crétois* of which *Pasiphaé*, published in 1929, was the only extract to be performed. It was staged once at the Théâtre

²⁹⁵ *Le critiques de notre temps et Montherlant, présentation par André Blanc* (Garnier, 1973), p. 87.

²⁹⁶ 'Le Solstice [de juin], d'abord interdit par les autorités allemandes, sera ensuite autorisé en France sur l'intervention du directeur adjoint de l'Institut allemand à Paris, qui se trouve être depuis des années le traducteur habituel de Montherlant.' Pierre Sipriot, *Montherlant par lui-même. Images et textes présentés par Pierre Sipriot* (Seuil, 1953), p. 186.

²⁹⁷ The play drew on Montherlant's own experience of his mother preventing him from enlisting in the army. A single scene was performed privately by Pierre and Émilienne Dux in 1934. See Henry de Montherlant, *Théâtre. Préface de J. de Laprade* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Librairie Gallimard, 1954), Préface.

Pigalle and again at La Maison de la Chimie by the Sylvain Itkine theatre company, ‘Le Diable écarlate’, in 1938.²⁹⁸ It has not stood the test of time, despite a ‘very successful production’.²⁹⁹ Ultra-modern machinery, sterile metallic scenery and overly comfortable seats in the theatre account, at least in part, for its short-lived career.³⁰⁰ Despite his various published theatrical drafts, Montherlant’s *La Reine morte*, premiered on 8 December 1942, is generally considered (even by the author) to be his first play.

An uncharacteristic and substantial period of silence – in terms of publication – preceded *La Reine morte*. It seems that the shock of defeat at the hands of the German advance in 1940 sparked a change in Montherlant’s creativity. ‘Il y a un abîme entre 1939 et 1942. Que s’est-il passé entre ces deux dates? Il suffit de les juxtaposer. Le Montherlant du théâtre est né de la défaite.’³⁰¹ French suffering and humiliation certainly offered ample inspiration for Montherlant’s characters. ‘Depuis 1942, au contraire, jusqu’à la dernière œuvre, écrite en 1945, un lien de famille, celui du désespoir, unit tous les héros principaux de Montherlant.’³⁰² Montherlant was already working on the first version of *Port-Royal*, a play of Jansenist inspiration which he had begun in 1940. However, given his views on the mediocrity and spiritual lifelessness of the French, Montherlant suggested it would be too severe for Parisian audiences.³⁰³ Besides, he would need another two years to complete it. A further complication arose from the content which Montherlant claimed would not get

²⁹⁸ There appears to be some discrepancy about this date. Gallimard’s 2006 edition of *La Reine morte* lists an earlier, private performance given in 1937. A note to the Grasset edition of the text (1938), however, situates the premiere on the 6 December 1938.

²⁹⁹ John Batchelor, *Existence and Imagination: The Theatre of Henry de Montherlant* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1967), p. xvi.

³⁰⁰ Georges Place, *Montherlant* (Chronique des Lettres françaises, 1974), p. 42.

³⁰¹ Jacques de Laprade, in Montherlant, *Théâtre*, p. xxxiv.

³⁰² Ernst Bendz in *Les Critiques de notre temps et Montherlant*, op. cit., p. 87. In *La Reine morte*, Ferrante describes himself as ‘un roi de douleur’. Henry de Montherlant, *La Reine morte* (Gallimard, 1947), p. 110, henceforth referred to as *RM*.

³⁰³ *Comœdia*, 30 December 1943. See Montherlant, *Savoir dire non* (H. Lardanchet, 1941), p. 12 and p. 14: ‘une obnubilation du sens des valeurs, et cela dans tous les ordres. [...] Les Français sont gens de mauvaise qualité.’

through censorship. ‘J’écrivis un premier *Port-Royal* entre 1940 et 1942. Il parut que sa mise en scène ne serait pas acceptée par l’occupant.’³⁰⁴

Unfortunately, Montherlant destroyed this first version, entirely rewriting it eleven years later, so his own explanation for its controversial subject matter is all that remains.

Si je ne montrai pas à Vaudoier le premier *Port-Royal* commencé en 1940, terminé en 1942, ce fut surtout parce que le sujet, avec ses histoires de police, de perquisition, d’emprisonnement, eût paru aux Allemands plein d’allusions à la situation d’alors, et il eût fait interdire la pièce.³⁰⁵

It is somewhat pertinent that if one were to claim any intention on the part of Montherlant to communicate ‘resistant’ content in *La Reine morte*, the above quotation would serve as proof that he did not hesitate to withdraw a play that might attract unfavourable attention from the occupier. It seems he was at least partly aware of pressures on authors deciding whether or not to have their theatrical works performed during the Occupation.

In the author’s dedication to Vaudoier, printed in the earliest editions of *La Reine morte*, Montherlant thanked the administrator for the commission. ‘Vous m’avez ouvert aussi [...] un domaine, que je négligeais, de la création artistique. [...] Mais il y avait un premier pas qui m’ennuyait. Faute d’entraîn à tirer les sonnettes des directeurs de théâtre, j’écartais cette forme d’expression.’³⁰⁶ Whether Montherlant’s temperament prevented him from approaching directors with his works, or whether he was simply in need of a stimulus, this project was to spark Montherlant’s creativity in writing for the stage. After the overwhelming success of *La Reine morte*, the Occupation saw Montherlant go on to write *Fils de personne* and *Malatesta* (first performed in 1946).

³⁰⁴ Montherlant, *Port-Royal et Notes de théâtre II* (Éditions Gallimard, 1954), p. 5.

³⁰⁵ Montherlant, *La Reine morte* (Éditions Gallimard, 2006), p. 9.

³⁰⁶ *RM*, p. 13.

The creation of Montherlant's first play was certainly not divorced from the unusual burdens of the Occupation. The principal actor, Jean Yonnel, who played the part of Ferrante, was among fifteen staff whose resignation from the two main subsidised national theatres (the Comédie-Française and the Odéon) was ordered in 1940 by the *Propagandastaffel*. 'Le bel effort de Pierre Dux menace pourtant d'être réduit à néant. Quelques journalistes s'en prennent en effet à Jean Yonnel qu'ils accusent d'être un Juif roumain.'³⁰⁷ It was only upon special intervention by the German embassy in August 1941 that Yonnel was able to return to the Comédie-Française. Yonnel's father was indeed Jewish, and a second accusation by Jean Azéma in *Le Cri du peuple* on 13 May 1942 again threatened his participation, but the Germans remained convinced Yonnel was not a Jew.

The length of the play, particularly before any cuts were made by the author, was such that a special announcement had to be read out by the stage manager at the dress rehearsal.

Mesdames, Messieurs, étant donné l'heure à laquelle nous avons dû commencer le spectacle, celui-ci, que nous voulons donner intégralement pour respecter l'œuvre de M. de Montherlant, ne pourra s'achever qu'à 11h10, le dernier métro passant au Palais-Royal à 11h20. Nous tenons à vous en prévenir au début de cet entracte, afin que chacun puisse prendre les dispositions qu'il croira devoir prendre.³⁰⁸

Despite adverse conditions, the play was performed to sell-out audiences and tickets were bought in bulk by certain entrepreneurs apparently gifted with foresight about the play's popularity, based on reception of the early performances. Seats were then sold on the black market; people were willing to buy at great expense even at a time of such shortage.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Added, pp. 48-49.

³⁰⁸ Sipriot, *Montherlant par lui-même*, p. 97.

³⁰⁹ Le Boterf, p. 137: 'Des petits combinards, ayant flairé la bonne affaire, achètent massivement des places pour les revendre au marché noir.'

Recognising the popularity of his play, Montherlant may have been bitter to see it taken off the programme at the Comédie-Française. 'Toujours jouée à guichets fermés, la pièce n'est retirée de l'affiche que pour des raisons politiques.'³¹⁰ Somewhat sarcastically, Montherlant suggested (with hindsight) that his play had had to make way for Paul Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin* in order to balance the Comédie-Française's political stance at a time when the Resistance movement was flourishing.

À Paris la pièce fut arrêtée à la centième, en plein succès. On voyait poindre la défaite allemande. Il était prudent que la Comédie-Française, qui avait joué sous l'occupation l'*Iphigénie* de Goethe, eût joué aussi dans le même temps un Résistant éprouvé. Claudel était l'homme.³¹¹

Whether or not Montherlant was right about the Comédie-Française's stance, his play was very successful, though it will be shown that this can in no way be linked to suspicions of Resistance activity on his part, nor to a pro-Resistance interpretation on the part of the audiences or critics.

However, the first performance of Claudel's play had already been significantly delayed. The sheer material demands of Montherlant's and Claudel's plays made it impossible to stage the two simultaneously.

[*La Reine morte*] fut, avec *Le Soulier de Satin* de Claudel, le plus grand succès théâtral sous l'occupation. La pièce fut retirée de l'affiche après la centième représentation, alors qu'on la jouait encore à bureaux fermés, par suite de la nécessité où l'on était de créer sans tarder *Le Soulier de Satin*.³¹²

Montherlant's next play, *Fils de personne*, never created any controversy as to its political leanings, despite the obvious contemporary setting. Even though the clandestine Resistance

³¹⁰ Montherlant, *La Reine morte. Drame en trois actes. Texte corrigé par l'auteur avec des coupures possibles pour la représentation. Introduction de H.-R. Lenormand* (Librairie Gallimard, 1947), p. 206.

³¹¹ Montherlant, *La Tragédie sans masque: notes de théâtre* (Gallimard, 1972), p. 31.

³¹² Montherlant, *La Reine morte. Introduction de H.-R. Lenormand* (Librairie Gallimard, 1947), p. 7.

movement was in full flow, the public stage was not a straightforward outlet for Resistance activity. ‘Cependant on n’imagine pas, dans le Paris de 1943, un spectacle où le problème des rapports franco-allemands aurait été librement abordé et tranché d’une façon défavorable au nazisme.’³¹³

It is important to examine the circumstances which led to the writing of *La Reine morte* and the various sources which inspired its characters. The fact that it started with a commission is not a coincidence but rather a singularity for Montherlant, who almost invariably created his own works independently. A twenty-two-year friendship with Vaudoier was to bear its fruit in a very intuitive commission.³¹⁴ In an article dedicated to the beginnings of *La Reine morte*, Vaudoier explained his decision to lend a series of Spanish classical plays to Montherlant, with a view to adapting one for the Comédie-Française. It was an old, dusty collection including works by the influential Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca. It also featured Luis Velez de Guevara’s *Régner après sa mort*.³¹⁵ The theatre administrator wrote of a sense of anxiety and risk in not pointing out his own preference to Montherlant, allowing the author to make an independent selection. However, the result was a happy meeting of the minds, then a trip to the south of France.

Quelque mois après nous avoir notifié son choix (qui confirmait si bien le nôtre), Montherlant partait pour Grasse. Trois semaines plus tard, il en rapportait cette ‘Reine morte’, sa ‘Reine morte’, plus délibérément arrachée à Guevara que ‘Le Cid’ le fut à Guilhem de Castro.³¹⁶

It is noteworthy that Montherlant did not write the play in Paris, but in the countryside near Grasse (at leisure and on walks, or late at night), away from the presence of the Germans

³¹³ Jean-Louis Garet, *Un écrivain dans le siècle. Henry de Montherlant* (Éditions des Écrivains, 1999), p. 153.

³¹⁴ *RM*, p. 13: ‘Avec une sorte de divination, vous aviez piqué sur une matière qui m’était convenable.’

³¹⁵ The volumes were entitled *Chefs-d’œuvre du théâtre espagnol*, translated by Charles Habeneck. Lope de Vega’s *L’Etoile de Séville* was performed in 1942 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

³¹⁶ ‘Naissance de “La Reine morte”’, *Comœdia*, 5 December 1942.

and the sufferings of occupied Paris. A period of only a few weeks was needed for this after he left Paris in May of 1942. Montherlant almost certainly allowed five weeks but finished it in only three, which would account for discrepancy among critics as to the span of its composition. The play is infused with the countryside and during the same stay the author witnessed a child chasing after fireflies; an identical episode appears in the play.³¹⁷

Originally intended as an adaptation, Montherlant's play became a new creation, using only the shell of the original. Based on the historical legend of Inès de Castro, posthumously crowned Queen of Portugal in the fourteenth century, Guevara's staged version was one of some forty-four different plays on the same topic, including Lope de Vega's own lost manuscript, *Aimer sans savoir qui*, and Houdar de la Motte's extremely successful *Inès de Castro* (1723).³¹⁸ A popular love story made famous and embellished by the sixteenth-century poet Camoëns in his *Lusiades*, this political tragedy is ideal material for a play.³¹⁹ However, Montherlant strips Guevara's play of its action. '*La Reine morte* is a play almost entirely devoid of incident.'³²⁰ Instead, he turns it into a psychological examination of a king tormented by old age, weariness and impotency. However, a tragic tone is maintained, particularly in the edited version that dispenses with comic relief.³²¹

Montherlant's Ferrante was inspired by the eleventh-century Persian poet Firdousi's *Chah Nâmeh* ('The Book of Kings') which features another 'roi de douleur', Khosrau.³²² At the height of his powers, when he had every possible benefit a man could attain in life, Khosrau renounced his throne, saying, 'Je suis las de mon armée, de mon trône et de ma

³¹⁷ *RM*, p. 114: 'c'est moi qui saute et qui cueille les lucioles et qui les apporte dans le creux de la main'. See Marguërite Lauze, 'J'ai vu écrire *La Reine morte* sur la grand-route', *Comœdia*, 3 March 1954.

³¹⁸ Antero de Figueiredo made this inventory of Inès de Castro plays. See *La Reine morte* (2006), 'Préface'.

³¹⁹ Maurice Rostand, in *Paris-Midi*, 19 December 1942.

³²⁰ Hobson, *The French Theatre of Today; An English View* (London: Harrap, 1953), p. 174.

³²¹ In a 1946 essay, 'Forger des mythes', Sartre insists that *La Reine morte* is not a tragedy. Sartre, *Un théâtre de situations: textes choisis et présentés par Michel Contat et Michel Rybalka* (Éditions Gallimard, 1973).

³²² Montherlant examined this work in an essay, 'L'Assomption du Roi des rois' (January 1942), published in the *NRF* (May 1942), the book *Éventail de fer* (1944) and *Textes sous une occupation 1940-1944* (1953).

couronne; je suis impatient de partir et j'ai fait mes bagages. [...] C'est mon âme qui est épuisée et mon coeur qui est vide.'³²³ These words are echoed by Ferrante, who complains, 'Je suis las de mon trône, de ma cour, de mon peuple [...] Je me suis écoulé comme le vent du désert [...]: il n'en reste rien.'³²⁴ Ferrante is the Alphonse IV of history, of Italian not Portuguese resonance, and Montherlant develops his complex character almost from scratch. Incidentally, the illegitimate successor of Alphonso V of Aragon, King Ferdinand I of Naples (1423-1494), lived at a small remove from the events of *La Reine morte*. He was also called Ferrante.

Even the character of Inès was not foreign to Montherlant before reading Guevara's tragedy. She featured in his series of short novels from the latter half of the 1920s. 'À 15 ans de distance, la *Petite Infante de Castille* tendait la main à l'écrivain des *Voyageurs traqués* pour l'encourager dans ses premiers pas d'auteur dramatique.'³²⁵ This is evidence of the rich variety of influences present in his work, and of the unity and continuity of his output. '*La Reine morte*, premier chef-d'œuvre de Montherlant au théâtre, recueille l'expérience amassée dans ses œuvres précédentes et annonce celles qui vont suivre.'³²⁶

It is unhelpful at this juncture to attempt to identify all the sources of inspiration for *La Reine morte*, particularly given the complex processes of artistic creation. Montherlant himself refers to it as, 'une cuisine vraiment infernale. [...] Je le répète, le public serait effaré s'il savait dans quelle marmite de sorcière a bouilli une œuvre littéraire avant de lui être présentée.'³²⁷ It is nevertheless important to point out that Montherlant was heavily influenced by his reading, his location and the circumstances of war in 1942. 'Là-dedans je

³²³ Marie-Claude Hubert, introduction, *La Reine morte* (2006), p. 27, quoted in translation by Lucille Becker, 'Pessimism and Nihilism in the plays of Henry de Montherlant', *Yale French Studies*, 29 (1962), p. 90.

³²⁴ *RM*, p. 25 and p. 119.

³²⁵ Jean Nepveu-Degas, Comédie-Française programme for *La Reine morte*, 13 December 1942.

³²⁶ Jacques Robichez, *Le Théâtre de Montherlant* (Société d'Édition d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1973), p. 107.

³²⁷ 'Comment fut écrite *La Reine morte*', in *RM*, pp. 153-54.

fourrais tout [...]: un fait divers lu dans un journal, un souvenir de lecture, des paroles qui venaient de m'être dites étaient utilisées sur-le-champ.'³²⁸ No specific examples of the 'fait divers' or the influence of isolated contemporary events have been identified either by the playwright or by other critics and historians, so the emphasis of my analysis will rely much more heavily on the finished text of the play than on the process of creation.

However, it may be helpful to set apart one of Montherlant's minor characters through whom he appears to comment on the contemporary situation. King Ferrante's page, Dino del Moro, is a culmination of many different sources, appearing first in a 1920s novel, *Moustique* (published 1986). Montherlant had a sexual penchant for young boys which led to numerous arrests and this obsession is evident in his fictional works. Although he was shy about revealing his sexual preferences, unlike his regular correspondent Roger Peyrefitte or Cocteau, for example, he was arrested in Marseille in July 1940 for approaching young boys and remained wary of the French police.³²⁹ He claimed such activities were research for his writings.³³⁰

Some of his plays deal with the rejection of a son by his father, and Ferrante is a typical example, condemning his son Pedro with the words, 'En prison pour médiocrité'.³³¹ This could well have been understood as a criticism of young Frenchmen unwilling to fight for the glory and pride of their nation. Montherlant was the sole critic to review Michel François's 1942 performance as the page, and frequent anecdotes in his writings testify to his 'éloge lyrique de la "treizième année"'.³³² In *La Reine morte* Montherlant goes to great lengths to expose his contempt of young 'men'. 'À quatorze ans, vous vous étiez éteint;

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 153.

³²⁹ Grenier, p. 183, note 3.

³³⁰ Henry de Montherlant and Roger Peyrefitte, *Correspondance. Présentation et notes de Roger Peyrefitte et Pierre Sipriot* (Éditions Robert Laffont et Albin Michel, 1983), p. 11.

³³¹ *RM*, p. 50. Georges's rejection of his son Gillou is the main focus of *Fils de personne* (1943).

³³² Maurice Bruézière, *La Reine morte* (Gallimard, 1947), p. 215. Of the forty reviews Montherlant read, none mention Dino del Moro, but review actors who had a handful of lines at most. *Comœdia*, 30 December 1943.

vous étiez devenu médiocre et grossier.’³³³ The relevance to, and critique of, 1940s French values is unmistakable, with particular anger expressed about the praise of youth touted by those in power at the time. ‘Car la juvénilité est chez nous un produit de Vichy, lui-même imitateur en cela des régimes fasciste et nazi.’³³⁴

While the main plot of the play belongs to Portuguese history, it also addresses the concerns of a French audience subjugated by difficult circumstances and a foreign power. It was written within a few months of the premiere and its contemporary relevance seems to have accounted, in part, for its success. Montherlant insisted that *La Reine morte* cannot be fully understood or appreciated without reference to the auspicious time of its creation.

Actualité involontaire de *La Reine morte*. [...] Exécutions, guerres nationales, guerre civile, et jusqu’à la famine, tout cela, qui est l’atmosphère de ce drame, est aussi l’atmosphère de l’Europe d’aujourd’hui. Ceux qui liront plus tard cette œuvre devront se rappeler en quels temps dramatique elle fut écrite et montée.³³⁵

La Reine morte was the first new Occupation play at the Comédie-Française and was written by an author of high repute: ‘L’État français le porte aux nues’.³³⁶ The premiere was even publicised in certain cinemas and was attended by the cream of the Parisian cultural elite, such as screen actress Edwige Feuillère, theatre director Alice Cocéa and many well-known playwrights: Stève Passeur, Jean Sarmant, Maurice Rostand and Cocteau.³³⁷ It should not be underestimated how important an event this was for the reputation of the French Arts in Paris. ‘Première création depuis la guerre. Un événement

³³³ *RM*, p. 25.

³³⁴ Montherlant, *La tragédie sans masque*, p. 41. ‘Juvénilité’ is Montherlant’s own word, mixing Latin and Greek origins: ‘La jeunesse se trouve être une page blanche sur laquelle ces hommes [politiques] peuvent écrire sans avoir à effacer.’ Montherlant, *Savoir dire non*, p. 9.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³³⁶ Montherlant and Peyrefitte, *Correspondance*, p. 18. He was also in demand for interviews on BBC radio.

³³⁷ *Aujourd’hui*, 13 December 1942 and *Le Matin*, 20 December 1942.

parisien. Un événement littéraire.’³³⁸ This meant that *La Reine morte*, perhaps more than any other play before it, was under the spotlight. Expectations were high and much depended on a good reception. ‘C’est donc avec une vive curiosité que la pièce est attendue pour sa sortie au Français, le 9 décembre.’³³⁹ The opinions of those in attendance, and the play’s impact, were made proportionately more significant by the numbers; one hundred sell-out performances occurred in the first year. This is an impressive statistic since the theatre alternated plays; *La Reine morte* could only be performed three times per week.³⁴⁰

The subject material of *La Reine morte*

La Reine morte opens, rather unconventionally for a play, with a noble tirade from the insulted Infante doña Bianca of Navarre who has come to Portugal to arrange a marriage alliance.³⁴¹ She has been rejected by her promised fiancé prince Pedro because of his love for the illegitimate Inès de Castro. King Ferrante is furious and demands an interview with his son. He admits the disdain he has had for Pedro since he turned fourteen (he is now twenty-six), and orders him to marry the Infante, keeping Inès as his mistress. In the following meeting between the lovers, we discover that they are secretly married and Inès is pregnant. In the absence of Pedro’s courage it falls to Inès to inform Ferrante of this in a scene which reveals much of the latter’s cynicism.

The second act develops Ferrante’s character in discussion with his corrupt advisors. Despite his hatred of violence, he is inexplicably drawn to cruelty – sadistically entrusting his son’s arrest to his former tutor, Don Christoval, for example – and is

³³⁸ *Paris-Soir*, 14 December 1942.

³³⁹ Le Boterf, p. 137. ‘Le Français’ is another name for the Comédie-Française.

³⁴⁰ Montherlant, *La Tragédie sans masque*, p. 29. In September 1943, *La Reine morte* was still being put on three times a week and brought in a record of over 40,000F each time. Fuchs-Betteridge, appendix II.

³⁴¹ Classical conventions require first scenes to present the main characters’ relationships with brief dialogue.

particularly vulnerable when accused of weakness. A further tête-à-tête enables the king to divulge to Inès his counsellors' wish to kill her. Behind his pretext of the nation's stability, Prime Minister Egas Coelho has concealed his true reasons for wanting this. Overcome and utterly fooled by the king's openness, Inès sympathises with him, despite insightful warnings from both Pedro and the Infante about Ferrante's inconsistency and deceptiveness. Indeed, the Infante wishes to prove her 'grandeur' by rescuing Inès from Ferrante's clutches, both in defiance of nature (which would have her oppose a rival) and in exercise of her pride in denying the king his victim. Inès, however, is determined – despite the inevitable dangers – to stay with Pedro, in obedience to her all-consuming physical passion.

The third act provides a final opportunity for Ferrante to burden Inès with his sorrows, alienation and rejection of the court, to the point where she cannot be allowed to live with such knowledge. Before Ferrante publicly shows random clemency for Lourenço Payva to show his strength and magnanimity in the face of his admiral, the page Dino del Moro confirms Ferrante's 'alternance'. The latter's dialogue duly becomes incoherent and lucid in turn, leading him to recognize that only Inès's murder can put an end to his indecision. Inès, meanwhile, naively believes the king's detachment and tenderness is genuine, so she breaks the news of her unborn child. This fatal outburst of maternal love and optimism angers Ferrante, for he must now (re)act against this new life.

The king despises her for unveiling his emotional weakness and gives captain Batalha the order to follow Inès – still unenlightened as to her fate – and have her assassinated. He then declares her dead, executed to protect the Portuguese succession. Shortly after his announcement, Ferrante anticipates Egas Coelho's brutal murder at the hands of Pedro for having instigated Inès' death, then passes away. The final scene of the

play is silent, everyone gathering around Inès's body and Pedro symbolically placing the crown on her stomach, as one by one (Dino del Moro the last) the courtiers desert Ferrante's cadaver.³⁴²

Montherlant takes liberties with historical dates, concentrating a large period into the short time allowed by verisimilitude. By being deliberately vague with the historical setting ('Au Portugal, – autrefois'), Montherlant makes the issues in the play more universal, though all the events took place in the fourteenth century and the main characters are at least modelled on historical figures. However, a few names and ages are changed and many anachronisms are permitted; for example, history records that Ferrante survived Inès by two years. Allusions are frequently made to important parts of the legend which cannot take place in the time-frame of the play.³⁴³ In order to focus his study on the vacillations of Ferrante, Montherlant makes of Inès not the mother of three she was in real life, but an expectant wife whose unborn child Ferrante can cut off in the same fatal stroke as Inès. In the same way that Montherlant borrowed merely the framework of Guevara's play, he took the historical characters and stripped them of their legendary associations.³⁴⁴ In so doing, he perhaps made the play more accessible to 1940s audiences who could identify with more modern protagonists.

An in-depth reading of the play reveals the way in which Montherlant moulds the characters to his will.

³⁴² For a concise summary of the play see Joseph Chiari, *The Contemporary French Theatre: The Flight from Naturalism* (London and Southampton: The Camelot Press, 1958), pp. 208-12. Robichez provides a detailed analysis of *La Reine morte*'s rigorous structure.

³⁴³ Ferrante predicts Coelho's death: 'On arrachera ton coeur de ta poitrine et on te le montrera.' *RM*, p. 147.

³⁴⁴ *RM*, p. 151: 'une armature que je pourrais garder mais en changeant tout ce qu'il y a dedans'.

Ce qui frappe le plus, dans cette lecture, c'est l'étonnante liberté dont M. de Montherlant fait preuve à l'égard de ses personnages. Inès, Pedro, l'Infante, le Roi Ferrante, sont dénudés avec une franchise qui ne s'exerce que rarement sur les personnages historiques.³⁴⁵

Such freedom does not simply demonstrate the author's creative talents, but opens up the dialogue for a rich exploration of the human soul – Montherlant's self-confessed aim.

Une pièce de théâtre ne m'intéresse que si l'action extérieure, réduite à la plus grande simplicité, n'y est qu'un prétexte à l'exploration de l'homme; [...] d'exprimer, avec le maximum de vérité, d'intensité et de profondeur un certain nombre de mouvements de l'âme humaine.³⁴⁶

Here, 'vérité' is not factual accuracy, but truth or authenticity. It is not the aim of this chapter to cover ground admirably presented by a handful of critics who have examined in detail the chronological elisions, historical discrepancies and individual originalities of *La Reine morte*.³⁴⁷ Rather, of primary import are the interpretations of Montherlant's carefully constructed and highly-praised dialogue, and the conclusions that may be drawn about both the author's political stance and the potential pro-Resistance impact of the play.

The reception of *La Reine morte*: Collaboration or Resistance?

Should Paris really be investing so much time, money and materials (ink and paper, costumes and scenery foremost among them) in this new play while the cruel winter and Nazi dictatorship were destroying so many lives? Montherlant apparently found the pomp of such a well-advertised premiere more than a little insensitive. '[Un] ajournement avait été demandé par l'auteur, qui estime qu'une "première" a quelque chose de frivole qui

³⁴⁵ H.-R. Lenormand, introduction to *La Reine morte* (Librairie Gallimard, 1947), p. 9.

³⁴⁶ Montherlant, *Notes sur mon théâtre* (L'Arche, 1950), p. 31.

³⁴⁷ Manuel Sito Alba, in *Montherlant et l'Espagne: les sources hispaniques de 'La Reine morte'* (Klincksieck, 1978), lists the digressions of time, place and events from Guevara's play. See also Isolina-Collette Wakerley, '*La Reine morte* ou un anachronisme volontaire' (Tours: Revue de Littérature Comparée, 1973).

s'accorde mal avec la gravité des événements politiques.'³⁴⁸ Somewhat more sceptical of his apparently humble motives, another columnist referred to this alleged sensitivity on the part of 'M. Soi-Même de Montherlant' whilst underlining the good publicity it earned him. 'Le truc est bien simple. M. de Montherlant fait dire un peu partout que, par les cruels temps qui courent, le théâtre ne peut être que le dernier de nos soucis. On aurait honte, qu'il dit, de parler de tragédies scéniques tandis que se déroulent des tragédies réelles.'³⁴⁹

Despite the sarcastic overtones of this quotation, it reveals an important issue regarding the decision to perform, given the unspeakable consequences of the war raging on the very doorstep of the auditorium. It is true of Montherlant, as it was of Sartre, Claudel and Anouilh, that he felt the need to continue working during the Occupation. For each of them, there is evidence that they earned a substantial amount of money from the works they wrote or had performed during this period.³⁵⁰ A similar impression of surprise at people's willingness to carry on performing is evident in Montherlant's speech given on the first anniversary of *La Reine morte*'s premiere in December 1943. 'Nous voici réunis pour la centième de cette pièce, tout comme si rien de grave ne s'est passé dans le monde depuis lors.'³⁵¹

Indeed, it may have been for the same reason of acknowledging the gravity of France's war experience in 1942-1943 that Montherlant decided to leave out the Infante's three bridesmaids whose comic roles threatened to trivialise the tragic atmosphere of *La Reine morte*. 'Tel fut le cas notamment pour l'intervention des trois dames d'honneur de l'Infante, intervention qui créait une irruption de burlesque dans une scène de tragédie, peu

³⁴⁸ *Comœdia*, 21 November 1942.

³⁴⁹ *La France Socialiste*, 5 and 6 December 1942.

³⁵⁰ Grenier, p. 158: '[Claudel] vend ses propres autographes jusqu'à 400 francs.'

³⁵¹ Montherlant, *Théâtre*, p. 246.

compatible avec le goût du public en 1942.³⁵² Montherlant's stance on action and commitment to the cause of France was very controversial, and he chose to absent himself from the first performance. Following a cool reaction to the dress rehearsal, cuts were made to the play and the press became almost unanimous in its praise of *La Reine morte*. 'Certains y trouvent quelques longueurs; d'une façon générale la critique est élogieuse.'³⁵³ While many of the actors came under fire for weak performances, Renée Faure as the Infante being the notable exception, the poetic and heroic language was universally acclaimed. Objections were made to long-winded dialogue immobilising the action, but reviewers regarded as virtually flawless the work of Pierre Dux (stage director) and Roland Oudot (scenery and costumes) in creating the appropriate atmosphere.

The Germans appeared to have mixed views of the play, though they never banned it, and its performance was even encouraged in certain prison camps in Germany (though permission was refused for others). This fact appears to have surprised reviewers in 1948. 'En fait, il n'y eut pas de mot d'ordre chez les autorités occupantes. [...] Devant *La Reine morte*, les Allemands manifestèrent les attitudes les plus opposées, allant de la colère à la bienveillance.'³⁵⁴ A German reaction to the play was reported to Montherlant by Odette Micheli, a colleague at the Red Cross – where he volunteered from 1942 to help child victims of the war.³⁵⁵

[Elle] a entendu dire un soir par deux officiers allemands, tandis qu'ils se levaient et quittaient la salle: 'Je ne comprends pas comment on laisse représenter de pareilles pièces.' Sans doute étaient-ce les répliques sur les prisons, et l'honneur qu'il y a à y être, qui les avaient choqués. Rien de plus divers, d'ailleurs, que les réactions de l'occupant.³⁵⁶

³⁵² *La Reine morte* (2006), p. 204.

³⁵³ *Dictionnaire des pièces de théâtre*, p. 506. The response was literally 'cool'; critics employed the words 'tiède' and 'glacial'. See the reviews listed by Montherlant in *La Tragédie sans masque*, pp. 26-27.

³⁵⁴ Montherlant, *La tragédie sans masque*, p. 32.

³⁵⁵ André Fraigneau: 'C'était une Croix-Rouge mondaine et littéraire. Montherlant n'a d'ailleurs pu faire qu'un aller et retour. Il prépare probablement des mémoires sur l'offensive.' Grenier, p. 182.

³⁵⁶ *RM*, pp. 166-7.

It may be wise to take the author's reasons for the Germans' disgust with a pinch of salt, but the divisiveness of the play should not be dismissed so easily. Indeed the following quotation demonstrates the ability of *La Reine morte*, whatever its associations, to spark opposing reactions:

Tout [ce succès] en pleine guerre. La pièce, d'ailleurs, semblait contenir des allusions politiques qui enthousiasmaient les *résistants*. Malgré cela, elle fut jouée même dans les camps de prisonniers français en Allemagne, comme à Wistznitz. Ensuite, elle a été représentée dans presque tous les pays d'Europe. À la Comédie-Française, les représentations furent interrompues en 1945, à cause des attaques – excitées par l'aigreur de certains 'confrères' – dont Montherlant avait été l'objet après la Libération.³⁵⁷

Simply by witnessing at close hand the psychological battles and dilemmas of a handful of genuine historical figures brought to life by the words of Montherlant, the audience 'can't avoid active participation in construction of dramatic reality'.³⁵⁸ The opportunity to gasp, applaud, stay silent, walk out or mutter is both a privilege for the spectator and, potentially, a curse for the performers. Cocteau encapsulates this perfectly when speaking of the phenomenon of collective response in the auditorium. 'Le public est un élément dangereux et superbe. [...] Comment se fait-il que les salles successives s'accoutument au relief d'une pensée, comme si ces salles étaient une seule et même personne à laquelle on répète quelque chose?'³⁵⁹ It seems that the 1940s audiences sought out even the smallest possible allegory of their situation in the heroes of literary theatre. 'During the four years of Occupation any play which presented an individual in conflict

³⁵⁷ Ferdinando Banchini, p. 18 (author's original emphasis).

³⁵⁸ David Bradby, *Modern French Drama*, p. 28.

³⁵⁹ 'Une grande vedette: le public', *Comœdia*, 17 January 1942.

with authority was automatically invested with topical allusions by the audience.³⁶⁰ While access to the first performances of *La Reine morte* is not available, eye-witness accounts can corroborate Cocteau's words by pointing us to those lines in the play which aroused the full attention of the theatregoers of 1942.

According to one report, there was even 'un accord secret entre la scène et la salle', where double-meanings were somehow unanimously perceived by the audience. Serge Added says that the same was true for Musset's *Fantasio*, and wonders whether such occurrences were even premeditated by the Comédie-Française.³⁶¹ More weight is given to the claim of complicity between actors and spectators when one collates all the reviews or accounts which speak of individual lines being applauded. A consistent consensus delineates a few such outbursts in the first performances of *La Reine morte*.³⁶² The first alludes to the crime of Frenchmen being taken prisoner by their own countrymen, and the honour of being counted a victim of such treatment. These are concepts that would not escape censorship if expressed directly. Pedro, under arrest, cajoles the king's officers: 'Messieurs, ce que vous m'êtes, c'est une vraie escorte d'honneur, *car dans les prisons de mon père je vais retrouver la fleur du royaume* [...] quiconque a été fait prisonnier par les siens est désormais mon frère.'³⁶³

Jacques Robichez, when speaking of Pedro's (brief) appearances in the play, concludes, 'À la fin de ce premier acte, ses toutes dernières répliques sont séditeuses: "Dans les prisons de mon père...". On devine les sentiments qu'elles pouvaient éveiller, en

³⁶⁰ Merrill A. Rosenberg, 'Montherlant and the Critics of the French Resistance', *French Review* (April 1971), 839-51 (p. 849).

³⁶¹ *La Vie culturelle sous Vichy*, ed. J-P. Rioux, pp. 321-22.

³⁶² The first example to follow is mentioned by Julian Jackson, p. 315, and Serge Added, p. 257, as a retort which was interpreted as anti-German.

³⁶³ *RM*, p. 53 (my emphasis). I do not agree with Montherlant's statement above that the Germans picked up on this, especially given that no demand was made to edit this line.

1942, à Paris.’³⁶⁴ Thus the context of occupation brought out a subtle subtext in the lines highlighted above, explained by the surrounding words and clearly not obvious enough to alert the Germans present in the theatre.

On a similar theme, when Pedro is arrested he exclaims, ‘C’est curieux, les hommes de valeur finissent toujours par se faire arrêter.’³⁶⁵ Given the growing presence of Resistance movements in France, with individuals risking prison or execution by assassinating Germans or disrupting their supply trains and communications, it is perhaps understandable that such a line might be seen to show admiration for their sacrifice. The line sparked wild applause from the first audiences. Attributing deliberate pro-Resistance motives to Montherlant seems improbable at best, but whether he intended to communicate such ideas or not is irrelevant to the play’s interpretation and reception, as a ‘message’ was seized upon, and consequently hailed, by the spectators.

Some critics refer to the above two sentences being the only lines in the play to spark audible reactions from the auditorium.³⁶⁶ However, occasional mention is also made of other potential contemporary allusions:

La Reine Morte risque de devenir une occasion de manifestations politiques. À *plusieurs reprises*, lorsqu’on prononçait les répliques: ‘En prison se trouve la fleur du royaume’ et ‘On tue et le ciel s’éclaircit!’, quelques jeunes gens, voyant là une apologie des attentats commis contre l’occupant, trépignent et battent des mains.³⁶⁷

Montherlant recalls outcry at these same words, horrified at the way they were understood. ‘Mais que ne voyait-on pas! Des jeunes gens de la Résistance, au poulailler, faisaient un sort, *fréquemment*, aux paroles d’Egas Coelho poussant le roi à assassiner (“On tue, et le

³⁶⁴ Jacques Robichez, p. 79.

³⁶⁵ *RM*, p. 53.

³⁶⁶ For example, Carolyn Evans, p. 10.

³⁶⁷ Le Boterf, p. 138 (my emphasis).

ciel s'éclaircit"), qui leur semblaient une apologie du terrorisme.³⁶⁸ The difference in language when referring to attacks by the Resistance should be noted here. Montherlant speaks of 'terrorisme', which may well reveal his opinion of (violent) acts of Resistance, whereas Resistance sympathizers would see those who assassinated Germans as 'heroes'.

In the same paragraph of *La Reine morte* which meditates on murder, Harold Hobson suggests that some of Egas Coelho's lines would undoubtedly have prompted audiences to call Hitler to mind by quoting the following passage of the play.

Et n'est-il pas insensé que des hommes acceptent de peiner, de souffrir, d'être ligotés par une situation inextricable, seulement parce qu'un être est vivant, qu'il suffirait de supprimer pour que tout se dénouât, tandis que des milliards d'êtres meurent, dont la mort est inutile, ou même déplorable? [...] En vérité, il est stupéfiant que tant d'êtres continuent à gêner le monde par leur existence, alors qu'un meurtre est chose relativement si facile et sans danger.³⁶⁹

Hobson goes even further in his identification of analogies with the contemporary situation, separating passages of universal relevance (note the use of 'our') and those specific to audiences of the Second World War.

But though the action of *La Reine morte* takes place five hundred years ago, its speeches echo with the troubles and problems of our own day. Coelho, urging Ferrante not to provoke Navarre too much, argues: 'Your majesty, Portugal at the present moment not only on certain points is genuinely weak, but on others must simulate weakness, the better to deceive its enemies. Therefore, partly justly, partly unjustly, the kingdom is thought feeble, and this situation will continue a long time still... Look at the facts: it cannot be denied that everywhere Portugal is on the retreat.' As the first French audience, at Christmas 1942, listened to these words, could it avoid substituting France for Portugal [?].³⁷⁰

After a detached examination of the play, one may justifiably wonder how on earth certain lines were not interpreted as a criticism of either the indigenous or occupying authorities.

³⁶⁸ *RM*, p. 166 (my emphasis).

³⁶⁹ *RM*, p. 68. 'On tue et le ciel s'éclaircit' are left out of Hobson's translation of this passage.

³⁷⁰ Harold Hobson, p. 172.

An apparent reference to the humiliating French defeat by the German penetration through the Ardennes forest in 1940, for example, appears to have been entirely missed by critics and reviewers alike. ‘Oui, c’est ainsi, il y a toujours quelques heures pendant lesquelles un royaume est sans défense: un trou, il suffit de rentrer.’³⁷¹

La Reine morte’s message was not restricted to the audiences of the Occupation, but is too simplistic to suggest that its ongoing success since the war proves it is not part of a ‘theatre of resistance’. Even those who categorically deny any ‘resistant’ content or reception for the play recognise its proximity to twentieth-century concerns:

La Reine morte parle davantage du XX^e siècle que du XIV^e siècle portugais. Du XX^e siècle certainement, mais de 1942 en particulier? S’il s’agit d’énoncer un ancrage de l’époque, cela ne pose guère de difficultés; mais existe-t-il un lien de même nature sur le temps très court ?³⁷²

I suspect that the make-up and circumstances of the first audiences were such that a specific understanding was possible, and even inevitable. ‘L’interprétation de *La Reine morte*, et l’esprit de cette interprétation, sont restés à peu près les mêmes qu’en 1942; c’est le public qui a changé, et qui voit l’œuvre sous un aspect différent.’³⁷³

From the examples above, quoted from more recent books, it appears – superficially, at least – that it is almost invariably with hindsight that any kind of pro-Resistance content has been claimed for this play. The risks of openly suggesting such a reading in a publicly-circulated newspaper review in German-occupied Paris are obvious, though even the vocal response of audiences to supposed contemporary allusions in the play was not enough to get it banned by the authorities. It also seems somewhat naive to

³⁷¹ *RM*, p. 120. The passage continues, ‘Par chance, il est rare que l’ennemi flaire ces heures. Ah! s’il savait !’

³⁷² Serge Added, p. 322.

³⁷³ Henry de Montherlant, *Notes sur mon théâtre*, p. 111.

suppose, as does Montherlant, that journalists were careful not to endanger the author's reputation by denouncing allegedly subversive content.

Alors que les critiques de 1942, probablement pour ne pas me gêner, n'avaient pas souligné des répliques qui, à l'époque, pouvaient paraître provocantes à l'égard des Allemands, ceux de la reprise [1948] s'étonnèrent que la censure allemande n'eût pas demandé des suppressions.³⁷⁴

It is not clear what Montherlant is trying to prove here, but if he is claiming a pro-Resistance message for *La Reine morte*, his reasoning is convoluted and unconvincing, and assumes the press would stay silent about specific provocative lines in the play for the express purpose of avoiding inconvenience to its author. However, even for the Parisian press, it was possible to hint at the political implications of passages in the play, without being specific about its location or content. Laubreaux, for example, says mysteriously, 'Il y a deux scènes, au cours des deux premiers actes, qui sont d'un grand orateur politique', without offering further explanation as to his implication.³⁷⁵

One is, of course, perfectly free to exclude (with Jackson and Added) the hypothesis that Montherlant deliberately attempted to communicate any sort of Resistance message in his text. However, one cannot comfortably overrule the eye-witness accounts that speak of the audiences' fervour. I maintain it is perfectly admissible that specific lines found a contemporary application because of the way they were delivered or perceived. After all, the work of the *metteur en scène* is concerned with translating the text into speech and action: 'Il s'agira de dégager peu à peu les mouvements que commande le dialogue, qui le

³⁷⁴ Montherlant, *La tragédie sans masque*, p. 31.

³⁷⁵ *Le Petit Parisien*, 12 December 1942.

traduiront et l'accompagneront. [...] Parfois un simple geste, un jeu d'expression, un regard, une rupture dans le rythme du débit, une inflexion de la voix.³⁷⁶

Although concrete evidence is not available to help elucidate this matter, many of the sources mentioned above were written by eye-witnesses present at the early performances. Dussane and Hobson do not specify their attendance at the Comédie-Française for *La Reine morte*, but we may safely assume that they were in contact with many people, particularly students, who would have been present. Given the range of works they saw during the Occupation (and Dussane's own links with the national theatre), it is highly doubtful that they were not able to see the play. However, their impressions of various performances, as well as their conversations with others, have been recorded in their writings on the theatre, and as such are of great value in determining how *La Reine morte* was interpreted by its first audiences.³⁷⁷

While the most authoritative interpretations of the play have already been advanced, some more extreme or far-fetched contemporary political allusions have also been 'spotted'. Montherlant claimed that he knew nothing of politics and refrained from public comment on political movements.³⁷⁸ Perhaps for this reason, he (feigned) impatience with the supposedly uncalled-for reaction of those who saw contemporary references in his play.

Quelquefois, d'abord on ne sait pourquoi, un applaudissement isolé fuse. On perçoit alors que telle parole d'un de vos personnages a paru une allusion politique. Un zigoto perdu dans son idée fixe (l'idée fixe de l'actualité) a sauté là-dessus, et laissant passer tout le reste, a gobé tout juste cette petite phrase-là.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁶ Jean Nepveu-Dégas, *Revue des Beaux-Arts de France III*, February 1943, p. 149.

³⁷⁷ See, for example, Dussane, p. 124, p. 130 and p. 131.

³⁷⁸ Montherlant, *Carnets*, p. 53: 'Mon esprit est réfractaire au politique'.

³⁷⁹ *RM*, p. 166. Also quoted in *Aujourd'hui*, 3 February 1943.

He certainly seemed more than a little surprised that these interpretations could be possible, though he was certainly not discontent with the subsequent publicity:

Qu'on puisse prêter un sens politique à "La Reine morte" [...] me plonge dans une douce rêverie. Heureuse, d'ailleurs. Toutes les fois qu'un lecteur, ou un critique, donne d'une œuvre ou partie d'œuvre de moi une interprétation radicalement erronée, je me frotte les mains. Plus on se gourre sur une œuvre, plus elle a chance de durer.³⁸⁰

His remark is indeed pertinent; press coverage, public discussion and audible reactions were extremely effective in raising the profile of his play.

Montherlant was amused by the following parallels between real-life figures and his protagonists given – significantly – by a reader from Neuilly, *not* a spectator from Paris:

La jeune infante de Navarre, si femme de gouvernement, c'est l'Allemagne. Elle doit épouser Pedro, lâche et apathique, – qui est les États-Unis, – fils du cruel Ferrante, qui est l'Angleterre. Mais Inès de Castro – la France – est mariée secrètement à Pedro. Inès (la France) mourra, victime de Ferrante (l'Angleterre), pour n'avoir pas voulu écouter les sages conseils de l'infante (l'Allemagne). En même temps qu'elle, mourra Ferrante.³⁸¹

Whilst recognising the pure fantasy of such an interpretation which, were it justified, would surely have been spotted by the cultured Germans (or denounced by collaborators), I nevertheless believe that Montherlant's play was infused with the events of 1942. According to Pierre Sipriot, Montherlant's hesitance in involving himself in national and social life, 'n'empêche pas une sourde imprégnation des œuvres par les circonstances; simplement parce qu'on met de tout dans une œuvre, y compris ce qu'on entend autour de soi ou lit dans les journaux.'³⁸² This is not to allow that any play could be said to communicate pro-Resistance ideas simply because it was written during the Occupation; Sipriot wrote this specifically of *La Reine morte*. 'Le début de *La Reine morte* se détache

³⁸⁰ *Comœdia*, 30 January 1943.

³⁸¹ In *La Gerbe*, 14 January 1943, quoted by Montherlant, in *La Tragédie sans masque*, pp. 27-28.

³⁸² Pierre Sipriot, *Montherlant* (Bourges: Seuil, 1975), p. 134.

des temps lointains et se rapproche brusquement de nous. Ce qui se dit dans le palais royal de Montemor-o-Velho, c'est en partie ce qu'on a lu dans les carnets et les essais de l'auteur.'³⁸³

Vastly differing interpretations of Montherlant's plays continued when *Le Maître de Santiago* was adjudged to be anti-Resistance, Communist and pro-Resistance (written by an exemplary – and perhaps the only true – resister) respectively.³⁸⁴ While it may be futile to insist on a fixed interpretation of *La Reine morte*, the reception of the play nevertheless enables a revision of what constitutes pro-Resistance theatre. Equating the expression of French grandeur with a 'theatre of resistance' seems especially apposite here. 'The production of *La Reine morte* [...] resulted in a work of great beauty, heroic grandeur and lofty inspiration. It was the very antipodes of the ugliness of life in general during the occupation.'³⁸⁵ Occupation audiences appeared nourished: 'L'histoire de la jeune reine sacrifiée à la raison d'état suscita de grandes émotions dans le public parisien de 1942.'³⁸⁶

The manifesto of the clandestine paper, *La Scène française*, described the role of theatre, and the duty of performers in the profession, as follows:

[J]amais, comme en ces jours sombres de notre malheur national, l'exercice des professions théâtrales ne nous a permis de remplir notre devoir patriotique avec plus de conscience et de grandeur. C'est qu'un grand privilège nous est donné: nous parlons français à haute voix devant des Français assemblés. Notre rôle est de réfuter en interprétant des œuvres françaises, la propagande allemande et vichyssoise qui, depuis 1940, ne cesse de nous répéter que la France est une nation finie.³⁸⁷

³⁸³ Robichez, pp. 72-73.

³⁸⁴ Montherlant, *Port-Royal et Notes de théâtre (II)*, p. 159: 'Comme je prévoyais, ces assertions, se détruisant l'une l'autre, ne tiennent pas debout.'

³⁸⁵ Leo Forkey, 'The Theatres of Paris during the Occupation', *French Review*, 22 (1949), pp. 299-305.

³⁸⁶ Carolyn Evans, p. 82.

³⁸⁷ *La Scène française*, December 1943, p. 1.

This is a salutary reminder to those who would hastily adjudge Montherlant's play pro-German or in favour of collaboration. Suffice it to say that many reviews pointed to this redeeming quality of Montherlant's *La Reine morte*, grateful that the Comédie-Française was fulfilling its patriotic role by investing in both young and established contemporary French talent. When praising the work of the set-designer, Roland Oudot, Vaudoyer placed him alongside Montherlant with the following commendation: 'Nous sommes fiers d'avoir pu le reprendre aujourd'hui, dans une circonstance qui associe sur l'affiche de la Comédie-Française les noms d'un écrivain et d'un peintre, ou plutôt, les noms de deux poètes purement et parfaitement français.'³⁸⁸

Even among collaborationist critics, there was a belief that *La Reine morte* answered the call for outspoken French pride in a period of forced subservience. In the 12 December 1942 issue of *Le Petit Parisien*, Laubreaux exclaimed, 'Allons, voilà enfin, aux heures les plus nécessaires, une œuvre française qui permet de lever la tête.' However, the fact that it was written by an arch-collaborator could simply mean that the comment expresses his sense of relief that one French playwright is rising above what he perceives as the mediocre masses. Almost identically, *L'Appel* praised the boost of pride afforded to the French by the play: 'La Comédie-Française se hausse à la hauteur de sa mission en présentant, dans les heures sombres que nous vivons, *La Reine morte*. Elle honore la France, chose qui, de nos jours, ne lui arrive pas aussi souvent que nous le souhaiterions.'³⁸⁹ This reiterates the French public's need for ideological succour from the theatre, given the harsh conditions raging outside. '[Les sujets] étaient peut-être les confidents naturels de la douleur d'un peuple qui avait besoin de s'assurer de sa grandeur

³⁸⁸ Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, 'Naissance de "La Reine morte"', in *Comœdia*, 5 December 1942.

³⁸⁹ *L'Appel*, 17 December 1942.

passée pour reprendre confiance en lui-même.’³⁹⁰ *La Reine morte* certainly appears to have achieved such a mission in the eyes of the 1942 press and audiences.

Montherlant’s theatrical output was to dominate his career from this point on, with only a single novel, *Le Chaos et la nuit* (1963), interrupting the following flow of plays: *Le Maître de Santiago* (1947), *Port-Royal* (1954), *La Ville dont le prince est un enfant* (1951) and *La Guerre civile* (1965). That Montherlant prospered so well during the Occupation was met with both disdain and suspicion, but his play clearly brought a sense of French grandeur to the biggest national stage, where he was one of the first living playwrights to be performed in the early 1940s. Whatever his personal inclinations, objectionable views on the war and the ideas expressed through his ‘heroes’,³⁹¹ *La Reine morte* was a phenomenal success with the Parisian public and, on the whole, with the press.

Montherlant’s political leanings

Montherlant was very outspoken about his native France. Proud of his own aristocratic roots, virile pursuits and cultural know-how, he was quick to decry the French people’s ignorance about the onset of war. This was evident in his reflections when walking in the capital city after the 1944 Liberation: ‘Le Parisien ne fait rien pour défendre son sol ni pour défendre sa vie. Mais pour *la gueule, la cuisse, le spectacle*, il se retourne avec une débrouillardise étonnante, rétablit la situation en quelques jours.’³⁹² The desire to be entertained indeed led to the quick reopening in 1940 of cabarets, music-halls and so on, but Montherlant was particularly concerned about the *quality* of French culture. He wrote

³⁹⁰ Carolyn Evans, p. 8.

³⁹¹ Montherlant, *Théâtre*, p. 1067: “L’effet tragique ne repose-t-il pas partout sur la vue d’objets intolérables?” (Goethe) *Objets intolérables*: Alvaro, Georges Carrion, voire Ferrante’ (my emphasis).

³⁹² Montherlant, *Le fichier parisien. Édition définitive revue et augmentée par l’auteur* (Gallimard, 1974), p. 101 (author’s original emphasis).

many articles on this topic, speaking of his exacting demands of young Frenchmen and also, more specifically, of the art of theatre.³⁹³ For example, he berated the Comédie-Française for the poor quality – ‘dessus de pendule’ – of the popular plays performed for the (‘ignorant’) masses in the first half of 1942, such as Gringoire’s *Le Passant*. In Montherlant’s opinion, they were sullyng the name of the greatest national theatre, ‘créée censément pour conserver pur le goût français’.³⁹⁴

He was no less exacting of the French government. He initially declared his trust in Pétain – ‘Jusqu’en décembre 1940, je faisais confiance au maréchal. Pas au-delà.’ – but later violently criticised Vichy’s actions: ‘L’État vole, fraude, persécute, tue, et cela est trouvé bon. Quoi qu’il fasse, l’État a toujours raison.’³⁹⁵ On the other hand, Montherlant seemed to believe, if one is to take seriously his *Solstice de juin*, that both the new French government established at Vichy, and the German victory, must be embraced; a clear collaborationist stance. He also held that Vichy’s proposed ‘Révolution nationale’ could be envisaged, despite its patriotism being clearly deluded as the so-called revolution would need to be realised independently of the German presence and world-wide conflict. Montherlant may in this way be ranked as a right-wing anarchist, as he opposed democracy but was passionately concerned about French values and purity.³⁹⁶ Thus, ‘Pour Montherlant, tout est bon qui défend la France, quel que soit le régime qui la prétend représenter.’³⁹⁷

³⁹³ *Comœdia*, 21 June 1941. See *Les Critiques de notre temps*, p. 89: ‘Cette exigence est toujours à l’égard de la société qui environne l’auteur [...] une exigence à l’égard de la patrie, accompagnée d’attaques et de reproches...’

³⁹⁴ Montherlant, *Carnets XLII et XLIII. Du 1^{er} Janvier 1942 au 31 Décembre 1943* (La Table Ronde, 1948), p. 32.

³⁹⁵ Montherlant and Peyrefitte, *Correspondance*, p. 153, and Montherlant, *Carnets*, p. 69. This was written barely two weeks before the premiere of *La Reine morte*.

³⁹⁶ ‘Soit: objectivement, en langage politique, il est un anarchiste de droite.’ *Les Critiques*, p. 11.

³⁹⁷ Garet, pp. 128-29. This view is confirmed and explained by Montherlant in *Carnets*, pp. 53-54.

Such classification may help to form a judgment of Montherlant's convictions and activities during the Occupation, but it seems to belie his apparent reluctance to discuss or expose political ideas in his literary and theatrical creations. Whatever conclusions one may draw about his motivations, it appears that he did see his writing as political, in the sense that it was an outpouring of his sense of patriotic duty. 'Et lui-même, mené parce [*sic*] qu'on appellera selon son gré orgueil, outrecuidance ou suffisance, a sans doute pensé qu'il était de son devoir d'intervenir dans le désarroi de ses compatriotes, qu'il pouvait par ses écrits aider au relèvement d'une nation prostrée.'³⁹⁸

Montherlant, like many writers and journalists, was looking for someone extraordinary to raise the standard and speak out with a great work that would allow the French to regain their national pride. He suggested in his *Carnets* that, 'C'est le malheur de la France, de n'avoir trouvé, dans son abaissement inouï, que des voix imbéciles et fausses, quand il s'agissait de lui parler de la grandeur de l'âme.'³⁹⁹ On another occasion, he spoke of, 'Un des plus grands destins tragiques, de sorte que ce peuple, qui fait si piteuse figure depuis tant d'années, reprend une espèce de grandeur dans le comble de son abaissement. Voici l'heure des grandes œuvres.'⁴⁰⁰ Such a call to French revival is quite political in nature, and Montherlant wrote elsewhere of a need to act and display courage, despite inaction on his own part.⁴⁰¹ However, his detractors argue that the playwright's own behaviour demonstrates a singular failure to live up to such principles. Sartre claimed that Drieu La Rochelle, 'a, comme Montherlant, fait la guerre pour rire en 1914.'⁴⁰² When examining Jean Giono's case, *Les Lettres françaises* claimed he had betrayed the French:

³⁹⁸ Garet, pp. 125-26.

³⁹⁹ Montherlant, *Carnets*, p. 77.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁰¹ Montherlant, *Les Nouvelles chevaleries* (Marseille: Jean Vigneau, 1942), pp. 59-61: 'Dans l'épreuve, il n'y a qu'à lui opposer le plus vif courage. L'âme jouit de son courage et oublie de considérer le malheur. [...] Comment peut-on apprendre à se connaître soi-même? Jamais par la méditation, seulement par l'action.'

⁴⁰² *Les Lettres françaises*, April 1943.

‘Nul écrivain n’a poussé aussi loin le reniement, sinon Montherlant, qui, ayant chanté l’héroïsme, trahit lorsque fut venue l’heure de l’héroïsme.’⁴⁰³

Montherlant’s stance on the defeat of France in 1940 was extremely controversial. He saw the victory of the Germans as an inevitable event which must be accepted in the same spirit with which a sportsman gracefully acknowledges his loss. ‘La meilleure preuve [de la noblesse] en est le succès, dans la majorité des cas, de cette démarche profonde: aller se mettre sans réserve dans les mains de son ennemi.’⁴⁰⁴ A particularly graphic analogy was suggested in an essay (‘Les chenilles’) from his banned *Solstice de juin* where he recounted urinating on a caterpillar and sparing its life once he had shown his superiority. ‘Faire tout ce qu’il faut pour anéantir l’adversaire. Mais une fois qu’il a montré que c’était lui qui tenait bon bout, s’allier avec lui.’⁴⁰⁵ The message was clear: the French should ‘throw themselves on the mercy of their conquerors. For all his celebration of virility, Montherlant’s was a counsel of prudence and realism.’⁴⁰⁶

Indeed, when it became clear even from 1942 that the German war campaign was weakening, the clandestine press began to eulogise small acts of rebellion on the one hand, and on the other expose those who had joined the losing camp and were now on the retreat. One such example of commendation was caused by the refusal of seventy-nine out of eighty actors to accept René Rocher’s invitation for a welcoming party at the Odéon for a Hamburg theatre company.⁴⁰⁷ Particular pleasure was taken in denouncing Drieu La Rochelle in articles entitled ‘Seul avec la Gestapo’ and ‘Les faux calculs de Drieu’.⁴⁰⁸ In a similar vein, they parodied Montherlant’s *Solstice de juin*: ‘M. de Montherlant nous

⁴⁰³ *Les Lettres françaises*, June 1943.

⁴⁰⁴ Montherlant, *Carnets*, p. 72.

⁴⁰⁵ Montherlant, *Le Solstice de juin* (Grasset, 1941), p. 288.

⁴⁰⁶ Julian Jackson, p. 207.

⁴⁰⁷ ‘L’Odéon à l’honneur’, *Les Lettres françaises*, June 1944.

⁴⁰⁸ *Les Lettres françaises*, November 1942 and April 1944.

informe qu'il ne pisse plus sur les chenilles, mais sur les vainqueurs d'hier. Dont acte.'⁴⁰⁹

This indictment of passive collaboration paved the way for the playwright's Épuration trial.

La Reine morte was interpreted by the above critics as condoning Vichy's denigration of the French: 'Des hommes qui ne valent pas de vivre! Des idées qui ne valent pas qu'on meure pour elles!'.⁴¹⁰ Jean Blanzat also made an unfavourable comparison of *Le Solstice* with Saint-Exupéry's *Pilote de guerre*: 'L'exode, vu du ciel, par un combattant qui risque sa vie à chaque seconde, n'est plus ce jeu de massacre que M. de Montherlant trivial et farceur, célébra d'en bas, avec un lyrisme que nous n'avons garde d'oublier.'⁴¹¹

However, it would be unfair to suggest that there was a unanimous consensus of French intellectuals willing to condemn Montherlant. Aragon, whose poetry was published by *Les Lettres françaises*, proclaimed, 'J'ai le plus grand respect des hommes qui représentent vraiment la France. [...] Je compte parmi eux Henry de Montherlant. On n'est pas plus Français que lui. Jusqu'à la rage. Jusqu'à l'acharnement qu'il porte à juger son propre pays.'⁴¹² According to Lenormand, Montherlant's *La Reine morte* could not be further from indifference to death and the suffering of his fellow Frenchmen.

Car, dans un temps où la mort a perdu toute importance, toute signification, où elle se répand sur l'espèce, aussi banale et moralement injustifiable qu'une épidémie, c'est affirmer sa foi dans la valeur de la vie humaine que de lentement tourner autour du complexe de l'assassinat, et de nous inspirer l'effroi d'un geste devant lequel l'accoutumance risque de nous rendre sinistrement consentants.⁴¹³

It should be noted that Lenormand wrote this in 1943, while the play was still being performed in its first run. Similarly, Drieu La Rochelle suggested that Montherlant took

⁴⁰⁹ *Les Lettres françaises*, July 1944.

⁴¹⁰ *RM*, p. 123.

⁴¹¹ *Les Lettres françaises*, April 1943.

⁴¹² *Ce Soir*, 7 December 1938.

⁴¹³ *La Reine morte* (Librairie Gallimard, 1947), p. 14.

seriously the notion of duty and action at a time of national crisis (with a parallel criticism of the passive majority). 'Il est remarquable qu'au moment où le peuple se décharge de sa faculté affirmative et la laisse glisser sous les pieds de toutes les puissances en marche par le monde, un grand écrivain français se jette sur cette question de la responsabilité du chef et la pénètre des maximes les plus cruelles.'⁴¹⁴

Furthermore, there is scant proof that Montherlant was directly involved in any collaborationist activity, such as entertaining Germans, promoting fascist or Nazi ideology, or denouncing his own countrymen. He only wrote one article for a German newspaper, *Deutschland Frankreich*, in April 1943. It was written in memory of his translator, Karl-Heinz Bremer. This is presumably not sufficient to be considered an act of collaboration, given that the clandestine Resistance journal *Les Lettres françaises* also wrote an obituary for Bremer, stating 'Tout donne à croire qu'il est mort courageusement'.⁴¹⁵ Heller has helpfully summarised Montherlant's contact with the Germans during the Occupation.

Pourtant, en dehors de Bremer qui était son traducteur allemand avant la guerre, et Junger rencontré une fois à Paris, Montherlant n'a jamais 'collaboré'. Il a refusé le voyage en Allemagne qu'on lui proposait, les conférences, d'écrire dans les journaux allemands comme le *Pariser Zeitung*, de signer à la librairie pro-allemande, etc.⁴¹⁶

The trip in question was to the Weimar Congress of European writers in 1941 and Montherlant further refused a German publication of his *Mors et Vita* as it would have required him to delete the section entitled 'Un petit Juif à la guerre'.⁴¹⁷ Equally, despite his

⁴¹⁴ *Les Critiques de notre temps et Montherlant*, p. 82.

⁴¹⁵ *Les Lettres françaises*, July 1944.

⁴¹⁶ Gerhard Heller, *Un Allemand à Paris*, p. 94.

⁴¹⁷ Merrill A. Rosenberg, 'Montherlant and the Critics of the French Resistance', *French Review* (April 1971).

admiration for the philosopher, 'il [a] refusé en 1941, compte tenu des circonstances, de composer et de préfacier un recueil de morceaux choisis de Nietzsche'.⁴¹⁸

The intervention of Bremer enabled him to obtain a personally-delivered *laissez-passer* in order to *return* to Paris from Nice in 1940. Indeed, 'Son seul acte de collaboration fut de demander souvent aux Allemands une autorisation spéciale pour courir les rues après le couvre-feu, l'usage d'une voiture de temps en temps, un ausweis pour Nice, etc.'⁴¹⁹ No incriminating evidence was found at Montherlant's home, either, when it was searched by the Gestapo in 1944. On this matter, the doubts surrounding Montherlant's attitude towards the Germans may never be resolved. He was not found guilty of fraternising with the enemy, though he admitted that his impressions of the occupier were mixed.

J'ajoute qu'il manque aux présents carnets – des années d'occupation – un certain nombre de notes relatives aux Allemands et à leur conduite de guerre. Je traçais ces notes à part afin de les avoir sous la main, s'il était nécessaire un jour de les détruire à l'improviste. Non qu'elles fussent systématiquement hostiles aux nazis, mais elles étaient écrites avec beaucoup de liberté. Et, en effet, des agents de la Gestapo s'étaient présentés chez moi, pour y perquisitionner, le 14 mars 1944, je dus et pus faire disparaître rapidement ces notes.⁴²⁰

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I am inclined to agree with Banchini: 'on l'avait accusé d'avoir été un collaborateur des Allemands: accusation misérable et ridicule'.⁴²¹

Any other conclusion (which is not based on *Le Solstice de juin*) simply has not been substantiated, despite bold claims from Sartre and Drieu La Rochelle that he was undoubtedly an archetypal collaborator.⁴²² More recent critics have also labelled Montherlant as a collaborator. Jackson suggests that even having one's name printed

⁴¹⁸ Frantz Favre, *Montherlant et Camus: une ligne nietzschéenne* (Paris-Caen: Lettres Modernes Minard, 2000), p. 9.

⁴¹⁹ Montherlant and Peyrefitte, *Correspondance*, p. 17. These documents were essential for *anyone* working in the performing arts, simply in order to travel or move around Paris.

⁴²⁰ 'Avant-propos', in Montherlant, *Carnets*, p. 10.

⁴²¹ Ferdinando Banchini, *Le Théâtre de Montherlant* (Rome: Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1971), p. 18 (note).

⁴²² Drieu wanted to recruit Montherlant for the editorial committee of the NRF. See Merrill A. Rosenberg.

alongside Montherlant's could be seen as compromising at the Liberation, though he concedes that Montherlant (wisely) ceased writing in the official press in February 1943.⁴²³

On the same count, it would be ridiculous to suggest that Montherlant was a resister. He was inclined, at least at the beginning of the Occupation, to write too much and too openly, but in his actions he remained independent of the ever more sharply-defined political movements. A final warning against labelling Montherlant's stance is appropriate before examining the differing interpretations of *La Reine morte*. 'Bonnes gens, vous voici prévenus! Montherlant ne fait pas de politique, à quoi il ne connaît rien, il s'occupe strictement de morale.'⁴²⁴ It may be precisely the confusion of politics and morals that has led to so much debate in judgments of Montherlant. Objections to the latter may have been formulated as accusations of a political nature.

Montherlant on trial

During the *Épuration*, Montherlant was investigated by four committees that examined the accusations of collaboration levelled at him by intellectual figures and colleagues in the theatrical profession. The trial focused entirely on his (early) essays, most of which commented on the contemporary situation. The 1941 publication of *Le Solstice de juin* was judged to be pro-German in its acceptance of the occupier's inevitable victory over France and Montherlant's admiration of the enemy. However, the *Comité national des écrivains*, the *Haute Cour* and the *Comité d'épuration de la Société des gens de lettres*, found no cause to condemn Montherlant. It was only at the fourth attempt that the *Comité d'épuration des Arts et des Lettres* considered *Le Solstice de juin* sufficiently damning to

⁴²³ Jackson, p. 311, p. 316 and p. 208.

⁴²⁴ Jean-Louis Garet, p. 135.

find Montherlant guilty of collaboration, though 'The censure was only nominal. Montherlant was forbidden to publish for a year.'⁴²⁵

Apart from one or two infamous exceptions, such as the execution of Brasillach, very few writers were indicted for their activities during the Occupation, and such a black mark against Montherlant's name appeared to be enough for him to seek refuge with Cocteau after the Liberation, fearing for his reputation. The similarities between the two are worthy of note. They both had new plays performed during the Occupation and wrote indiscriminately for the collaborationist press; they were also present at various social occasions with German company, such as a 1943 dinner at Colette's home. Deciding to follow their own conscience concerning behaviour in German-run Paris, they nevertheless both refused to attend the Weimar Congress of European writers in 1941 or travel to Berlin, which would have indicated a public confession of collaboration. However, Montherlant made significant efforts to keep his private life anonymous, whereas Jean Cocteau's homosexuality was well advertised. Vichy's opposition to the immorality in Cocteau's plays and the pursuit of both the playwright and his partner Jean Marais, who played lead roles in his works, is good evidence of this. Montherlant's desire to avoid unwanted attention towards his sexual persuasion may well explain his reticence regarding Cocteau's advances.⁴²⁶

Montherlant's privacy about his homosexuality caused him to be particularly concerned about being seen in public. Many of the reviews of *La Reine morte* mention his absence from the premiere or his desire to avoid the cameras. According to Le Boterf, his initial absence was primarily due to Vaudoyer's editing of the text without consulting the author: 'Montherlant refuse d'assister à la "première"...mais se réconcilie vingt-quatre

⁴²⁵ Merrill A. Rosenberg, p. 841.

⁴²⁶ Domenget, p. 123, claims Montherlant did not trust Cocteau with private matters and kept away from him.

heures après avec l'administrateur de la Comédie-Française.'⁴²⁷ Jackson explains that Montherlant was timid about his sexual escapades and deliberately avoided the authorities. 'Walking around Paris one day with the writer Jean Grenier, he insisted they lower their voices when passing in front of a building occupied by the Germans in case they were overheard.'⁴²⁸ During this conversation with Montherlant in May-June 1942, Grenier also established that the playwright had doubts about France's ability to recover from defeat and guarantee its own future.⁴²⁹ In his correspondence with Roger Peyrefitte, Montherlant was significantly more explicit about his relationships with young boys, though, having discovered on 31 October 1940 that the German censorship body was intercepting his letters, he began to use a heavily coded language in order to avoid suspicion.

Aware of his reputation among his peers (fellow writers made up the *Comité d'épuration* which found him guilty), Montherlant seemed genuinely concerned that he would be made a pariah of French society; a sense of solitude shared by other writers. François Domenget confirms this sentiment, adding that as Montherlant had seen Barrès, Gide, Colette and Cocteau forgotten by the critics, he felt his exile from the French literary field would be an inevitable consequence of the official condemnation.⁴³⁰ He was by no means the only right-wing author to prosper under the Occupation and such a label became a curse at the Liberation. 'Lui-même prétendait volontiers, affirmant avec amertume à ses amis que, classé politiquement à droite, il était "sur la liste noire", qu'on ne jouerait plus ses pièces après sa mort et qu'on étoufferait son nom.'⁴³¹ As late as 1954, during a symbolic ceremony at the Comédie-Française celebrating the 250th performance of *La*

⁴²⁷ Le Boterf, p. 137.

⁴²⁸ Julian Jackson, p. 207.

⁴²⁹ Jean Grenier in *Sous l'occupation* (Éditions Claire Paulhan, 1997), pp. 296-97.

⁴³⁰ *Montherlant critique*, p. 315.

⁴³¹ *Les Critiques de notre temps et Montherlant*, p. 7.

Reine morte, Montherlant handed over the manuscript of the play to the theatre's archives saying, with typical melancholy and a reminder of the scarcity of paper during the Occupation, that at least the reverse of the pages (bills, letters and so on) would be of some interest to posterity.

What is perhaps most striking about *La Reine morte* is that despite the spontaneous outbursts from the audiences at specific lines, the play has continued to be successful, retaining its appeal outside the circumstances of the Second World War. After its success during the Occupation, including performances in POW camps, the play was staged again in 1948 at the Comédie-Française to huge critical acclaim, taken on two tours to sixty French towns and abroad (1951, by Noël Vincent), and has been performed frequently ever since.⁴³² It has been staged as far away as Brazil, Denmark and Hungary, while the text has been translated into English, Spanish, German and Italian. A new opera composed by Daniel-Lesur, and based on Montherlant's version of the Portuguese legend, was also commissioned in 2005.

As with the trials of many other writers under the spotlight at the Liberation, Montherlant's works of fiction were conspicuously absent from the evidence list against him. While an author might not expect to be accused of sharing the same values as his fictional characters, it has been common practice to mistreat Montherlant in this manner. It has been suggested, for example, that Ferrante represents the author's views on the political expediency of silencing an individual's freedom for the good of the nation – an extremely serious accusation in a time of war.

⁴³² For example, *Les Amants d'Anne* in Ecully, Lyon (2006/7) and the Théâtre 14 (March-April 2008). Jean-Luc Jeener staged all sixteen plays by Montherlant at the Théâtre du Nord-Ouest from June to December 2006.

Any allusion to a government willing to sacrifice a family member whose personal happiness is opposed to the most convenient national policy was likely to be subject to condemnation, at least by the clandestine press. It was not long in coming. *Les Lettres françaises*, in its January-February 1943 edition, made an unusual and bold criticism of *La Reine morte* which implied its complicity with the occupying powers.

Montherlant, qui depuis toujours s'est plu à célébrer la virilité et la grandeur dans ses écrits sinon dans la vie prend parti, il nous le fait sentir à chaque instant, pour la raison d'État contre le sentiment et contre le bonheur humain. Et voilà le secret de l'appui officiel donné à *La Reine morte*.

However, in my opinion, a close reading of Ferrante's motives reveals a more complex story than such a one-sided interpretation implies. Ferrante does not have Inès killed because of the 'raison d'État', he merely proclaims this in order to keep up appearances.⁴³³ The dialogue states that Ferrante's reasons are confused, as the character himself exclaims with his final breath.

Ô mon Dieu! dans ce répit qui me reste, avant que le sabre repasse et m'écrase, faites qu'il tranche *ce nœud épouvantable de contradictions qui sont en moi*, de sorte que, un instant au moins avant de cesser d'être, je sache enfin ce que je suis.⁴³⁴

The existentialist overtones in this tirade are striking, as is the admission that the king has no conviction concerning his fatal act. Indeed, in an earlier monologue, Ferrante far more explicitly excludes political expediency as a factor in his decision. In order for him to be satisfied, his son Pedro would have to marry the Infante to create the desired alliance between Navarre and Portugal. Ferrante knows that killing Inès will not bring about any

⁴³³ Montherlant, *La tragédie sans masque*, p. 22: La raison d'état, que le roi met en avant, n'est pas une des causes de son acte: elle n'est là que pour la forme.'

⁴³⁴ *RM*, p. 148 (my emphasis).

change in the political situation and the assassination is an act he must commit as a show of strength, and to punish the naive trust, hope and new life represented by Inès.⁴³⁵

Pourquoi est-ce que je la tue? Il y a sans doute une raison, mais je ne la distingue pas. Non seulement Pedro n'épousera pas l'Infante, mais je l'arme contre moi inexpiablement. [...] Eh bien! qu'au moins je me débarrasse tout de suite de cet acte. Un remords vaut mieux qu'une hésitation qui se prolonge.⁴³⁶

While the clandestine paper's judgment of the play appears flawed, particularly given Ferrante's penchant for ignoring the appeals of his counsellors for good diplomacy, it is interesting that they went as far as accusing Montherlant of holding to the values spoken by one of his characters. This is why I believe Montherlant is wrongly accused. He claims in general that each of his 'créatures devenait tour à tour le porte-parole d'un de mes moi', and specifically that 'Le roi, dont le caractère est à peine esquissé chez Guevara, prenait forme, pétri de moments de moi'.⁴³⁷ However, it is obviously a dangerous and misleading assumption to equate an author's creative process with his political commitment. The inspiration for Montherlant's characters, dialogue and overarching themes is wide-ranging, and it seems too simplistic to accuse an author of holding to the political views of his main protagonist. Not only does this play belong to the realm of fiction, unlike Montherlant's wartime essays for example, it is based on historical events not invented by the playwright.

Jean Batchelor helpfully distinguishes between fiction and the playwright's own stance, explaining that Montherlant's characters are fed by his own experience and brought to life by parts of the author's personality, but then become the province of Art; that is, exaggerated and with a life of their own. While certain psychological traits are indeed borrowed from Montherlant, who invests the characters with many of his own ideas, he is

⁴³⁵ His counsellor Gonçalves and Prime Minister Coelho insist clemency is a sign of weakness. *RM*, p. 64.

⁴³⁶ *RM*, p. 143.

⁴³⁷ Montherlant, *Textes sous une occupation 1940-1944*, p. 162.

not writing *about* himself. Batchelor would thus argue that there is as much of Montherlant in Inès, or the Infante, as there is in Ferrante. He would also disagree with Montherlant's own claim: 'Ces héros, ces rois, ces princes, comment ne me toucheraient-ils pas, puisqu'ils sont tous moi-même? Minos, c'est moi. Et Pasiphaé. Et Khosrau [Ferrante]. Ils ne sont pas ce que je suis en rêve, mais ce que je suis en réalité: leur être est le mien.'⁴³⁸

Once characters are written on the page, or represented on the stage, they escape the control of the author and enter the realm of fiction. An author living solely in his creations is the province of fiction, not true life.⁴³⁹ This is not to suggest that a writer may not communicate a specific philosophical or political manifesto through his characters, simply that the author is not summed up by, or restricted to, his protagonists' ideas.

However, *Les Lettres françaises* was not the only paper to criticise *La Reine morte* for communicating Montherlant's own agenda. *France Socialiste* suggested that it was a sign of immaturity that the playwright was unable to give his characters their own distinctiveness. 'Et l'on sent, peut-être plus qu'il ne conviendrait, la pensée et la parole de l'auteur dans le langage, les réflexions des personnages. [...] Défaut d'expérience, sans doute.'⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, Jacques Berland complains that, 'Les personnages, tour à tour, défendent les idées, les conceptions, les partis pris de M. de Montherlant'.⁴⁴¹ This opinion was certainly not universally shared, as Jean-Nepveu-Dégas defended Montherlant's injection of independent life into his characters. 'Les personnages, fixés par l'histoire ou la

⁴³⁸ *Textes sous une occupation*, pp. 88-89.

⁴³⁹ 'Julián lived in his books. The body that ended up in the morgue was only a part of him. His soul is in his stories. I once asked him who inspired him to create his characters, and his answer was no-one. That all of his characters were himself.' Carlos R. Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, trans. by Lucia Graves: Phoenix, 2004)

⁴⁴⁰ *France Socialiste*, 19 December 1942.

⁴⁴¹ *Paris Soir*, 14 December 1942.

légende, il leur a rendu la vie, justifiant leurs réactions par les caractères à la fois nettement différenciés et riches de nuances qu'il leur prête.'⁴⁴²

Interestingly, Montherlant withdrew his subtitle for *La Reine morte*, 'comment on tue les femmes', and corresponding defamatory remarks in the text, as a response to accusations of misogyny.⁴⁴³ Such accusations may be well-founded, given Montherlant's aristocratic roots and praise of extra-virile behaviour, not to mention the criticism of and submissive roles for women in his series of novels, *Les jeunes filles* (1936-1939). Simone de Beauvoir, in particular, devoted significant space to this subject in *Le Deuxième sexe* (1950). Marie-Claude Hubert comments on one such change in *La Reine morte*.

Jusqu'en 1947, la réplique d'Égas Coelho commençait ainsi: 'Non, en effet, il n'y a pas de proportion! Et ce sont toujours les hommes qui sont tués, jamais les femmes: cela n'est pas juste. Bien plus, à égalité de crime devant la loi, une femme n'est pas tuée: cela n'est pas juste. Une femme, par sa trahison, livre l'armée: elle est emprisonnée à vie, et, s'accommodant peu à peu, puisqu'il est dans la nature que tout ce qui dure se relâche, elle en vient à tirer une vie qui n'est pas dénuée de tout agrément. Mais un homme, pour le même forfait, est retranché d'un coup.' Agacé par les applaudissements des spectateurs, Montherlant fit supprimer ce passage où s'exprime la misogynie du ministre.⁴⁴⁴

The pains Montherlant took to release himself from ties to his characters were perhaps never more extreme than the composition of an entire play to demonstrate the eternal ambivalence of his own political position, as well as his belief in creative freedom. *Demain il fera jour* (1949) is the sequel to *Fils de personne* and brings back Georges as a French lawyer who had worked for the Germans. Georges allows his son Gillou to join the Resistance in 1944 only because of anonymous threats of reprisals for collaborators.

⁴⁴² *Revue des Beaux-Arts de France III*, February 1943, p. 146.

⁴⁴³ For example, 'En cette occasion, la femme est comme la poule: tuez-la et elle vous nourrit.' *RM*, p. 67.

⁴⁴⁴ *La Reine morte* (2006), p. 218. Montherlant recounts the same episode from a conversation with Maurice Escande, the actor initially performing the part of Égas Coelho, in *La tragédie sans masque*, p. 32.

Inevitably, both ex-collaborators and ex-Resistance members believed Montherlant was trying to clear his name, but the playwright answered his critics with a public statement.

Un auteur n'a pas à être esclave, dans ses créations, des erreurs que l'on commet sur sa personne et sur son œuvre. Son indépendance à l'égard des personnages qu'il crée, dont il n'est pas solidaire des égarements, doit doubler une même indépendance à l'égard du public et ses égarements.⁴⁴⁵

Whilst such a comment perhaps reveals Montherlant's naivety concerning the critical and interpretative process, it is the imagination which produces or fleshes out characters. 'S'il [Montherlant] est donc inconsciemment [...] à la fois Ferrante et Pedro, Inès et l'Infante [...] consciemment, il n'est aucun d'eux. Il les assume en tant qu'ensembles, créés par lui, mais *ne reconnaît point pour autant leur maximes*.'⁴⁴⁶

Conclusion

On the evidence of Montherlant's fictional writing, it certainly appears that he does not actually hold to a specific political position, but rather chose a pragmatic standpoint that caused him to continue writing and furthering his career. However, where strong political views are present in an essay, judgments can be made on the author's standpoint and even a sentence passed as at the Liberation, but one is on extremely uncertain ground where fictional characters are concerned, even if they are based on historical figures. Montherlant's wish for creative independence may not have been respected, but there is no doubt that *La Reine morte* benefited greatly from the controversy and misunderstandings surrounding its meaning or political overtones. 'A l'effarement du public s'il savait

⁴⁴⁵ 'Postface', *Demain il fera jour* (1949), in Montherlant, *Théâtre* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), p. 746.

⁴⁴⁶ *Les critiques de notre temps et Montherlant*, p. 13 (my emphasis).

comment est fabriquée une œuvre correspondrait l'effacement de l'auteur s'il savait comment son œuvre est comprise dans le public. Mais vive le malentendu!⁴⁴⁷

The more a work is widely discussed and its meaning hotly debated, the greater its chances of success and of enduring in the public sphere. 'Je suis convaincu que les œuvres qui durent ne durent que par des malentendus, par toute la littérature dont la postérité les entoure.'⁴⁴⁸ Certainly, in the case of *La Reine morte*, the extra publicity was a favourable phenomenon, which might well not have been positive had Montherlant been seen to be promoting a collaborationist stance in the play. It seems that the unrevealed secrets of Ferrante, Égas Coelho and even the Infante, provide sufficient mystery to keep spectators and critics alike guessing, even if the lack of resolution on these points can be frustrating.⁴⁴⁹

Widely differing interpretations of *La Reine morte* are by no means limited to the period of Occupation, rather they are a fundamental feature which have persisted through subsequent generations and different eras. This is magnified by the complex context of *La Reine morte*'s conception, performance and reception, along with the difficulties of making a coherent interpretation of Montherlant's elusive politics and views. It seems that inconclusive assessments are an inevitable result of Montherlant's plays, which provoke continuous misunderstandings between playwright and critic.⁴⁵⁰ While there is evidently no consistent pro-Resistance thesis in Montherlant's *La Reine morte*, it undoubtedly had a huge impact on the suffering French in the Paris of 1942, providing a morale boost for

⁴⁴⁷ 'Comment fut écrite *La Reine morte*', in *RM*, p. 154.

⁴⁴⁸ Montherlant, *Théâtre*, p. 1068.

⁴⁴⁹ H.-R. Lenormand, in *La Reine morte* (Librairie Gallimard, 1947), p. 12: 'Et c'est cette fausse sécurité qui maintient en nous, présente jusqu'à la fin, l'angoisse dont doit vivre un drame tel que celui-ci. [...] C'est le plus noble effroi que la forme tragique puisse créer.'

⁴⁵⁰ Montherlant, *Théâtre*, p. vii: 'Chaque pièce, cependant, par sa nouveauté et sa vigueur, a suscité des débats fondés sur de continuels malentendus.'

French audiences for an entire theatrical season until it finally had to make way for *Le Soulier de satin* at the Comédie-Française.

CHAPTER FOUR

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: *LES MOUCHES*

Perhaps more than with any other French playwright during the Occupation, enormous controversy has surrounded the meanings communicated by the performance of Jean-Paul Sartre's first Paris-staged play, *Les Mouches*, premiered on 3 June 1943.⁴⁵¹ He has been accused of duplicity, both in the sense of creating double meanings and of deliberately covering his tracks. Ingrid Galster suggests that Sartre's postwar theories about 'committed literature' served to mollify his lack of direct Resistance action during the Occupation.⁴⁵² Others refuse to conclude whether this was deliberate or not. Allan Stoekl believes two very different messages are discernible in *Les Mouches* and were simply appropriated by opposing groups.⁴⁵³ Sartre has also been accused of passive – that is, inauthentic – Resistance, and even improving his career thanks to France's submission to German and Vichy rule.

On the other hand, his fervent supporters have hailed him as a model of resistance thought and action, a courageous and subversive writer spurring his countrymen on via clever camouflage to violent, but necessary, attacks on Germans (despite reprisals).

Le détour par l'histoire ou les mythes antiques a été parfois pour les dramaturges un moyen d'échapper à la censure en dissimulant des propos subversifs sous un vêtement d'emprunt. Ainsi *Les Mouches* de Sartre en 1943, *L'Antigone* d'Anouilh en 1944, en dressant face aux tyrans des héros épris de dignité et de liberté, constituaient un manifeste en faveur des peuples et des résistants qui luttèrent au prix de leur vie contre l'oppression ennemie.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵¹ Benedict O'Donohoe, *Sartre's Theatre: Acts for Life* (Bern, Switzerland: Lang, 2005), p. 55. *Dictionnaire des pièces de théâtre*, p. 396 and François Noudelmann, 'Huis clos' et 'Les Mouches' de Jean-Paul Sartre, (Gallimard, 1993), p. 17: 'Les Mouches ont été créées le 2 juin 1943'. Discrepancy is about dress rehearsals.

⁴⁵² Ingrid Galster, *Sartre, Vichy et les intellectuels* (L'Harmattan, 2001), p. 11.

⁴⁵³ Allan Stoekl, 'What the Nazis saw: *Les Mouches* in Occupied Paris', in *SubStance* # 102, 32 (2003), p. 88.

⁴⁵⁴ Michel Lioure, *Lire le théâtre moderne* (Dunod, 1998), p. 106.

Indeed, in this light, the very name of the author is seen as synonymous with the Resistance. 'Il serait naïf de supposer qu'un homme si informé politiquement, si "engagé" lui-même, aborderait le théâtre sans penser aux messages politiques qu'il pourrait y communiquer.'⁴⁵⁵

This chapter will examine the circumstances surrounding the first performances of *Les Mouches*, the hugely differing interpretations of – and reactions to – its content, and the ongoing debates concerning its legacy and Sartre's reputation. Sartre's wartime activities will also be examined to see what light they can shed on his political stance, his attitude towards the Resistance and whether any specific political message can be discerned in his play.

Preparing for the premiere

Although it was not his first attempt at theatre, Sartre's first experience of staging a play had been in the extreme conditions of a prison camp. From his school days, he had written various different scripts, including an adaptation of a myth, and a letter to Simone de Beauvoir from Stalag XII D states clearly that he again tried his hand at several plays which were not performed.⁴⁵⁶ Almost certainly the period of greatest development for Sartre followed his first encounter with the theatre director, Charles Dullin. Not only was Sartre given a History of Theatre class to teach in Dullin's École d'art dramatique, focusing especially on Greek theatre, but he was also able to experience life backstage in order to

⁴⁵⁵ Carolyn Evans, p. 86.

⁴⁵⁶ *Un Théâtre de situations: textes choisis et présentés par Michel Contat et Michel Rybalka* (Éditions Gallimard), p. 220.

see the practical workings of performance.⁴⁵⁷ A trip to Greece in 1937 took Sartre to Argos where the various mythical characters discovered in his reading came to life. In a letter written to his friend Wanda Kosakiewics – sister of the actress who played the part of Électre in *Les Mouches* under the ‘aryanised’ stage name of Olga Dominique – Sartre implied that he had tried, with little success, to adapt the legend of the *Orestia*.⁴⁵⁸

Plenty of inspiration was available during the 1942-1943 theatre season in Paris. Modern adaptations of myths were in vogue, communicating contemporary dilemmas using a sufficiently distant context while avoiding unwanted attention from the Germans. Cocteau’s *Renaud et Armide*, Leconte de Lisle’s *Les Érinées*, Gerhardt Hauptmann’s *Iphigénie à Delphes*, Goethe’s *Iphigénie en Tauride* and Jean Giraudoux’s *Électre* (performed at the Théâtre de l’Ambigu April 1943) all closely preceded Sartre’s composition of *Les Mouches*. The influence of Giraudoux’s play was significant not only because of the similar subject matter (the legendary house of Atreus), but also because it demonstrated a means of adapting a myth with political and philosophical overtones. ‘[E]n proposant au public d’avant-guerre une réflexion sur la vengeance [l’]opposition entre Égisthe et Électre semble constituer un écho au conflit franco-allemand.’⁴⁵⁹

Also influential was the July 1941 performance of Aeschylus’s *Les Suppliantes* at the Roland-Garros Stadium. Aeschylus’s *Orestia* was to be a source text for Sartre, but equally significant was Sartre’s encounter with Jean-Louis Barrault, whose physical presence and staging capabilities he immediately admired.⁴⁶⁰ In fact, Sartre asked Barrault to direct *Les Mouches* and, convinced by the latter’s enthusiasm, assumed the staging

⁴⁵⁷ He later said this precious contact with Dullin taught him all he knew about the theatre. *Cahiers Charles Dullin*, II, 1966.

⁴⁵⁸ François Noudelmann, p. 147.

⁴⁵⁹ Alain Beretta, *Étude sur ‘Les Mouches’ de Jean-Paul Sartre* (Ellipses, 1997), p. 18.

⁴⁶⁰ G. Dumézil’s *Mythes romains* and V. Basanoff’s *Les Étrusques et leur civilisation* were also sources.

would go ahead in September 1942. At the same performance of *Les Suppliantes*, Barrault had suggested to two amateur actresses that if they wanted a bigger role on a Parisian stage they should approach a playwright with a request for a new play. According to Sartre, it was upon this advice that Olga Kosakiewics approached him in the hope that he would write a play for her: 'it seems the idea for Sartre's second foray into the theatre came to him fortuitously.'⁴⁶¹

The spontaneous nature of Sartre's choice of the Orestia is further confirmed by a 1943 interview in *Comœdia*; he said Oreste was already theatrically 'situated' and thus a perfect subject for the dramatic and philosophical vision of a man obtaining his freedom by means of a horrendous crime. The fact that the double murder is inscribed in the myth did not ingratiate Sartre with the public, as his Oreste is proud rather than repentant of his act. Many commentators suggest that the genesis of Sartre's first public play owes more to a desire to further his career and do a favour for friends than to a conscious decision to outwit the Germans and call audiences to the Resistance. 'Sartre n'a donc pas choisi délibérément la légende antique uniquement comme un prétexte pour tromper la censure en faisant allusion à son époque.'⁴⁶²

Not only did Dullin introduce Sartre to the intricacies of theatrical production; he also brought his invaluable reputation to Sartre's aid. He intervened to allow *La Nausée* to be published in 1938 and was later classed as *deutschfreundlich* by the Germans.⁴⁶³ Dullin wrote regularly for *La Gerbe* and was the speaker of Groupe-Collaboration directed by Alphonse de Châteaubriant. René Rocher (COES) also confirmed that Dullin was *persona*

⁴⁶¹ Benedict O'Donohoe, *Sartre's Theatre: Acts for Life* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 53. See also 'Huis Clos et *Le Soulier de satin*: À propos d'une lettre inédite de Jean-Paul Sartre à Jean-Louis Barrault', in *Romanische Forschungen* (Frankfurt and Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), pp. 202-09.

⁴⁶² Beretta, p. 39.

⁴⁶³ See Galster (2001), pp. 70-72.

grata in the eyes of the occupier. Sartre, on the other hand, was viewed suspiciously by the defenders of the dominant powers.⁴⁶⁴ The collaborationist press unanimously castigated *Les Mouches*, but Rebatet went even further a year later by campaigning to have *Huis clos* banned. Sartre was by no means seen as favourably by the authorities of the Occupation as one may be tempted to think. Sartre is right in his 1960s homage to Dullin when he speaks of the risk of staging a new play by a philosophy professor. Indeed, Sartre's ideas, language and morals were far from being approved of, and it is of no small significance that so many reviews of *Les Mouches* attacked these aspects of Sartre's play more than the major themes communicated by the performance.

Sartre was also under investigation by the Vichy government, and his teaching post was in imminent danger because of suspicions of immoral activities linked with De Beauvoir (who was fired) and others with whom they regularly engaged in illicit behaviour in hotel rooms. The investigation was pending when France was liberated in 1944.⁴⁶⁵ There is no chance that the Germans would have allowed the play to go ahead if Sartre had been as clear a Resistance figure as commentators suggest. '[Q]uant à Sartre, à la fois membre du Comité national des Écrivains et du Front national du théâtre, *il incarne clairement la Résistance*' (as if this could be possible for a public figure in 1943).⁴⁶⁶ Besides, as this commentator later points out, *Les Mouches* was only publicised discreetly and exclusively in collaborationist papers.

Sartre began writing the play during the summer of 1941 at the beach in Porquerolles and during a long excursion with Beauvoir, somewhat typically for their

⁴⁶⁴ *Les Intellectuels et l'Occupation, 1940-1944: Collaborer, partir, résister*, ed. by Albrecht Betz and Stefan Martens (Éditions Autrement, 2004), p. 158. Jean-Pierre Azéma is given as a specific example.

⁴⁶⁵ For documentary evidence of these events, see Gilbert Joseph, *Une si douce Occupation: Simone de Beauvoir et Jean-Paul Sartre 1940-1944* (Albin Michel, 1991), p. 221.

⁴⁶⁶ Beretta, p. 21 (author's original emphasis).

escapist Occupation activities.⁴⁶⁷ He finished *Les Mouches* in May 1942 though it was not premiered until 3 June 1943. Uniquely among my five chosen plays, *Les Mouches* was available in its performance version in April 1943 (published by Gallimard), thus before the theatrical premiere. It had gone through the censorship process and was also available to read in a Lyon paper.⁴⁶⁸ A letter from Sartre to Barrault, definitively breaking the agreement for the latter to stage *Les Mouches* at the Théâtre de l'Athénée, reveals that '[Pierre Renoir] a refusé, ou à peu près de nous donner son theatre. [...] Nous voici au 15 Juillet; après deux mois, nous sommes à la veille des vacances, sans acteurs ni théâtre.'⁴⁶⁹ This is another example of the difficulties for young or new playwrights to be accepted and staged during the Occupation, as the experience of Claude Vermorel has already shown.

Dullin offered to let Barrault direct the play at the enormous auditorium of the newly-baptised Théâtre de la Cité (ex-Sarah Bernhardt). This new name, imposed by the Germans in their racial cleansing programme that eliminated dead and living Jews in the performing arts, is (conspicuously) omitted by many commentators, notably Sartre himself, when speaking of *Les Mouches*.⁴⁷⁰ Financial difficulties were created not only by the luxurious costumes and scenery, the big cast and the sheer size of the auditorium, but also by the pitiful number of spectators turning up to the performances.⁴⁷¹ It may seem curious that there was not enough financial backing, given Sartre's assurance to Barrault that money was not an issue, and the liberal nature of both Sartre's and Beauvoir's generosity to their young satellites who orbited round the *famille*.⁴⁷² There was, however, a curious episode elaborated by Beauvoir in her memoirs of a strange man called Néron, who

⁴⁶⁷ Beretta, p. 17: 'une randonnée à bicyclette en zone libre'.

⁴⁶⁸ *Confluences III*, no. 19, April-May 1943.

⁴⁶⁹ Galster, 'Huis clos et *Le Soulier de satin*', pp. 207-08.

⁴⁷⁰ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 225, and Dussane, p. 124.

⁴⁷¹ Beretta, p. 21.

⁴⁷² *Famille* is Sartre's term for companions and sexual partners. Sartre wrote to Barrault, 'Pour vous comme pour moi, la question d'argent ne se posait même pas.' Galster, 'Huis clos et *Le Soulier de satin*', p. 208.

allegedly offered one million francs to back *Les Mouches* before throwing himself into the Seine, whereupon he was pulled out and it was discovered that he was penniless.⁴⁷³

Performances were brought to a halt and considered a failure due to the lack of ticket sales. A helpful perspective is offered by the research of Annette Fuchs-Betteridge, who has examined the receipts of Parisian theatres from the most 'stable' 1942-1943 season. She found that *Les Mouches* made 265,819F in its first run of twenty-seven performances. This figure is barely half that raised by only twenty performances of Jean Sarmant's *Mamouret* in March 1943 at the same theatre and less than the sum obtained after only six performances of *La Reine morte* (277,282F).⁴⁷⁴ The comparison seems fair given that the Comédie-Française had 1460 seats to the Théâtre de la Cité's 1243 and charged between six and fifty-two francs, while seats at the Théâtre de la Cité cost from five to sixty francs. However, the impact of *Les Mouches* in the Paris press was much more significant and ambiguous. An investigation of the reviews will now follow a brief summary of the play's subject material.

The narrative, political allegory and references to the 1940s

Oreste arrives in Argos with his tutor, who has provided an education characterised by an untested philosophical scepticism. The handsome young man is travelling under the name of Philèbe and apparently just passing through his childhood home as a tourist. He is an existential stranger looking for a burden of responsibility to ground him among men. He sees the sweltering city swarming with flies, the inhabitants unwelcoming and enslaved by a shared sense of remorse imposed by the usurper of the throne, Égisthe, who murdered

⁴⁷³ Beretta, p. 21.

⁴⁷⁴ Annette Fuchs-Betteridge, 'Le Théâtre dramatique en France pendant l'occupation allemande 1940-1944' (unpublished PhD thesis, Université de Paris III, 1969), appendices I and II.

Oreste's father Agamemnon fifteen years previously. Égisthe has instituted an annual ritual to release the dead for twenty-four hours, during which they are believed to go back to their homes to haunt the living. The god Jupiter, a derisory but persuasive figure who manages to keep the Argives toeing the line by impressing them with 'miracles' (that is, magic tricks), tries to convince Oreste to leave because it is better if the people remain ignorant.

Oreste's sister, Électre, is the sole protester against these morbid rituals and violates the annual ceremony by wearing white and dancing for joy. On the point of convincing the people that they are being duped, she sarcastically challenges her ancestors to show with a sign if she is wrong. Jupiter immediately obliges with a spectacular magic trick. Électre has dreamed of her avenging brother coming in triumph, but cannot recognize him in the gentle and unassuming Philèbe. The tension surrounding Oreste's true identity is exacerbated by his mother Clytemnestre, who speaks of his likeness to her son and senses he is a curse.

Oreste eventually reveals himself to Électre and his renewed purpose aligns itself with the legendary story; he rebels against Jupiter's counsel and vows to kill the murderous royal couple. In the palace, the siblings overhear Égisthe ruminating with Jupiter on his manipulation of the people and Jupiter admits that he is powerless to stop a man who realises he is free. After the murder of Égisthe, Électre is utterly horrified by the concrete realisation of her dreams and wants her brother to desist. However, Oreste continues off-stage to struggle with killing his mother (whom he names an accomplice in their father's murder), to the accompaniment of Électre's tormented cries.

To escape the anger of the people, the siblings hide in the sanctuary of Apollo's temple where Oreste will address his people the following morning. Électre, traumatised by their bloody act, repents and resubmits to Jupiter, but Oreste assumes total freedom with no regret for his crime and fears neither the lynch mob nor Jupiter, who no longer has a hold

on him. He declares the people free and symbolically takes upon himself all their burdens, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin leading the rats away from the city. So he leaves Argos, taking the flies with him.⁴⁷⁵

While few political or contemporary allusions were picked up by the first audiences of *Les Mouches*, Sartre and other commentators have since made detailed analyses which draw out both general themes of relevance and specific representations of historical figures and dilemmas. Perhaps the most controversial topic which Sartre retrospectively claimed he had addressed in this play was an approval of violent individual acts against an illegitimate tyrant or occupier. However, if one examines Sartre's own words on this subject, they appear decidedly ambiguous. 'Le véritable drame, celui que *j'aurais voulu* écrire, c'est celui du terroriste qui, en descendant des Allemands dans la rue, déclenche l'exécution de cinquante otages.'⁴⁷⁶ Significant here are the italicised words; they imply that while Sartre would have liked (wanted) to write such a play, he did not in fact write it (although the conditional could, at a stretch, be said to refer simply to his intentions to dramatise the above scenario for which he was obliged to use the cover of a myth). It was not until four years later that he claimed this more explicitly.⁴⁷⁷

However, the sensitive issue of assassinations and reprisals was particularly topical at the time *Les Mouches* was performed. A German officer was killed by the Resistance on the day before the premiere, only a mile away from the theatre.⁴⁷⁸ Sartre stated that he wanted to encourage the authors of such attacks not to give in to a 'seconde forme de repentir'; that is, to avoid denouncing themselves in order to escape the retaliatory

⁴⁷⁵ 'Ce sont les Érinnyes, Oreste, les déesses du remords.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mouches*, ed. Robert J. North (Harrap, 1963), p. 110, hereafter referred to as *Les Mouches*.

⁴⁷⁶ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 225 (my emphasis). These words are from an interview in *Carrefour*, 9 September 1944.

⁴⁷⁷ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 232.

⁴⁷⁸ Ronald Aronson, *Camus & Sartre: the story of a friendship and the quarrel that ended it* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 23.

execution of French hostages.⁴⁷⁹ According to Sartre, 'C'est ainsi qu'il faut comprendre l'allégorie de ma pièce.'⁴⁸⁰ Some lines in the play could be said to convey, or at least justify, such an impression. 'Le plus lâche des assassins, c'est celui qui a des remords.'⁴⁸¹ However, it is interesting, not to say suspicious, that such a clear reading of his alleged intentions was not given until an interview in February 1948, on the occasion of a new German-language production of *Les Mouches* in Berlin.

A pro-Resistance interpretation of the play focuses on the rightful leader of the people, exiled from his homeland, who liberates the city (understood to represent France) from a fascist dictatorship. Although not young, nor indeed an heir to the throne, De Gaulle could well have been associated with Oreste in the general sense that he aimed to return to get rid of the illegitimate occupier and free the people. However, the parallels cannot go beyond this point, because Oreste is unwilling to stay and lead the people. His departure to start a new life is bewildering from a political point of view, and the 'strange' world he discovers draws him into exile.⁴⁸²

However, De Gaulle does not have to feature in a pro-Resistance interpretation of *Les Mouches*. Indeed, one may see Orestes as an unrepentant active resister who would not be chosen as a leader because of the horrendous and violent nature of his crime. On the other hand, in this light he could simply be seen as a murderous Hitler figure (like Égisthe). The profoundly individual nature of Oreste's act is certainly driven home by Sartre in his italicisation of key possessive pronouns in the text.⁴⁸³ The recurrence of words belonging to the semantic field of loneliness characterises the closing scenes of the play: 'un exil',

⁴⁷⁹ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 232.

⁴⁸⁰ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 232.

⁴⁸¹ *Les Mouches*, p. 120.

⁴⁸² Exile is existential solitude and Sartre's third 'myth', with death and love. *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 62.

⁴⁸³ *Les Mouches*, p. 109 and p.127: 'J'ai fait *mon* acte', 'c'est *mon* chemin' and 'ce sont *mes* morts'

‘Étranger’, ‘désespoir’ and ‘Je suis tout seul’.⁴⁸⁴ It is possible that Sartre is genuinely sympathising with the anxiety and isolation of active resisters involved in killing Germans – which, incidentally, he never personally experienced. However, it appears more consistent that he was expressing the lonely walk of an existentialist whose involvement in the world and exercise of freedom leads only to alienation. It is certainly hard to imagine how the audience could have identified with Oreste as a resister; he remains an outcast and must perform a dreadful act. In such a reading of *Les Mouches*, it is hard to know how those wishing simply to passively encourage the Resistance would be expected to react. ‘En 1943, pour échapper à la censure, les ambiguïtés sont nécessaires. [...] Cette leçon donnée d’un individualisme héroïque n’est pas une réponse claire à l’occupation allemande.’⁴⁸⁵

The character of Électre can be likened to contemporary *attentistes*; those who resisted the Occupation passively, but were finally won over by Vichy propaganda. She has an ideal vision of liberation but refuses to accept the violence necessary to achieve it; her conversion to Jupiter’s law of constant confession results from revulsion at the bloody murder appropriated by Oreste.⁴⁸⁶ Indeed, the persuasive strategy adopted by the voluptuous and bloodthirsty ‘flies’ is to insist on the ugliness of Clytemnestre’s murder.⁴⁸⁷ Some commentators insist that Électre, rather than Oreste, is the one character who represents the values of the Resistance, subtly (and later, blatantly) undermining the rule and manipulation of Égisthe.⁴⁸⁸ Besides, unlike Oreste, she belongs to the city; she has suffered true slavery under an illegitimate leader and consistently derides Jupiter. Indeed,

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 122, p. 123 and p. 125.

⁴⁸⁵ Mireille Cornud-Peyron, ‘*Les Mouches*’ et ‘*Huis clos*’ de Jean-Paul Sartre (Éditions Nathan, 1991), p. 62 and p. 64.

⁴⁸⁶ *Les Mouches*, p. 124 and p. 125: ‘[T]u m’as plongée dans le sang. [...] Je me repens, Jupiter, je me repens’.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 114: ‘Il a tué la vieille très malproprement, tu sais, en s’y reprenant à plusieurs fois.’

⁴⁸⁸ Cornud-Peyron, p. 28 and pp. 38-39.

the very first time she appears in the play is to throw household waste onto the god's statue, mock his obsession with death and announce his downfall at the hands of her liberator.⁴⁸⁹

The Jupiter of *Les Mouches* is Sartre's parody of an allegedly omnipotent god who is powerless when faced with a man who chooses to exercise his freedom. Differing interpretations suggest he represents either Hitler – as the force of fate bending Électre and Égisthe (Pétain) to his rule – or the Church, which financed and influenced Vichy's National Revolution.⁴⁹⁰ The 1943 audiences must indeed have been bemused to see Dullin take on this role, for Jupiter could hardly be said to be a convincing God figure. He is initially mistaken for a man and moreover was wearing a surrealist mask. It has been argued that, like the Pedagogue, Jupiter simply provides an antithesis to Oreste, and disappears from the play once his pitiful attempt to impress Oreste with a microphone falls flat. At times, Jupiter's presence serves only to give Oreste a platform to declare his philosophical standpoint. This is the case in the second scene of the final act that explores the nature of Oreste's freedom, ending with an indifferent 'Je te plains' and 'Adieu'.⁴⁹¹

Clytemnestre can be seen to represent the collaborating French, an accomplice of the tyrant Égisthe and therefore a target of assassination. She could even, in this light, be said to characterise the French *Milice*, responsible for oppression and rounding up Jews. She is as complicit in the evil state of affairs as her husband, who can be seen to represent the Nazis. According to this specific interpretation, Oreste cannot stop at the murder of

⁴⁸⁹ *Les Mouches*, p. 67: 'Je peux te cracher dessus, c'est tout ce que je peux faire. Mais il viendra, celui que j'attends, avec sa grande épée. [...] Et puis il tirera son sabre et il te fendra de haut en bas.'

⁴⁹⁰ Beretta, p. 57: 'Sartre veut précisément, à travers Jupiter, *dénoncer le comportement de l'Église catholique pendant le régime de Vichy*' (author's original emphasis).

⁴⁹¹ *Les Mouches*, p. 123.

Égisthe; the murder of his mother is logical, even essential, in order to liberate the people.⁴⁹²

Many sexual metaphors are used to describe the city of Argos, which Oreste wants to 'take' and 'pursue'. A limited transposition might conceivably see Argos as representing Paris, the sole location for performances of *Les Mouches* during the Occupation. Indeed, an anonymous review published in the clandestine paper, *Les Lettres françaises*, was entitled 'Oreste et la Cité'. Simultaneously a reference to Argos and the theatre in which *Les Mouches* was performed, Michel Leiris's review explains the moral lesson of Oreste's act and its consequences 'au niveau de la cité'.⁴⁹³ Similarly, there is a cultural parallel from Greek tradition of the theatre being identified with the city. '[L]e choix de la tragédie grecque, source des *Mouches*, rappelle une époque où le théâtre était directement lié à la vie de la cité dont il met en scène les conflits. C'est dans cet esprit que Sartre va reprendre l'histoire des Atrides.'⁴⁹⁴

According to contemporary accounts, attempts were made by the actors to force a fixed interpretation on the spectators.

[L]a mise en scène de la création avait cherché à instaurer un parallélisme entre le peuple d'Argos terrorisé et le public parisien occupé [...] Les comédiens tentaient de faire ressortir le côté allusif de la pièce par leurs gestes et leurs intonations, à l'initiative de Dullin.⁴⁹⁵

Apparently, this involved Dullin directly addressing the audience as if they were the people of Argos.⁴⁹⁶ One must be cautious about such a report, particularly as Sartre (in 1944) declared he was utterly opposed to such techniques, preferring to maintain distance

⁴⁹² O'Donohoe, p. 69, discusses the existential necessity of this act. The Freudian overtones are also evident.

⁴⁹³ 'Anon.' (Michel Leiris), *Les Lettres françaises*, December 1943.

⁴⁹⁴ Beretta, p. 16 (author's original emphasis).

⁴⁹⁵ Beretta, p. 63. He refers here to Jean Lanier's testimony quoted in *Le Théâtre de J.-P. Sartre devant ses premiers critiques*, pp. 228-29. Lanier played the part of Oreste in the 1943 production of *Les Mouches*.

⁴⁹⁶ Dullin later denied this, saying the text was risky and worrying enough already. Galster (2001), p. 259.

between actors and spectators.⁴⁹⁷ However, it seems that *Argos* more generally reflects the state of France, in terms of its moral decline and the cult of repentance imposed by its (illegitimate) leader. This is certainly the effect Sartre claimed – in his post-Liberation commentaries – he wanted to achieve. ‘La pièce fut admirablement comprise [...] par tous ceux qui, en France, voulaient s’insurger contre toute domination nazie. [...] J’y disais aux Français: vous n’avez pas à vous repentir.’⁴⁹⁸

In *Les Mouches*, the flies of the title can, given the context, be seen to depict the ever-present spies in France – that is, those willing to denounce their countrymen.

Dans un climat de suspicion généralisée et de délation permanente, les ‘mouches’ font référence aux espions. Elles sont partout, insaisissables, prêtes à bondir, insatiables mouchards dans une ville où règne la terreur...La situation des Atrides correspond à celle de la France, gouvernée par les Allemands avec la collaboration de Pétain.⁴⁹⁹

The word ‘mouchards’ is slang for paid informers, and although the *Érinnyes* do not have this role in the play, using actors to represent the flies that persistently haunt the citizens could be said to portray such an atmosphere. Postwar commentaries have suggested that the flies were *intended* to represent the French *Milice*, though I would argue that this is an anachronism, as Sartre had written the play so much earlier on in the Occupation. Official government recognition of Joseph Darnand’s activist elite branch of the Service d’ordre légionnaire (SOL) came in January 1942, but it did not become the ‘Milice française’ until January 1943.⁵⁰⁰ Only the historical circumstances of the first performances of *Les Mouches* could conceivably have been responsible for making such a conceptual link.

⁴⁹⁷ ‘Le style dramatique’, *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 31. Sartre tries to avoid ‘realistic’ contact with the spectator and gives a specific example of a play (that he execrates) in which actors move among the audience.

⁴⁹⁸ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 231 and p. 232.

⁴⁹⁹ Noudelmann, p. 19.

⁵⁰⁰ This is the date that Julian Jackson, based on Jean-Paul Azéma’s 1990 book, *La Milice*, gives for its creation. Jackson, p. 230.

Indeed, this reinforces my opinion that the preoccupations of the spectators, especially among the press, encouraged specific interpretations of the play's content which cannot have been intended by the playwright, as they postdate the writing – if not the staging – of *Les Mouches*.

It seems likely that the title for the play came from a line in Giraudoux's *Électre* addressed to the unrelenting Euménides: 'Voulez-vous partir! Allez-vous nous laisser! On dirait des mouches.'⁵⁰¹ It does not appear that any other performance element (such as costumes) would lead spectators to conclude that the flies resemble French informers. However, Michel Leiris made the link at the beginning of his review, based purely on the word itself, not its implications in the play.

Les mouches – j'entends ici: les vraies, les policières, celles qui pullulent dans les journaux stipendiés – ont bourdonné très fort, l'été dernier, contre ces autres *Mouches*, pièce dont le thème est celui de l'*Orestie* d'Eschyle et qui vient d'être reprise au Théâtre de la Cité.⁵⁰²

This implication of outright hostility towards the play is also an early indication of the claims which were to follow soon after the Liberation.

Another element which effectively brings the myth out of its context and identifies it with 1940s France, is the vocabulary used by Sartre. In addition to anachronisms typical of Giraudoux (Oreste and the Pedagogue are described as tourists, and there are references to Homer), Sartre uses popular speech, allowing for humour and complicity with the audience.⁵⁰³ Finally, Sartre privately confessed that *Égisthe* is modelled on Pétain, which

⁵⁰¹ Jean Giraudoux, *Théâtre complet* (Éditions Gallimard, 1982), p. 600.

⁵⁰² Ingrid Galster, *Sartre devant la presse d'Occupation: Le dossier critique des 'Mouches' et 'Huis clos'*. *Textes réunis et présentés par Ingrid Galster* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), p. 175.

⁵⁰³ According to Cornud-Peyron, p. 44, 'Pour le public de 1944 [sic.], ce langage "de tous les jours" actualise l'analyse de la lassitude des hommes au pouvoir [Égisthe]'. See also Beretta, p. 18.

further confirms that *Les Mouches* is immersed in its time.⁵⁰⁴ Égisthe is an archetypal dictator, weary of rule but persuaded of his need to deceive the people for the sake of order and stability. Égisthe, like Pétain, enforces a cult of repentance, attributing the ongoing sense of guilt to the people's collective sins. Furthermore, he is Jupiter's (Hitler's) puppet.

The topicality of repentance

Vincent Grégoire has done an in-depth study of the relationship between Pétain's 1940-1941 radio announcements preaching to the French about their guilt and the theme of repentance in *Les Mouches*. In order to legitimise its regime and maintain order after the shock of defeat, the Vichy government exaggerated the nation's complicity in the previous administration's failure to prevent the invasion. Various speeches that Pétain gave over the national radio repeated, 'comme une litanie', the moral lesson that France must repent and assume responsibility for her sins.⁵⁰⁵ 'Vous souffrez et vous souffrirez longtemps encore, car nous n'avons pas fini de payer nos fautes' (17 June 1940). Pétain's voice and reputation were certainly persuasive and his propaganda monopolised the airwaves. Even some of France's leading intellectuals, such as Gide, Mauriac and Valéry, were initially in agreement with this rhetoric. It seemed reasonable to suggest that the decay of France's moral fabric had led to the defeat and words such as 'decomposition', 'atonement' and 'common punishment' flowed freely from their pens. *Les Mouches* also contains an extended vocabulary based on decomposition.⁵⁰⁶ Once the shock had worn off and the daily life of the Occupation had to be confronted, more French intellectuals became openly sceptical about Vichy's insistence on a guilty national conscience.

⁵⁰⁴ Vincent Grégoire, 'L'Impact de la repentance vichyssoise dans *Les Mouches* de Sartre et *La Peste* de Camus', *French Review*, 77.4 (March 2004), p. 700, note 17. Sartre said this to Paul-Louis Mignon.

⁵⁰⁵ Grégoire, p. 697.

⁵⁰⁶ R. Artinian, 'Foul Winds in Argos: Sartre's *Les Mouches*', *Romance Notes* vol. 14, 1972, pp. 7-12.

Grégoire cites Sartre's postwar texts as 'evidence' of his desire to oppose Vichy's standpoint and free the French from their shame, but little comment was made to this effect in reviews of *Les Mouches* and neither the Germans nor the fascist editors in Paris would have taken issue with such criticism of Vichy.⁵⁰⁷ A passing comment in a letter is about the clearest indication that any link was made between the burden of remorse in *Les Mouches* and Vichy's cult of repentance: 'Cette cité de repentis, on se croirait à Vichy.'⁵⁰⁸ A couple of allusions were made in publications outside the Occupied Zone, but only fleetingly and not in the subversive sense that Sartre claims for the play: 'Je laisserai délibérément de côté les allusions qui peuvent viser certaines propensions récentes au *mea culpa*, ainsi que les encouragements officiels auxquels cette propension a donné lieu.'⁵⁰⁹ There is a concerted effort to avoid the topic, even in a paper not censored by the Germans. Besides, the very next line of the review includes a plea not to limit an understanding of the play to political allegory: 'en s'y attachant, on réduirait arbitrairement la portée de l'ouvrage'. Even in the safety of London, as late as 15 March 1944, the most explicit reference to the topicality of Sartre's play came in covert form. 'Ce régime, fondé sur l'auto-accusation, justifié par les péchés de la collectivité, nous semble familier.'⁵¹⁰

It may be that the extraordinary weight given to the acknowledgment of guilt (*mea culpa*) in the play – Galster catalogues over fifty – was simply no longer *d'actualité* in mid-1943. The fact that Sartre started writing the play in 1941 poses problems for topicality. Pétain's cult of remorse was only effective – that is, supported by leading writers and

⁵⁰⁷ Galster (2005), p. 14: 'Il est évident qu'une attaque contre l'occupant ne pouvait pas être imprimée, mais les critiques auraient très bien pu relever le "méaculpsisme", car bien qu'interdites par la loi, les attaques contre Vichy étaient tolérées dans la presse parisienne.'

⁵⁰⁸ Galster (2005), p. 99. Jean Paulhan, letter to Jean Fautrier, 23 June 1943.

⁵⁰⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *Chercher Dieu*, 1 July 1943. Galster (2005), p. 111.

⁵¹⁰ Lionel de Rouet, *France Libre*. Galster (2005), p. 182.

public opinion – until mid-1941 at the latest.⁵¹¹ Thus the pertinence (and risk) of parodying this obsession with repentance could well have been all but lost in 1943. Not even fervent collaborators – who might wholeheartedly approve of such mockery – picked up on it.⁵¹² When explaining the context of *Les Mouches*' first performances with hindsight, Sartre seemed to artificially extend the period of this cult of repentance.

Il faut expliquer la pièce par les circonstances du temps. De 1941 à 1943, bien des gens désiraient vivement que les Français se plongeassent dans le repentir. Les nazis en tout premier lieu y avaient un vif intérêt et avec eux Pétain et sa presse.⁵¹³

Much has been made since the 1940s of the play's anti-Vichy thrust and a close reading of *Les Mouches* certainly brings to light several striking parallels. For example, the city of Argos will remain oppressed until it rejects the burden of sins imposed by its tyrant: 'allusion transparente au discours doloriste de Vichy, à sa religion du remords, à l'atmosphère de pénitence nauséabonde qu'il faisait peser sur la France'.⁵¹⁴ Bernard-Henri Lévy compares the complicity of government and Church under Vichy with the Égisthe/Jupiter partnership, and its joint purpose in seeking to enforce 'un ordre moral', the same terminology employed by Pétain in his radio speeches.⁵¹⁵ One may legitimately wonder whether Sartre's desire to get *Les Mouches* performed quickly, expressed in mid-1942, in fact stems from the relevance of this topic. '[I]l vaudrait mieux [...] que vous sentiez, en tant qu'artiste, la nécessité de mettre ma pièce en scène. [...] Le temps pressait,

⁵¹¹ Grégoire, pp. 693-97.

⁵¹² Galster (2005), p. 22, note 63: 'il faut noter que l'autoflagellation marqua le discours vichyste surtout en 1940-1941 et que *Les Mouches* ne furent créées, au grand dépit de Sartre, qu'en 1943.' Guérin, p. 320: 'Il y avait plus de risques à tenir ce discours deux ou trois ans plus tôt.'

⁵¹³ *Un Théâtre de situations*, pp. 274-75.

⁵¹⁴ This opinion is offered by Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Le Siècle de Sartre* (Grasset, 2000), p. 369.

⁵¹⁵ Pétain, 25 June 1940: 'C'est à un redressement intellectuel et moral que, d'abord, je vous convie.'

et pourtant où en sommes nous?'.⁵¹⁶ The live medium of the stage is of course an ideal place to show topical issues: 'l'urgence provoquée par le contexte historique est plus adaptée à l'efficacité du théâtre'.⁵¹⁷

On the other hand, the obsessive cycle of remorse permeates the play independently of the angle of political allusion.⁵¹⁸ This reading, in its literal and philosophical sense, was discussed by contemporary critics and it is certainly noteworthy that Sartre was reluctant to speak on the topic – and its implications – in his wartime interview about the play. This interview, in the April 1943 edition of *Comœdia*, focuses solely on Oreste's violent act and discovery of freedom, not once mentioning the oppressive atmosphere of remorse. Surely, if Sartre had intended to write a play denouncing Vichy, he would have advanced the explanation earlier than 1947. Grégoire suggests that the relevance and sensitivity of guilt and repentance in Germany in 1947 – where *Les Mouches* was then being performed – led Sartre to liken the situation to France in 1940-1942.⁵¹⁹ What emerges most unambiguously from 1943 is that no review developed the idea that repentance in *Les Mouches* is used to ridicule Vichy and open people's eyes to the government's manipulation. Despite Sartre's alleged efforts, *Les Mouches* cannot be restricted to an analogy of the Vichy regime and it may be said that if this had been his intention, it failed spectacularly, as the audiences missed the point altogether.

The reception of *Les Mouches* in occupied Paris

⁵¹⁶ Letter to Jean-Louis Barrault, 9 July 1942. Galster, '*Huis clos et Le Soulier de satin*', p. 207 (Sartre's original emphasis).

⁵¹⁷ Beretta, p. 14.

⁵¹⁸ The Argos children are raised to carry the city's guilt: 'mon petit-fils, qui va sur ses sept ans, nous l'avons élevé dans la repentance: il est [...] déjà pénétré par le sentiment de sa faute originelle.' *Les Mouches*, p. 60.

⁵¹⁹ Grégoire, p. 697 and p. 700.

Ingrid Galster has seemingly exhausted the contemporaneous sources on *Les Mouches*, by examining in detail every available review, without managing to elucidate how Sartre could provide a camouflage strong enough to fool the censorship while remaining clear to French spectators. The nearest she comes to a solution is to suggest that the Germans' liberal strategy of pursuing normalcy in French artistic life might lead them not to ban *Les Mouches* so as to avoid attracting attention to it.⁵²⁰ She includes testimony from the somewhat unreliable Gerhard Heller, who claimed to have picked up on the Resistance 'signs' in *Les Mouches* and intervened in its favour during the rehearsal period:

'J'ai assisté à des répétitions des "Mouches" et d'"Antigone". On me faisait remarquer certains passages. Les deux pièces risquaient d'être interdites ou, au moins modifiées. J'ai pu, en connivence avec le censeur, persuader les autorités du caractère inoffensif de ces passages.' [...] Quant aux *Mouches*, Sartre avait fourni [à Heller] le prétexte mythologique nécessaire pour qu'il se laisse abuser et pour qu'il plaide en faveur de la pièce.⁵²¹

No evidence remains of problems surrounding the visa, which makes it very problematic to prove German liberalism towards *Les Mouches*. Galster also recommends balancing the glowing eulogies of Sartre with the somewhat indifferent impact of his Occupation plays.

Having previously managed the Théâtre de l'Atelier, Dullin took over the enormous Théâtre de la Cité (present-day Théâtre de la Ville). It may be that a significant proportion of the audience was made up of students recruited from Sartre's philosophy classes. Testimony of the excitement created by attending the plays of Sartre and Camus refers to young people animated by these authors' penchant for revolt and anti-conformism.⁵²² In a February 1944 interview with Paul Claudel, Jacques Madaule commented on the

⁵²⁰ Galster (2005), p. 20.

⁵²¹ Galster (2005), pp. 85-86. Heller's words are from a letter to Annette Fuchs-Betteridge, given in full in Appendix IV of her thesis.

⁵²² Dussane, p. 124: 'je sais que toute une jeunesse y reconnaissait sa propre fièvre et qu'elle entendait à plein l'appel qui lui était ainsi lancé.'

continuing enthusiasm of students attending *Les Mouches*. '[La pièce, qui] continue de se jouer depuis un an, on le joue une fois par semaine, au Théâtre de la Cité. Il paraît qu'il y va des jeunes, de plus en plus, me disait-on.'⁵²³ There was also a small minority of initiated academics among the press, most of them reporting for the non-occupied zone of France.

According to the majority of first-hand accounts, the audiences were noisy. This can be interpreted in different ways and may simply have been due to the shock of the costumes and language, as reported by the 'hostile' newspapers (no collaborationist press review was favourable). It may also have been a violent reaction of horror faced with Oreste's proud response to his crime. On the other hand, a small number of testimonies claim that specific lines provoked outbursts in the audience. 'Dans les salles où on jouait Sartre ou Anouilh, des milliers de visages amaigris qui vivaient mâchoires serrées et dents grinçantes, se sont ainsi délivrés de leur mutisme à travers les cris des masques de théâtre.'⁵²⁴ Perhaps some members of the public did indeed pick up on contemporary allusions and were consequently offended by the insinuations of lines such as, 'Pardonnez-nous de vivre alors que vous êtes morts', repeated by the chorus of men in the crowd.⁵²⁵ A constant theme running through contemporary references to the play, however, is a general confusion as to the meaning of its ending. No obvious contemporary transposition of Oreste's departure from Argos was made and the audience seemed far from satisfied.

It is unlikely that Dullin would promise a new author that his plays would be kept on the theatre schedule indefinitely; to do so would engender too great a risk for him. Most accounts agree that the play was withdrawn after about twenty-five showings, which may

⁵²³ *Paul Claudel: Une visite à Brangues. Conversation avec Jacques Madaule et Pierre Schaeffer en février 1944* (Éditions Gallimard, 2005), p. 52.

⁵²⁴ Dussane, pp. 122-23.

⁵²⁵ *Les Mouches*, p. 82. See also Beretta, p. 22.

well have been the number initially envisaged.⁵²⁶ Others vary between a total of forty or fifty performances.⁵²⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most optimistic figure comes from Sartre.⁵²⁸ Starting at the beginning of June, *Les Mouches* did not even make it to the end-of-season closure, and it had to share stage time with another play at the October *reprise* – to the disappointment of Sartre and Beauvoir.⁵²⁹ The actors' inexperience was highlighted in Sartre's letter to Barrault (who was clearly hesitant about working with amateurs), though many received high praise in the press. In any case, the creation of *Les Mouches* was a financial loss to the point where it was – literally, according to Sartre – impossible to perform it any longer.⁵³⁰ Had it still been running, it seems *Les Mouches* would have been targeted in a distribution by air of anti-Nazi tracts ('papillons') over Paris theatres on 14 July 1943, coordinated by the Front national du théâtre (which included Pierre Dux, Marie Bell and Sartre).⁵³¹

Somewhat surprisingly, the 1943 press was almost unanimous in its rejection of the play. One is hard pressed to find a handful of positive reactions, and these exclusively represent a later attempt to redeem Sartre's play after the initial onslaught of the collaborationist papers. Reviewers principally objected to its allegedly base and scatological dialogue, and an obsession with death. Many condemned Sartre's 'characters', which they saw as mere mouthpieces expounding his theories of existentialism. 'M. Jean-Paul Sartre me paraît être davantage essayiste qu'auteur dramatique. Et c'est beaucoup pour nous faire connaître le fruit de ses réflexions qu'il semble avoir embrassé le

⁵²⁶ *Dictionnaire de pièces de théâtre*, p. 396 and Gilbert Joseph, *Une si douce Occupation: Simone de Beauvoir et Jean-Paul Sartre 1940-1944* (Albin Michel, 1991), p. 280.

⁵²⁷ Noudelmann, pp. 28-29.

⁵²⁸ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 226.

⁵²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Librairie Gallimard, 1960), p. 554.

⁵³⁰ In 1969, Dullin remembered bitterly, 'Ce fut un éreintage rapide et total, les recettes furent lamentables.'

Un Théâtre de situations, p. 227.

⁵³¹ Carolyn Evans, pp. 85-86.

théâtre.’⁵³² This is a criticism (or observation) frequently levelled at the play.⁵³³ Sartre and Beauvoir, in their postwar writings, attributed the journalists’ bile (and supposed pretence) to a rejection of the playwright’s political allegory. ‘La plupart des critiques feignirent de n’avoir saisi aucune allusion; ils tombèrent à bras raccourcis sur la pièce, mais en alléguant des prétextes purement littéraires.’⁵³⁴

According to several fascist voices in particular, Laubreaux loudest among them, a distraction was the disconcerting, outdated costumes and décor. ‘[U]n vraisemblable bric-à-brac cubiste et dadaïste, une avant-garde depuis longtemps passée à l’arrière-garde’, ‘le décor saugrenu et “bizarroïde” [...] (Ne parlons pas des masques de martiens dont sont affublés les personnages).’⁵³⁵ The scenic elements were confusing at best – Dada masks hiding many of the actors’ faces, for example – and downright off-putting at worst.⁵³⁶ Though rarely mentioned, the musical accompaniment chosen for the play was roundly criticised for drowning out important elements of the dialogue.⁵³⁷ However, this opinion was not universal; the pro-Vichy Armory suggested that the music deserved a better script.⁵³⁸ The textual and philosophical qualities of the play were thus obscured by its unsettling *mise en scène*. ‘*Les Mouches* ont des dehors un peu drôlets. C’est ce que le public distingue avant toute chose.’⁵³⁹

⁵³² *Paris-Soir*, 15 June 1943. Galster (2005), p. 122: ‘Jean-Paul Sartre a voulu écrire la tragédie de la liberté. Il l’a fait plus en philosophe qu’en auteur dramatique.’

⁵³³ Robert Lorriss, *Sartre dramaturge* (Nizet, 1975), p. 48, claims *Les Mouches* is without doubt Sartre’s most studied and quoted work, ‘en raison du rôle qu’elle joue dans l’expression de la philosophie sartrienne, mais dramatiquement elle est peu estimée.’ Hobson and McCall object to blunt philosophical rhetoric in the play.

⁵³⁴ Beauvoir, p. 553.

⁵³⁵ *Le Petit Parisien* and *L’Oeuvre*, 5 and 7 June 1943. See *Je suis partout* (18 June) and *La Semaine de Paris*.

⁵³⁶ *L’Information universitaire*, 19 June 1943: ‘[Les] masques exagérés en particulier absorbent trop l’attention du spectateur.’

⁵³⁷ Albert Buesche, *Pariser Zeitung*, 9 June 1943 (trans. by Galster): ‘Dommage que la musique de scène et le bruitage (très antique et très moderne) aient parfois fait une concurrence désagréable à la parole.’ See also *L’Appel*, 10 June 1943 and *La Gerbe*, 1 July 1943.

⁵³⁸ *Les Nouveaux Temps*, 13 June 1943.

⁵³⁹ *L’Atelier*, 12 June 1943.

In other words, the press berated Sartre not for political reasons, but on the strength of aesthetic and moral judgments. Among these reviews, there is no hint of a revolt against – or an understanding of – the expression of freedom, the denunciation of tyranny or the call to arms that Sartre claimed for the play. Laubreaux wrote a long diatribe in the 12 June 1943 issue of *Le Petit Parisien*, having already slated it the previous week. However, vast experience and insight as a theatre critic lay behind Laubreaux's outspokenness. He did not cite specific examples, but claimed that Sartre's 'intentions' were not communicated from the stage, even though they are obvious in the text.⁵⁴⁰ He does not, however, elaborate on what these intentions might have been. The collaborationist press followed in his wake, steering public opinion and potential spectators away from *Les Mouches*. 'On peut même affirmer que l'éreintement des *Mouches* est dû en grande partie à une véritable cabale menée par Alain Laubreaux.'⁵⁴¹

A defence of *Les Mouches* only appeared several months after the premiere and consisted primarily of articles by Sartre's friends, including Gabriel Marcel and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. A positive and anonymous article in the clandestine publication *Les Lettres françaises*, which Sartre quotes as proof that his Resistance message was unequivocally understood, did not appear until December 1943. At this point, *Les Mouches* was being performed less frequently after the summer hiatus. The article made no mention of political themes in the play, and it should be noted that even the most favourable reviews did not pick up on a clear call to Resistance or a parody of Vichy, certainly not to the extent that Sartre was later to claim. Consequently, most people in the auditorium for the first

⁵⁴⁰ 'L'Épate des Mouches', *Je suis partout*, 11 June 1943: 'Aucune de ses intentions, évidentes à la lecture, ne parvenait au spectateur.'

⁵⁴¹ Beretta, p. 23.

performances would not have read any indication in the press that Sartre's play contained oppositional content.

Indeed, in 1981, Ingrid Galster felt the need to approach Michel Leiris on the subject of his apparent reticence in the 1943 article. He assured her that he simply did not consider an allegory of the Vichy/Resistance conflict to be a dominant aspect of *Les Mouches*. He acknowledged political allusions created by the unusual circumstances of the Occupation (hinted at in the opening sentence of his review), but chose not to limit the play to such an interpretation, stating clearly, 'elle n'était nullement une pièce d'actualité'.⁵⁴² His comments – on the potential for Argos to be transformed into a liberated community of responsible men overcoming despair and oppression – not only depart from the material of the play (which allows for little optimism about the people's future), but also remain extremely vague. They do not justify enthusiasm at Leiris' lucidity: 'il a compris l'allusion politique et l'appel à la résistance'.⁵⁴³ Sartre's post-war defence of *Les Mouches* claimed *Les Lettres françaises* had hailed an anti-Vichy and anti-Nazi message in *Les Mouches*.⁵⁴⁴ On the other hand, a commentator wonders, sixty years on, 'why did even Michel Leiris [...] not stress the importance of the Resistance message in his review of the play, in a Resistance paper?'.⁵⁴⁵

Probably the greatest difference between the collaborationist press and more balanced reviews is an understanding of philosophical ideas characteristic of intellectuals acquainted with Sartre's theories.⁵⁴⁶ A clear summary of the nature and justification of Oreste's act and his ensuing sense of freedom emerges from Leiris's article in particular:

⁵⁴² Galster (2005), p. 19. The letter dates from 1 July 1981.

⁵⁴³ Beretta, p. 23.

⁵⁴⁴ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 231.

⁵⁴⁵ Allan Stoekl, 'What the Nazis saw: *Les Mouches* in Occupied Paris', *SubStance* # 102, 32 (2003), p. 79.

⁵⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty claims, 'un certain nombre de critiques n'ont ici ni regardé ni écouté' and points out that they failed to mention the word 'liberté' despite its frequent recurrence in the play. Galster (2005), p. 163.

‘La leçon morale – agir selon la liberté – était parfaitement claire.’⁵⁴⁷ As Galster has so effectively argued, these minority reviews all originate from academics initiated in Sartre’s philosophy or colleagues and ‘friends’ familiar with his writings.

On the other hand, to claim that only passionately anti-Nazi resisters opposing Pétain’s regime were able to grasp the subtleties of *Les Mouches* is far too simplistic.⁵⁴⁸ Mixed reactions were equally present among the Germans; some were favourable but considered Sartre’s philosophy – which they confronted undaunted – to be confused, and they were critical of formal defects in the play. The critic Albert Buesche, for example, was able to perceive other potential readings of the play, whilst acknowledging its essential ‘refus’ of oppression and moral dictatorship. With little effort, he could discern a certain ‘fascist existentialism’ which justifies individual morality and the necessity of violent acts.⁵⁴⁹ While Oreste commits his act – the central focus of the play – in the name of individual freedom rather than vengeance, its purpose is not ‘his’ people’s happiness and liberation, nor even to govern them, ‘mais, au contraire, pour la gloire du surhomme: on pense à un Nietzsche dramatisé’.⁵⁵⁰ The reviewer has clearly admired the power of the play and appreciated the quality of the acting, even suggesting the masks were a success, but has come away with no clear answer as to the nature of the freedom that Sartre intends to proclaim.⁵⁵¹ Buesche was a Nazi, and was puzzled by Sartre’s presentation of liberation in *Les Mouches*, believing that if only Oreste is liberated, no one is. Indeed, both left- and right-wing commentators struggle with Sartre’s presentation of freedom. ‘[L]iberty is the

⁵⁴⁷ Galster (2005), p. 19.

⁵⁴⁸ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 231: ‘La pièce fut admirablement comprise par les gens qui s’étaient levés contre le gouvernement de Vichy.’

⁵⁴⁹ Stoekl, p. 84, develops this concept, quoting Himmler’s words on the unspoken, ‘necessary’ individual acts of violence by Nazi officers which were both a burden and a source of pride.

⁵⁵⁰ *Pariser Zeitung*, 9 June 1943, translated in Galster (2005), p. 42.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*: ‘Le spectateur est-il mené par le bout du nez au nom d’une tout autre notion de la liberté, ou s’agit-il du reflet d’une époque embrouillé jusqu’à la moelle – c’est ce qu’on se demande. La pièce tient des deux, sans être clairement l’un ou l’autre.’

crucial problem of the play, because its abstraction and interiority seem to preclude its implementation in society.’⁵⁵²

I have considered Buesche’s review closely because it dispels several myths. Firstly, it proves that Germans could approve of *Les Mouches* without its supposed political content outraging their sensibilities. Secondly, it challenges the notion that the Germans were unable to analyse the subtleties of French drama or that the censorship board would let even clear calls to Resistance slip through their net. Thirdly, it demonstrates that *Les Mouches* can be understood in various ways without a satisfactory resolution of these interpretations ever being achieved. This of course has great advantages for the library and performance life of a dramatic composition, but simultaneously challenges the notion that a – (mis)understood – single message is inherent to the play.

Unfortunately, many commentators (often writing study guides to the play itself) content themselves with quoting Sartre’s post-war explanations of the play’s purpose in encouraging the French to resist the Germans, concluding, ‘Tel est le *premier* objectif de la pièce’.⁵⁵³ However, close examination of the text, which was available before the first performances, could equally allow one to see Pétain in Oreste; ‘un être au-dessus de la mêlée’ who saves the country – ‘[il] fait don de sa personne’.⁵⁵⁴ Similarly, the flies could be seen as ‘dirty’ Jews, in a fascist reading of the play, and unrepentant Oreste’s individual act of violence can be likened to the unspoken acts of SS officers believing in the greater Good.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵² Stoekl, p. 82.

⁵⁵³ Cornud-Peyron, p. 67 (my emphasis).

⁵⁵⁴ Grégoire, p. 703, note 17. Pétain, June 1940: ‘Je fais à la France le don de ma personne’.

⁵⁵⁵ Stoekl reads the reference to Nietzsche in Buesche’s review in the context of Nazi Germany where the philosopher was often invoked at rallies when speaking of the SS. Stoekl, p. 82, note 6.

I maintain that inconsistencies within the play make it very difficult for the reader or spectator to come to any firm conclusions. A good example of this can be seen in Oreste's own justification for murdering Égisthe. He first speaks of the necessity of committing an act in order to assert his existence, give substance to his freedom and commit himself to the world of men.⁵⁵⁶ The other reason he gives is the liberation of the people of Argos from tyranny – 'ô mes hommes, je vous aime, et c'est pour vous que j'ai tué'.⁵⁵⁷ However, he does not do anything further to enable its realisation, rather he leaves the people to their own devices. One can hardly suppose the community will be transformed for the better, as Sartre provides the first example of utter failure with Électre. Horrified by the murders, she is persuaded by Jupiter and the Érinyes to return to the cycle of guilt and repentance.⁵⁵⁸ By far the most rebellious subject under Égisthe's rule, Électre is now Jupiter's puppet as a result of Oreste's crime; there is little hope that the people will defy Jupiter and take possession of their freedom.

Oreste is in this sense a political failure, a self-declared 'roi sans terre et sans sujets'.⁵⁵⁹ Perhaps he triumphs in an existential sense, though a pro-Resistance view then becomes much harder to justify.⁵⁶⁰ This paradox is redolent of Sartre's conflicting explanations for writing the play in the first place. 'Oreste nous donne tour à tour deux versions de son acte. [...] Mais quoi qu'il prétende, il ne saurait jouer vraiment sur les deux tableaux à la fois.'⁵⁶¹ Is one to believe, as Beauvoir claims, that Sartre was actively looking for a way to speak of revolt to the Parisian public – 'Il commença à chercher une intrigue à

⁵⁵⁶ *Les Mouches*, p. 109: 'Je suis libre, Électre; la liberté a fondu sur moi comme la foudre.'

⁵⁵⁷ Beretta, p. 30: 'C'est plus pour mettre fin aux maux du peuple que pour venger personnellement Agamemnon qu'Oreste va accomplir le meurtre.'

⁵⁵⁸ *Les Mouches*, pp. 124-25.

⁵⁵⁹ *Les Mouches*, p. 127.

⁵⁶⁰ Keith Gore, *Sartre: 'La Nausée' and 'Les Mouches'* (Arnold, 1970), p. 60: 'from a political point of view, Oreste is a failure.'

⁵⁶¹ Francis Jeanson, *Sartre par lui-même* (Écrivains du Seuil, 1955), p. 18 and p. 19.

la fois prudente et transparente’?⁵⁶² Or did he simply respond to a personal request from a couple of aspiring amateur actresses and happened upon an appropriate character.⁵⁶³

Oreste’s ‘geste’ serves only to distance him from those he paradoxically leaves after declaring, ‘À présent, je suis des vôtres, ô mes sujets, nous sommes liés par le sang, je mérite d’être votre roi’.⁵⁶⁴ It has been argued that neither of his reasons are accurate, rather he imitates his mythological counterpart, killing the evil stepfather who has usurped his place in the family, in a striking parallel to Sartre’s own desires.⁵⁶⁵ One can hardly argue that Oreste is not free, for ‘He has surely set a good example of authenticity’.⁵⁶⁶ However, the crowd’s last words indicate that no mass liberation has occurred or is likely to occur.⁵⁶⁷ When questioned on this point after the war, Sartre maintained that the non-Communist branch of the Resistance was concerned with fighting the Germans, not with delegating rights for the post-liberation period, and that the myth enabled him to communicate this.⁵⁶⁸

Sartre’s Occupation activities

Gilbert Joseph, who strongly refutes Sartre’s popular reputation as a committed resister, has written a book whose title evokes the unspectacular nature of the playwright’s experience of the Second World War.⁵⁶⁹ He exposes at length the real-life compromises which belie many of Sartre’s own writings on responsibility, committed action and the

⁵⁶² Beauvoir, p. 499.

⁵⁶³ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 269.

⁵⁶⁴ *Les Mouches*, p. 127.

⁵⁶⁵ Benedict O’Donohoe, ‘Sartre’s Melodrama: *Les Mouches*, or the Stepson’s Revenge’, *French Studies Bulletin*, 72 (1999), p. 8: ‘The most cogent reading of his regicide is a symbolic enactment of Sartre’s revenge upon Joseph Mancy [his stepfather].’ O’Donohoe supports this with an extract from *Les Mouches*, p. 109.

⁵⁶⁶ O’Donohoe (1999), p. 71.

⁵⁶⁷ *Les Mouches*, p. 126: ‘A mort! A mort! Lapidez-le! Déchirez-le! A mort!’

⁵⁶⁸ Peter Royle, *Sartre: l’enfer et la liberté: étude de ‘Huis clos’ et ‘Les Mouches’* (Quebec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1973), p. 149.

⁵⁶⁹ Gilbert Joseph, *Une si douce Occupation: Simone de Beauvoir et Jean-Paul Sartre 1940-1944* (Albin Michel, 1991).

nature of resistance. Sartre was mobilised in 1940 and assigned to a meteorological post because of his weak physical condition. His regiment was captured by the invading army in June and Sartre was taken to the German prison camp Stalag XII D at Trèves (Triers) where he stayed until the spring of the following year.⁵⁷⁰ He was allowed to send two letters and a postcard per month, and his correspondence with Beauvoir reveals that daily life was not too hard, excluded as he was from physical labour. Indeed, he was a particularly privileged prisoner, even being allowed to write plays.

Sartre became friendly with various religious leaders in the camp and was asked to write a Christmas play for the prisoners.⁵⁷¹ On 24 December 1940, Sartre directed and performed in *Bariona, le fils du tonnerre*, a play based on the Nativity, having written and rehearsed it in a matter of weeks. Though he later disavowed the play, criticising its dramatic flaws and verbosity, and forbidding its publication or public performance, *Bariona* remains a fascinating precursor to *Les Mouches* in that similar claims were made about its content and implied call to oppose the Nazis.⁵⁷² Sartre insisted that it transparently communicated oppositional ideas under the cover of the Christian story. I use the word ‘transparently’ very deliberately, as it was also employed by Sartre’s supporters in their praise of *Les Mouches*. ‘On rappelle ici que *Les Mouches* furent jouées pour la première fois sous l’occupation allemande: d’où les fréquentes allusions qu’elles contiennent, et qui étaient alors plus transparentes encore qu’aujourd’hui, à la politique du *mea culpa*’.⁵⁷³

⁵⁷⁰ Is it a Freudian slip on Bradby’s part when he speaks of Sartre’s fellow prisoners in the *concentration* camp? David Bradby, *Modern French Drama, 1940-1980* (CUP, 1984), p. 46. Beretta, p. 11 and Aronson, p. 29, both say that Sartre returned to Paris in March. Other sources date his release to April 1941.

⁵⁷¹ Letter to Beauvoir, December 1940, transcribed (in part) by Contat and Rybalka. *Un Théâtre de situations*, pp. 219-21.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 221. In the early 1960s he authorised a limited edition of 500 copies, upon the request and for the benefit of his fellow prisoners. *Bariona* has now been published as an appendix in *Les Écrits de Sartre: Chronologie, bibliographie commentée*, ed. by Contat and Rybalka (Éditions Gallimard, 1970).

⁵⁷³ Jeanson, p. 10, uses these words as an introduction, quoting from Sartre’s post-war essay, ‘Paris sous l’Occupation’ from *Situations III* (Librairie Gallimard, 1949), See also Grégoire, p. 692 and Beauvoir, p. 499.

Sartre says of *Bariona*, 'Le texte était plein d'allusions à la situation du moment et parfaitement claires pour chacun de nous. L'envoyé de Rome à Jérusalem, dans notre esprit, c'était l'Allemand. Nos gardiens y virent l'Anglais dans ses colonies!'.⁵⁷⁴ Dorothy McCall suggests that the prisoners' common hatred of the Nazis was sufficient to explain Sartre's hidden message being received. 'With a Christmas story to appease the censors, Sartre was able to speak directly to his fellow prisoners, both Christians and nonbelievers, about resistance to their common enemy.'⁵⁷⁵

That Sartre claimed to have achieved the unambiguous transmission of a 'hidden' message in *Bariona* poses an enormous problem for the modern reader of Sartre; namely, how could he so effectively deceive the German censorship body whilst encouraging resistance among opponents of the Nazis in the same text?⁵⁷⁶ Sartre's somewhat euphoric experience with *Bariona* encouraged him to write plays upon his return to Paris.⁵⁷⁷ It also shaped his conception of ideal theatre enabled by a common situation brought about by extreme circumstances: 'je compris ce que le théâtre devrait être: un grand phénomène collectif et religieux.'⁵⁷⁸ The importance of this discovery can hardly be underestimated; Sartre saw the potential of a ready-made 'situation' (a 2000-year-old story) which could provide an analogy with contemporary circumstances. The topic of occupation by an oppressive, murderous army was sufficiently vague (and well-known) both to satisfy the Germans and to serve as a mouthpiece for the prisoners' own preoccupations. If this basic transposition is made, characters within the play resemble modern figures and the audience

⁵⁷⁴ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 221.

⁵⁷⁵ Dorothy McCall, *The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 1.

⁵⁷⁶ In his thorough analysis of Sartre's theatre, O'Donohoe raises this controversial question whilst declining to tackle it in his own book. O'Donohoe, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁷⁷ 'Je ferai du théâtre par la suite.' Letter to Beauvoir, December 1940, *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 220.

⁵⁷⁸ *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 62 and p. 64. Sartre was, of course, an atheist, but chose the context of Jesus' birth for *Bariona* in order to unite prisoners with different beliefs. Galster (2001), p. 47, refers to this experience as Sartre's 'conversion'.

looks to Bariona to guide them in the path of resistance. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence to counterbalance Sartre's impressions.⁵⁷⁹ However, one may surmise that the play did not – and was not intended to – directly lead the prisoners to openly defy or assassinate the German guards.⁵⁸⁰ Although Sartre was doubtless boosted by his involvement in this performance, his disillusionment with the power of words to bring about change in society was also to characterise the same period.⁵⁸¹

Sartre returned to Paris in March or April 1941, after his fellow philosophy reader, the Abbé Perrin, provided a false medical certificate to release him from the prison camp, despite allegations that Drieu La Rochelle was responsible for this.⁵⁸² He was restored to his teaching position at the *lycée* Pasteur and was later assigned a *khâgne* post at Condorcet – teaching a preparatory class for the *École Normale Supérieure* – where he replaced, by nomination, a Jewish professor. Once in Paris, Sartre was apparently hardened in his moral activism by his imprisonment, according to the testimony of Beauvoir.⁵⁸³ He recruited for *Socialisme et Liberté*, formed to act as a third way of resistance between right-wing Gaullism and left-wing Communism. In this he was helped by Merleau-Ponty, later among the few to praise *Les Mouches*. However, future activists were not ready to be mobilised for the Resistance, which had yet to take shape, and Sartre had not understood that Communist support would not be forthcoming while the Soviet Union kept peace with Hitler. This pact was not broken until June 21 1941; only from this point did Communists actively oppose

⁵⁷⁹ However, Perrin did not believe the prisoners picked up a Resistance message. Galster (2001), pp. 44-47.

⁵⁸⁰ *Bariona* also makes a clear plea in favour of procreation, yet Robert Champigny doubts that participants or spectators of the play were foremost among the fathers during the postwar baby boom; Sartre being the most obvious example. See Champigny, *Sartre and Drama* (America: French Literature Publications Company, 1982), p. 37.

⁵⁸¹ *Les Mouches*, p. 88: 'J'ai voulu croire que je pouvais guérir des gens d'ici par des paroles.'

⁵⁸² According to Ronald Aronson (p. 74), certain members of the French Communist Party (PCF) even spread a vicious rumour that Sartre was released by the Germans to spy for them. Perrin's own testimony confirms Sartre's version of events. Marius Perrin, *Avec Sartre au Stalag 12 D* (Jean-Pierre Delarge, 1980), p. 120.

⁵⁸³ Joseph, p. 187.

the (legality of the) Occupation. Sartre's trip to the Unoccupied Zone to round up further support for *Socialisme et Liberté* brought no success with either Gide or Malraux.

In the winter of 1941-1942, Sartre disbanded the group as the lack of tangible results had rendered the risks too costly. It is doubtful whether any real risks were involved, though Aronson – relying heavily on Beauvoir's memoirs – insists the group were brave in printing and distributing pamphlets.⁵⁸⁴ Further danger was apparent when two neighbouring clandestine groups were arrested.⁵⁸⁵ Joseph believes this group was a figment of Sartre's imagination, with no evidence of flyers, pamphlets, or indeed any other written record, testifying to its existence.⁵⁸⁶ In addition, he points out that none of the group could remember in any detail the Constitution that Sartre supposedly wrote for the reform of the State, or even the tasks that they were supposed to accomplish.⁵⁸⁷ This is an important point, as in all probability the documents would have to be memorised and destroyed in order not to be discovered. Whilst not denying Sartre's activity in this group, Beretta nevertheless confirms that any documentation attesting to it has been irrevocably lost.⁵⁸⁸

According to Galster, who aims to counterbalance criticism of Sartre with a list of resistance activities which plead in his favour, Sartre was prepared to carry bombs for assassinating Germans ('valises'), though his companion for the task was arrested and the project abandoned.⁵⁸⁹ In my view, the reality was less flattering. Other members of *Socialisme et Liberté* went on to actively help Jews hide to escape deportation.⁵⁹⁰ Some of Sartre's associates became martyrs for the Resistance or joined the more violent

⁵⁸⁴ Aronson, p. 30.

⁵⁸⁵ *Les Intellectuels et l'Occupation*, p. 154 and p. 160.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵⁸⁸ Beretta, p. 12: 'Sartre n'aura écrit que deux ou trois textes dans un bulletin clandestin de *Socialisme et Liberté* qui semble être définitivement perdu.'

⁵⁸⁹ Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (NY: Pantheon Books, 1985).

⁵⁹⁰ Dominique Desanti and his wife, for instance. *Les Intellectuels et l'Occupation*, p. 161 and p. 167.

Communist branch, while Sartre remained a servant of Vichy by continuing his teaching career and submitting theatre scripts to the Germans. Joseph has examined the testimony of Sartre's pupils and it appears he neither mentioned the political situation, nor gave a single word of hope or objection to the progressive Nazification of France to those he taught.⁵⁹¹

The most obvious counter-argument adopted by supporters of Sartre, to redeem his lack of direct action, is his decision to turn to theatre, and writing in general. What better medium than a live stage for communicating subversive ideas to a 'captive' audience? Beauvoir suggested that creative artistic activity was the only means of resistance available to him.⁵⁹² Sartre's own writings on committed literature, which catapulted him into the limelight in the postwar years, seemed all the better to reinforce the notion.⁵⁹³

Perhaps the most striking example of this was his assertion that 'today's new writers' – implicitly including himself – had to take risks by writing, and accept the consequences:

In publishing a great many clandestine articles, frequently under dangerous circumstances to fortify the people against the Germans or to keep up their courage, they became accustomed to thinking that writing is an act; and they have acquired the taste for action. Far from claiming that the writer is not responsible, they demand that he should at all times be able to pay for what he writes. In the clandestine press not a line could be written which did not risk the life of the author, or the printer, or the distributors of Resistance tracts.⁵⁹⁴

Few challenged his bold assertions at the Liberation, so Sartre was able to recast his plays in the light of 'committed literature', according to which it is the duty of a writer in an extreme situation to comment on political and historical events.

⁵⁹¹ Joseph, p. 195.

⁵⁹² Beauvoir, p. 573. See also Beretta, p. 13.

⁵⁹³ Cornud-Peyron, p. 31. See Sartre, 'The Case for responsible literature', *Horizon*, 65 (May 1945), published in French in *Les Temps modernes*, 1 October 1945: 'Every word has consequences. Every silence too. [...] Since we act on our time by our very existence, we decide that this action will be deliberate.'

⁵⁹⁴ 'New Writing in France', *Vogue*, July 1945 (pp. 84-85). See Aronson, p. 54.

I do not intend to dwell again on the issue of whether resisters should have stayed quiet or continued to write given that the Nazis occupied France. However, as Sartre claimed his writing was an act of resistance, the measure of *Les Mouches*'s impact upon the Resistance should surely be its reception in the eyes of the public and published critics.⁵⁹⁵ Sartre almost certainly intended to at least encourage a pro-Resistance reading of *Les Mouches*, without necessarily limiting it to one. But I would advance that if few understood this message, even fewer accepted its political implications: the assassination of Germans (or the French militia) and outright rejection of the Vichy government.

In his reinstated teaching position, Sartre was free to write. His output was prolific, and it would hardly be an overstatement to suggest that his reputation as a mature playwright and French intellectual figure was constructed during this three-year period. His prominence in a 1944 theatre debate, hosted by Jean Vilar and featuring Camus, Salacrou, Barrault and Cocteau, is evidence of this. At the same time as performances of *Les Mouches*, his 722-page philosophical work, *L'Être et le Néant* was published (25 June 1943). Galster claims the enigmatic figure of Gerhard Heller was behind the German approval of this vast work, which is all the more impressive given that his orders were to slow the expansion of French culture. In addition, *L'Être et le Néant* weighed one kilogram and therefore used a staggering quantity of paper at a time when it was in short supply.⁵⁹⁶

Sartre frequently published anonymous articles in *Les Lettres françaises* venting his spleen against overt collaborators such as Drieu La Rochelle. His final contribution to the theatre of the Occupation, premiered just days before the Allied invasion and the subsequent Liberation of France, was his second publicly-performed play, *Huis clos*. There was considerable controversy over the three main characters, who encapsulated the most

⁵⁹⁵ Sartre's philosophy argues a play's effectiveness – here its impact on the Resistance – affects its *existence*.

⁵⁹⁶ Galster (2001), pp. 81-82.

vile and unacceptable people in the eyes of Vichy and fascists alike: a child-killer, a lesbian and a deserter. More widely understood and appreciated by audiences, however, *Huis clos* was successful enough to allow Sartre to leave teaching and pursue his writing full-time.

Sartre was an improbable recruit for active resistance against the Germans. He had serious problems with his eyesight and a very recognisable face. However, he had the ability to write against Vichy and all forms of collaboration, leading some to judge that Sartre was a ‘writer who resisted and not a resister who wrote’.⁵⁹⁷ Aronson has no illusions as to Sartre’s role in the Resistance. ‘He remained in the third rung of the Resistance: he identified with it, associated with members more active than he, knew a bit about what was happening, and occasionally contributed his talents and participated in meetings.’⁵⁹⁸ However, he also sees Sartre’s Occupation writing as a transparent call to resistance, even presenting *Les Mouches* as Sartre’s greatest contribution to the Resistance cause, although he does not give any evidence from 1943 to support such a claim:

The Flies counseled violent struggle against the usurpers, a rewriting of Aeschylus – under the eyes of the censors – which encouraged resistance. [...] The play’s most important anti-Vichy and anti-German message was Sartre’s rejection of guilt and repentance as serving the usurpers, and his call to murder the murderers. [...] Indeed, it was a feat in 1943 to have such an inflammatory play passed by the censors.⁵⁹⁹

The audaciousness of this claim is in line with the majority of postwar interpretations of the play, and even uses the reputation it acquired from the Liberation as ‘proof’ of its assertions. No mention is made of the favourable reviews from the German press or the second edition of early 1944 approved by the occupiers. Allusions to the ‘important message’ and ‘inflammatory’ content were conspicuously absent from reviews in 1943.

⁵⁹⁷ Cohen-Solal, chapter 13, is entitled ‘Un écrivain qui résistait et non pas un résistant qui écrivait...’ The phrase was adopted by Sartre himself in a 1973 interview with Jean Gérassi.

⁵⁹⁸ Aronson, p. 31.

⁵⁹⁹ Aronson, p. 31.

Sartre's compromises

While Sartre's war-time movements escalated to outright involvement in the Resistance – if one accepts that writing exclusively and anonymously in clandestine papers can be considered as such – the road was punctuated by compromises. Staying in Paris to write, publish or work was bound to entail these, though the important and philosophically unavoidable factor of choice is crucial here. Sartre, as much as any other French playwright, knew what was involved in putting on a play in German-occupied Paris. His personal contacts enabled *Les Mouches* to be performed, but they required that he turn a blind eye to certain collaborationist tendencies. He had a privileged relationship with Dullin, the theatre director, who had no compunction about advertising *Les Mouches* in *La Gerbe* and in the German bi-monthly 'Pariscope' (22 May and 19 June 1943):

Il est peu sûr que la publicité parue dans *Der deutsche Wegleiter* fut payante car Dullin était l'un des présidents de l'Association des Directeurs de Théâtres de Paris qui composait la page 'Pariser Theater' où elle était insérée. [...] Dullin n'a probablement pas su résister à la tentation de remplir son théâtre, fût-ce par les occupants que la pièce, selon son auteur, justifiait d'abattre. Si l'on peut donc plaindre ce dernier d'avoir dû s'accommoder des applaudissements allemands [...] il n'en est pas de même pour Dullin, car il les avait expressément sollicités.⁶⁰⁰

O'Donohoe links politics and philosophy to form a judgment of Sartre. He finds it somewhat incongruous that Sartre was studying Heidegger (the chancellor of Freiburg University under the Nazis) during his 1940 internment, whilst claiming to write a clear call to resistance in a play approved by the German guards.⁶⁰¹ His articles in *Comœdia* also seem to represent a certain compromise from the playwright. Sartre claimed he was

⁶⁰⁰ Galster (2001), pp. 105-06.

⁶⁰¹ O'Donohoe, p. 32. Sartre even appeared on the 'liste noire' in *Les Lettres françaises* at the beginning of 1943 (along with Montherlant) for being a disciple of Heidegger. Galster (2001), p. 87.

initially unaware of the paper's collaborationist leanings and was misled by its editor René Delange.⁶⁰² However, Sartre's contribution was by no means limited to the initial interview on *Les Mouches* with Jean Novy in April 1943.⁶⁰³ He had also reviewed Melville's *Moby Dick* and was listed as a collaborator (contributor) for *Comœdia* from the first Occupation edition (1941). Most damning is that Sartre wrote a homage to Giraudoux for the paper much later in the Occupation (January 1944).

He had been informed by Paulhan (who had introduced Sartre to the editor) that the entire content of the paper was run by the Germans prior to publication. From the outset, *Comœdia* officially submitted to the *Propagandastaffel* in its unwavering loyalty to the cause of Franco-German collaboration, and all its contributors were declared as belonging to the 'race aryenne' – attesting to which, from its second year of dissemination, all authors had to sign a six-page official document.⁶⁰⁴ Among Sartre's postwar attempts to vindicate himself was the claim that he had completely refused to write for *Comœdia*, not so much for personal reasons concerning the paper or its editor, but on the basis that to contribute would constitute a compromise on the Resistance stance of abstention.⁶⁰⁵ Allan Stoekl argues that Sartre's writings for *Comœdia* are not necessarily sufficient to condemn the author, nor even deny his membership of the Resistance, as he categorises the paper as one of 'soft' collaboration.⁶⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Sartre's retrospective and categorical denials of collaboration are unreliable, at best.

⁶⁰² Incidentally, Charles Vildrac made the same accusation: 'J'avais donné une nouvelle à *Comœdia*, et puis je me suis aperçu que c'était un journal contrôlé par les Allemands. Delange, dans tous les journaux, ne tient jamais parole. [...] a téléphoné continuellement à Contrôle allemand.' Jean Grenier, p. 364.

⁶⁰³ This interview also contained a gibe at the Jewish philosopher Bergson. *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 224. See Joseph, p. 269, for further comment on this interview, and his chapter on *Comœdia* (pp. 161-74) for details of its manifesto and links with Sartre.

⁶⁰⁴ Joseph, p. 171.

⁶⁰⁵ Joseph, p. 174. See Archives Nationales, Z 6, n.1, 15070 (dossier Delange) for details of Sartre's claims.

⁶⁰⁶ Stoekl, p. 80. Grenier, p. 284, offers testimony from various intellectuals who disagreed on this matter.

One of the most persuasive arguments used to defend Sartre's reputation as a resister concerns his alleged refusal to sign an official declaration stating he was not Jewish. Indeed, he chastised Beauvoir for signing the form in order to continue teaching, though he later stated that he understood Beauvoir's position and her concern (for them both) to have a job. Sartre claimed he was able to circumvent this order through the help of an 'inspecteur' who enabled his return to the *lycée* Pasteur. Joseph believes no one could have exempted Sartre from completing the regulation documents.⁶⁰⁷ After all, the racial cleansing of schools was passionately pursued by the Germans; if it had not been, Sartre would never have obtained his next teaching position. Moreover, teachers had to regularly promote and disseminate Vichy propaganda and encourage loyalty to Pétain. Even if Sartre had been protected by a 'secret' resister (was there any other kind?), no risk can be said to have been involved.⁶⁰⁸ It would not constitute a brave statement of costly Resistance action.

It is a well-known fact, powerfully highlighted by Marcel Ophuls in his interviews with school teachers in Clermont-Ferrand, that very little protest was made by French professionals to the revocation of Jews in government jobs.⁶⁰⁹ Neither was the Resistance movement overtly concerned with the protection of Jews.⁶¹⁰ However, Dominique Desanti recalled the desire of the clandestine paper, *Sous la botte* – the predecessor to Sartre's aborted *Socialisme et Liberté* group – to be as well informed as possible,

d'abord sur les édits raciaux et d'exclusion du gouvernement Pétain à Vichy. On expliquait ce que cela voulait dire pratiquement. On expliquait que les gens perdaient leur travail, qu'ils n'avaient pas droit aux mêmes cartes d'alimentation, qu'ils n'avaient droit à rien. [...] On essayait d'expliquer aussi comment on pouvait résister.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁷ For a more in-depth account of the incident, see Joseph, pp. 187-88.

⁶⁰⁸ Aronson, p. 29.

⁶⁰⁹ Marcel Ophuls, *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* (1969).

⁶¹⁰ This is not to exclude individual efforts, nor Resistance publications such as *Le Courrier français du témoignage chrétien*, which came to the defence of the Jews.

⁶¹¹ Galster, in *Les Intellectuels et l'Occupation*, p. 164.

In 1948, Sartre called to account authors who fail to protest against injustice. 'I hold Flaubert and Goncourt responsible for the repression which followed the commune because they did not write one line to prevent it.'⁶¹² His words simultaneously form a retrospective accusation of his own inaction.

The fact that Sartre had taken the place of a Jewish lecturer at Condorcet was revealed somewhat sensationally in 1997, and is tackled in some detail by Galster, whose faith in Sartre was more than slightly shaken by the incident.⁶¹³ The entire affair has been written off as unresolved by Stoekl, who prefers the analysis of Sartre's war texts as 'proof' of his true stance, particularly as there is no way to determine Sartre's awareness of the person he was replacing, especially at this far remove. However, Galster provides compelling evidence of Sartre's potential complicity: public records of appointments and staff lists, and the fact that there were only four *khâgne* positions in Paris. Furthermore, the application of the *Statut des Juifs* led to obvious absences and teaching vacancies in 1941.

It appears that Sartre genuinely struggled with the issue of involvement in the Resistance. Unlike his friend Camus, Sartre did not know how to run a Resistance group or direct a clandestine journal.⁶¹⁴ Almost at every turn, Sartre's efforts failed or were nipped in the bud. Camus even invited Sartre to write articles on the state of Paris in August 1944 for *Combat*, during the anti-German uprisings. Although the danger was limited compared to the risks of undermining German policy during the previous four years, the opportunity was nevertheless precious for Sartre given that the Liberation was imminent. However, Beauvoir later explained to a biographer that Sartre had been too busy to write the articles

⁶¹² Sartre, 'Présentation aux *Temps modernes*', *Situations II* (Paris, 1948), pp. 12-13.

⁶¹³ Galster, in *Les Intellectuels et l'Occupation*, p. 152: 'Aujourd'hui encore, je maintiens cette position [Sartre's deliberate desire to resist], mais un point aveugle risque de tout faire basculer.'

⁶¹⁴ Sartre's later essays use Camus as a model for commitment. 'New Writing in France', *Vogue*, July 1945.

and that she had actually completed them on his behalf. 'It is no small point. These articles *appeared* to show Sartre coming down to earth in a new and decisive way, at a defining historical moment, and they have been regarded as the best eyewitness account of those days.'⁶¹⁵ Camus also invited Sartre to attend a meeting at *Combat* just before the Liberation. According to Jacqueline Bernard, a member present at the meeting, Sartre was falling over himself to write the smallest piece of journalism, be it on the most mundane subject. Sartre's version is very different: 'je suis entré dans son groupe de résistance, peu avant la Libération.'⁶¹⁶ The exaggeration is significant: 'Almost all active members of the Resistance were given false papers. Sartre never had any.'⁶¹⁷

Further compromises were inevitably entailed in the submission of the text of *Les Mouches* to German censorship. The play was quickly approved and permission to publish was given in December 1942. Jean Lanier (Oreste) declared in a 1981 letter that no changes or cuts were made to the original text of *Les Mouches*.⁶¹⁸ This indicates there was nothing in the dialogue to displease the occupying authorities. According to certain commentators, simply submitting the text for censorship – and allowing the theatre's name to be changed – even constitutes an approval of the power system in place (and confers legitimacy upon it).⁶¹⁹ Despite postwar claims that the Germans stopped performances for political reasons, a second edition of *Les Mouches* was (allowed to be) published in January 1944. This piece of information alone renders untenable the argument that the Germans finally understood the oppositional content of the play and consequently prevented further performances.

⁶¹⁵ Aronson, p. 24 (my emphasis).

⁶¹⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Cérémonie des adieux; suivi des Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre, août-septembre, 1974* (Gallimard, 1981), p. 342.

⁶¹⁷ Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life* (NY: Carroll & Graf, 2000), p. 178.

⁶¹⁸ Galster (2001), p. 90.

⁶¹⁹ *Les Intellectuels et l'Occupation*, p. 155.

Besides, Sartre was permitted to continue teaching and writing plays, another of which was performed less than a year later, with German consent.

Myth making: post-Liberation claims

Jean Paulhan, in the 19 June 1943 issue of *Comœdia*, promised a debate on *Les Mouches*, following an extremely unfavourable article by the regular critic Roland Purnal, but the discussion never materialised. It was not ‘une controverse qui a marqué la vie intellectuelle parisienne’.⁶²⁰ The play’s reputation fell flat for want of a sufficiently big audience or a more welcoming intellectual climate. However, after the Liberation of France, Sartre’s claims about the play turned it into a sensation. He said a clear message of defiance had been broadcast and understood, while the Germans had been fooled. He also recounted that *Comœdia*’s editor, Delange, had been warned by the Germans not to attract attention to *Les Mouches* by allowing the proposed debate on the play.⁶²¹

Over the next ten years he alternately claimed that the play had been banned from performance by the Germans or forced off the stage by a coordinated collaborationist press campaign, thus proving its Resistance value.⁶²² ‘Les collaborateurs ne s’y trompèrent point. De violentes campagnes de presse obligèrent rapidement le théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt [*sic*] à retirer la pièce de l’affiche.’⁶²³ However, the evidence points to a much more nuanced story. Not only is Sartre’s version contradicted by the reviews and testimony of the time, it is even tempered by his own writings. In his 1946 article, ‘Forgers of Myths: the young

⁶²⁰ Beretta, p. 24. Beretta goes on to explain that, ‘Sartre even argued that the drubbing administered by collaborationist critics was proof that they understood the play’s true intent.’

⁶²¹ *Les Intellectuels et l’Occupation*, p. 156. Only a declaration by Sartre’s (1945) survives to ‘confirm’ this.

⁶²² Stoekl, p. 78.

⁶²³ ‘Ce que fut la création des “Mouches”’, in *La Croix* (for a 1951 staging of the play). See *Les Écrits de Sartre*, p. 91.

playwrights of France', Sartre explained that any strong reaction to one's plays is a good sign, different irreconcilable interpretations notwithstanding.⁶²⁴

Since the Occupation, varying judgments of Sartre have tended to place commentators in irretrievably opposed camps. Although Joseph sees Sartre's Resistance reputation as a complete fabrication, he does not sufficiently consider the content of writings that form the playwright's most significant claim to Resistance 'action'. Added looks closely at the intended 'message' of *Les Mouches* while rejecting any possibility that it could be described as 'resistant' because almost no-one received it. 'L'existence d'une censure stricte et attentive laissait prévoir ce résultat: la notion de 'théâtre résistant' tombe, faute d'objet.'⁶²⁵

Loiseaux classifies *Les Mouches* as 'refusal' literature, while Galster claims it is undeniably a Resistance play, because of its content, even though only a select few picked up on it.⁶²⁶ The fact that *Les Mouches* was the only Occupation play to receive approval from *Les Lettres françaises* is a considerable factor in favour of a pro-Resistance interpretation, though this may be a further indication that it was simply not possible to successfully stage a subversive play in Occupied Paris, even if Sartre is judged to have got the closest. It may simply be that the clandestine paper, for which Sartre wrote articles from the beginning of 1943, wished to demonstrate a show of (belated) support for a colleague, reviewing the play well after the most influential papers had castigated it. Their approbation should not be seen as unanimous, either. Indeed, François Mauriac was furious to see such a long article take up precious space in the underground paper.

⁶²⁴ *Theatre Arts* (NY), 30 (June 1946). *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 63: 'Des réactions aussi violentes prouvent que nos pièces touchent le public là où il importe qu'il soit touché.'

⁶²⁵ Added, p. 273.

⁶²⁶ Buesche, in *Das Reich*, 12 September 1943, confirms: 'La pièce est un seul défi, un appel ininterrompu.'

Ce papier dépensé, ce risque couru pour faire avaler aux pauvres types cet immense panégyrique du navet de Sartre! Et à un pareil moment! Lorsqu'il y a tout à dire! [...] Je compte leur flanquer ma démission. [...] Comment ne sentent-ils pas le ridicule inouï de faire paraître *clandestinement* une longue étude sur *Les Mouches*!⁶²⁷

Sartre claimed that the Conseil national des écrivains (CNE), which ran *Les Lettres françaises*, agreed that *Les Mouches* should be submitted to German censorship and performed, 'parce que de telles pièces aidaient à démystifier le public, même si elles ne pouvaient montrer la vérité que sous le voile'.⁶²⁸ There seems to be a problem with the dates here. Sartre was only approached by this Resistance group in January 1943, whereas the play received its visa in 1942.⁶²⁹ Indeed, he could only become a member after the death of its joint founder, Jacques Decour, who was suspicious of Sartre and the German visa accorded to *Les Mouches*.

I believe a genuine, if unconscious, mistake made by many commentators is to assume from the outset that the prudence of Sartre's writings was linked purely to the delicate issue of censorship. Beretta maintains that Sartre's caution in limiting his 1943 *Comœdia* interview to his philosophical intentions was due to the fact that 'il était tenu à la prudence face à la censure'.⁶³⁰ This interview can, with some effort, be read as hinting at some of the contemporary allusions in the play, though few have based their argument on the article.⁶³¹ O'Donohoe comes to the same conclusion for the text of the play: 'Finally, considering that he needed to circumvent the Nazi censorship, it is reasonable to assume that Sartre would have been unwise to stage any more overt a call to arms, as this might

⁶²⁷ Galster (2005), p. 179. Doubtless, a clash of personalities between Mauriac and Sartre (evidenced by uncomplimentary comments on each other's work) was in large part responsible for such a strong reaction.

⁶²⁸ *Libération*, 21 September 1959.

⁶²⁹ Galster (2001), pp. 86-87. This discrepancy appears to have been missed by Galster.

⁶³⁰ Beretta, p. 62.

⁶³¹ Contat and Rybalka, however, claim that 'Cette interview est à lire en grande partie entre les lignes; Sartre évite de parler directement du contenu politique de la pièce, mais y fait néanmoins des allusions très claires.' Galster (2001), p. 64.

well have proved counter-productive.’⁶³² Again, one may wonder why Sartre would wait until 1947/1948 to explain his ‘true’ intentions – and in such an ambiguous way – as the German censorship ceased to be effective in 1944.

The influence of Beauvoir’s autobiography in judging all matters pertaining to Sartre has somewhat eclipsed views from other important figures active during the Occupation. During the Paris insurrection in the summer of 1944, Sartre was entrusted with the protection of the Comédie-Française from German sabotage by the clandestine Comité national du théâtre. ‘Exhausted from his walk across the city, Sartre had fallen asleep in one of the seats. Camus woke him with the words, “You have turned your theater seat in the direction of history!”’.⁶³³ While the comment is probably typical of the jovial humour shared between friends, it is nevertheless a poignant comment on Sartre’s desire to be part of historical turning points and real events; a desire frustrated by his inability to decide what his involvement should be or effectively put into practice his developing ideas on commitment. This comment was later used with some venom by Camus to imply criticism of Sartre’s inability to act on his theories. It is another example of the gap between Sartre’s intentions (and opportunities) to resist and the somewhat paler reflection of his actual participation.

However, it is remarkable how influential the dissemination of Sartre’s post-war claims for *Les Mouches* proved to be. The following assertions were written in the 1960s:

When Sartre wrote *The Flies*, the play had resonances that are lost to a spectator or reader today. [...] The audience of *The Flies* in 1943 was less interested in the philosophical problems of the play than its clear political meaning: satire of the Vichy puppets and praise of the Resistance. [...] The audience’s conspiracy with *The Flies* gave extraordinary power

⁶³² O’Donohoe, p. 71.

⁶³³ Aronson, p. 25. The original French reads, ‘Tu as mis ton fauteuil dans le sens de l’histoire!’

to certain lines. [...] It is astounding that the German censors could have failed to understand the subversive intention of *The Flies*. This obtuseness can be explained.⁶³⁴

The exact opposite of the first statement is true, as the 1943 spectators missed the supposedly 'clear political meaning' of the play.⁶³⁵ To speak of 'complicity' in the audience is exaggerated in the extreme, given the ever-dwindling numbers of spectators and their audible discomfort with Dullin's costumes, as well as Sartre's language and philosophy. As to the 'obtuseness' of the occupiers, which presumably excludes the lucid sightings of revolt in German reviews, should one not be more shocked by the failure of the French to pick up such 'subversive' ideas?

It is frequently assumed that *Les Mouches* was perceived as a political analogy.

Les Mouches, pièce née de la France occupée et de la Résistance, respire la guerre, le meurtre. [...] Le drame avait une actualité spécifique. [...] Conduit par Électre, le dialogue est fondé sur le rappel de la réalité française pendant l'occupation. Dans cette scène [I, iv], c'est Électre qui parle au nom de la Résistance. [...]

Chacun de ces thèmes s'inspire de l'actualité et participe aux préoccupations immédiates de l'époque. *Les Mouches* sont 'une' réponse aux problèmes du gouvernement de Vichy, de la résistance et de ses actes violents, du problème posé par le risque d'otage. [...] Sartre a quelque chose à dire.⁶³⁶

Dussane admits she is unsure whether the Germans picked up on the call to take risks and enter direct action, or whether they put the ideas down to Aeschylus.⁶³⁷ The implication behind such a comment is that the French saw through the camouflage. 'De nouveau, la fable antique servait à donner l'accent de pérennité à l'aventure contemporaine, et à déguiser prudemment les personnages et leur pensée actuelle aux yeux de la censure.'⁶³⁸

However, according to the reviews which have survived, the French were no further ahead

⁶³⁴ McCall, p. 15 and p. 16, note 15.

⁶³⁵ I thus disagree with Jeanson (p. 10) on this point.

⁶³⁶ Cornud-Peyron, p. 26, p. 28 and p. 123.

⁶³⁷ Dussane, p. 124.

⁶³⁸ Dussane, p. 124. See also O'Donohoe, p. 52 and p. 54.

than the Germans. Only the most oblique references to a deliberate call to action were implied in a couple of reviews that did not even make it into the public domain. The play was reviewed in *Les Lettres françaises*, but was nowhere hailed as a clear call to resistance either during or immediately after the war, Sartre's belated claims excepted.

Conclusion

To my mind, Sartre was not a resister. A careful study of his Occupation activities reveals his lack of risk-taking and compromises in his links with collaborators, Germans and the press. Most of his ambitious claims do not stand up to analysis. I agree with Added and Aronson that his postwar theoretical writings cleverly rewrote the Occupation in favour of the Resistance. Added defines this as the myth of unanimity; that is, that playwrights somehow managed to collectively deceive the German censorship body. Sartre implied that virtually everyone participated in the cause.

In a dazzling move, the article connects 'each of us' among those who supported the Resistance passively with those who participated in some of its less dangerous and demanding activities, and with the heroes active in the underground sabotage, communication, and transportation in the *maquis*. [...] Sartre's myth-making had a powerful double effect: he legitimised all those, including himself, who sided in any way with the Resistance, and at the same moment he became this silent republic's spokesperson.⁶³⁹

The post-Liberation appeal of a committed literature, which exhorted authors to act upon their theories and engage with contemporary dilemmas and crises, could conveniently (and retroactively) be applied to Sartre's own theatre.

Sartre may well have intended to communicate a subversive message through *Les Mouches* as the only means of resistance available to him, but it was so obscure that neither

⁶³⁹ Aronson, p. 40. He is referring to Sartre's postwar essay, 'La République du silence'.

the theatre-going public nor the Germans grasped it. Indeed, there is a hint from Sartre's own pen that he erred on the side of caution when writing *Les Mouches*, presumably because of the obligatory pre-performance reading by the Germans: '[la pièce] a été écrite dans des circonstances particulières, elle est très "sage" – vous savez pourquoi.'⁶⁴⁰ It has been common practice, even very recently, to assume that political intent is evident in the play: 'le texte de Sartre se livre *sans aucune ambiguïté* comme une œuvre engagée pour la Résistance.'⁶⁴¹ The myth, which surrounds Sartre and insists that an unambiguous reading of *Les Mouches* was possible, is not convincing, particularly as multiple meanings in the script continue to prevent a consensus of opinion as to its allegorical dimensions.⁶⁴²

However, even those who hail a pro-Resistance message in *Les Mouches* are usually quick to point out its application as a solely individual lesson. Indeed, one of its most disturbing aspects for a 1943 audience is the lack of united resistance to the oppressor and the apparent failure of the 'hero' to effect change for the people. In fact, Sartre seems to have misunderstood the Resistance's aims and was not concerned with the future state of affairs.⁶⁴³

However, it is equally clear that Sartre's thinking at this time was concerned with personal morality rather than public or political issues. Orestes' final action is open to the criticism that an effective political rebel does not assassinate and escape: he stays to help build a new society. But in 1943 (paradoxically perhaps) Sartre was not concerned with the practical politics of liberation.⁶⁴⁴

One might go so far as to suggest that Sartre did not write a play of his time, but was very much at odds with 1940s society, whether that be Vichy, the German occupiers or the

⁶⁴⁰ Letter to Barrault, '*Huis clos et Le soulier de satin*', p. 204. Galster wonders, 'Vise-t-il la Censure qui l'empêche d'être plus explicite dans la contestation de l'ordre dominant?'

⁶⁴¹ *Dictionnaire des pièces de théâtre*, p. 396 (my emphasis).

⁶⁴² Jeanson, p. 23: '[Il] se change en mythe pour échapper aux hommes réels.'

⁶⁴³ Sartre confirmed this to Jeanson in the 1950s. Aronson, p. 41.

⁶⁴⁴ David Bradby, *Modern French Drama*, p. 39.

Resistance. One could also see contemporary allusions in the play as coincidental rather than deliberate, and certainly not unambiguous.⁶⁴⁵ Studies of *Les Mouches* which insist that it is inextricably linked to its era are extremely limited and tend to exclude key themes in the play as a result, besides the lack of concrete evidence to support their interpretations.

I agree with Aronson that Sartre was developing and maturing as a writer and a thinker, and was not clear about his role in politics or society. This posed a particularly difficult problem at the Liberation when authors were put on trial for their activities and every aspect of their wartime movements was put under the microscope. Sartre's abortive attempts at Resistance action led him to turn to writing as a means of combat.⁶⁴⁶ Inquests during the *Épuration* were little concerned with authors' fictional works, which could not exonerate them. Sartre thus had to reconstruct his Occupation activities and writings in the light of his theories of commitment.

I agree with Stoekl that *Les Mouches* is open to many different interpretations, none of which is fully convincing or necessarily wrong, though I am less inclined to judge it a 'strength'.⁶⁴⁷ Whilst I would never accuse Sartre of being pro-Nazi or secretly loyal to Vichy, I nevertheless think that allusions to the Occupation, a rejection of Vichy and German rule, and a call to Resistance action, are far from obvious in *Les Mouches*. On the other hand, I find it impossible to dismiss, as does Added, its claim to belong to a 'theatre of resistance' merely on the basis that few people seized the play's hidden meanings. A number of initiated intellectuals, students and friends (or colleagues) of Sartre were able to

⁶⁴⁵ *Les Intellectuels et l'Occupation*, p. 158, note 39. Galster says that Azéma, 'se limitant au seul texte des *Mouches*, juge que certaines répliques étaient *par hasard* dans l'air du temps et n'ont rien à voir avec une résistance quelconque.'

⁶⁴⁶ Beretta, pp. 12-13: 'Sartre estime que son combat ne doit plus être politique à proprement parler, mais *idéologique*: renonçant à l'action directe, il va écrire sans cesse' (author's original emphasis).

⁶⁴⁷ Stoekl, p. 85: 'My point is that both sides were "right", and neither was. Sartre wrote a protean work whose very strength was that it could be read from either side.'

discern contemporary (political) allusions in *Les Mouches*. The ambiguous nature of most Occupation stances is reflected in the contrasted readings of the play.

Such a recognition could certainly find resonance among a population whose every wartime activity was susceptible to multiple readings: millions of French, no doubt like Sartre himself, lived quiet lives, collaborating in every minor act, and yet imagining themselves, like Orestes, heroic and violent resisters.⁶⁴⁸

With hindsight, one can see that the extreme circumstances of the Occupation have inevitably manipulated or conditioned the interpretation of many plays. Part of the problem is that *Les Mouches* is not limited to a political allegory.⁶⁴⁹ Oreste is a stranger to Argos and risks nothing with his act (Égisthe does not resist death and there is no occupying army threatening reprisal). There is no pressure to remain and effect change and he leaves the city with impunity. It seems inconsistent to claim a precise political message given that the playwright was against *pièces à thèse*.⁶⁵⁰ *Les Mouches* is much more rich and varied than many cursory analyses admit. Few denied the verbal power of the play's dialogue or the originality of Sartre's adaptation of the Orestia myth; the new and successful productions of *Les Mouches* in 1945, 1947, 1948 and 1951 further testify to this.⁶⁵¹

The play certainly attracted intellectual debate at the time, though not perhaps to the extent that the Resistance 'myth' surrounding it would suggest. Journalists' reluctance to discuss political elements in the play cannot simply be put down to prudence or offence at pro-Resistance content, because Anouilh's *Antigone* was subject to public debate the following year. The philosophy expressed in Sartre's play was repugnant to many,

⁶⁴⁸ Stoekl, p. 89.

⁶⁴⁹ Robert Champigny, *Sartre and Drama*, p. 117: 'The significance of his plays is not precisely and unequivocally oriented toward a contemporary situation.'

⁶⁵⁰ Gore, p. 46. Sartre, in *Un Théâtre de situations*, p. 61, explains that French theatre 'n'est le support d'aucune "thèse".' See also Galster (2001), pp. 34-35.

⁶⁵¹ Even Purnal's ascorbic review in *Comœdia*, 12 June 1943, acknowledged there were 'certains passages d'une indéniabile beauté', as did a review in *Révolution nationale* on the same day.

particularly given the avant-garde packaging and coarse vocabulary. Sartre's notions of freedom, morality, violence and responsibility were clearly not acceptable to audiences in June 1943. However, worldwide attention to Sartre's postwar theories on the writer's duty to be involved in the exceptional events of his time meant that a revised account of *Les Mouches* was not only possible, but desirable. In any case, in 1943 Sartre was about to be eclipsed by what was undoubtedly the most spectacular and epic theatrical production of the Occupation: *Le Soulier de satin*.

CHAPTER FIVE

PAUL CLAUDEL: *LE SOULIER DE SATIN*

27 November 1943 marked a triumph in French theatre.⁶⁵² Paul Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin*, a play of exceptional length even in its abridged version for the stage, was performed for the first time in front of a packed audience at France's largest national theatre, the Comédie-Française. For the premiere, the stage director Jean-Louis Barrault planned, with the help of Arthur Honegger's music, to imitate the warning siren for an air-raid to grab the public's attention. A genuine alert emptied the theatre before a line was spoken, causing the increasingly deaf Claudel (75 years old) to mistake it for the carefully planned surprise and call out for people to return to their seats. A long series of modifications, delays, and the sheer scale of a five-hour performance, all made its eventual success the more impressive.⁶⁵³ Seats were coveted to the extent that police intervention was required at the box offices and tickets were sold on the black market.⁶⁵⁴ Sixty consecutive sell-out performances attest to its popularity, as does the demand for Claudel's works to be staged in the late 1940s and the regular staging of *Le Soulier* since then.⁶⁵⁵

Though hardly the subject of political debate upon publication in 1929, *Le Soulier de satin* certainly had its opponents and has since caused controversy because of the

⁶⁵² Christopher G. Flood, 'Theatrical triumph and political ambiguity: *Le Soulier de satin* at the Comédie-Française in 1943-1944', *French Cultural Studies*, 3 (1992). Jean-Louis Vaudoier, 10 December 1943 letter to Claudel: 'Le succès du *Soulier* prend "des proportions triomphales".'

⁶⁵³ Le Boterf, p. 161: 'Il serait vain de le dissimuler, *Le Soulier de Satin* est un immense succès. Le plus retentissant sans doute des annales théâtrales durant l'occupation.'

⁶⁵⁴ Henri Amouroux, *La Vie des Français sous l'Occupation*, (Fayard, 1961), p. 468. Vaudoier, 10 December 1943: 'les bureaux de location sont assiégés par une foule si avide et si démonstrative que, certains matins, "la force publique" a été contrainte d'intervenir pour rétablir l'ordre!'

⁶⁵⁵ Barrault started up his own theatre just after the war, but staged *Le Soulier* soon afterwards and directed the elusive fourth 'Journée' in 1972. The complete version (10-11 hours) was not staged in Claudel's lifetime, but has since been produced by Antoine Vitez (1987) and Olivier Py (2003 and 2009).

circumstances surrounding its production – and the activities of its author – during the Occupation. Bold claims, comparable to those for *Jeanne avec nous* and *Les Mouches*, were made after the war that the play had demonstrated French solidarity and a spirit of resistance under the Germans’ noses. This chapter will first examine the background to the 1943 performance version of the play, analysing in particular the changes made to the text and the contribution of Jean-Louis Barrault, who was also the leading actor. Subsequently, interpretations of the play and reactions to the first performances will be discussed, as will Claudel’s activities and writings from the period, with a view to establishing whether or not *Le Soulier de satin* actually had an impact in favour of the Resistance.

The complexities of creating the play during the Occupation

The route to the first performance of *Le Soulier de satin* was a long and arduous one punctuated by the shocking defeat of France in 1940, and enabled by Barrault’s stubborn determination, tireless campaigning and unusual complicity with the playwright. The result of at least five years of combined reflection and experience, *Le Soulier* was completed in 1924.⁶⁵⁶ The first full publication was released in 1929 and a two-part edition of the complete text was available in the shops from January 1930.⁶⁵⁷ The initial response was of near silence from the public, and mostly mute shock from the critics, such as the oft-quoted comment in André Gide’s diary: ‘Achévé *Le Soulier de Satin* de Claudel: Consternant!’⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁶ A note from Claudel’s diary attests to this. ‘22 oct. Je mets l’Explicit Opus au bas du Soulier de satin commencé en 1919 à la suite d’une conversation avec Sert.’ Paul Claudel, *Journal I: introduction par François Varillon; texte établi et annoté par François Varillon et Jacques Petit (1904-1932)* (Gallimard, 1968), p. 647.

⁶⁵⁷ The first ‘Journée’ was published in *Le Roseau d’or* on 21 December 1925 and the complete text first appeared in a limited publication of four luxury volumes between 1928 and 1929.

⁶⁵⁸ Claudel, *Mémoires improvisés recueillis par Jean Amrouche* (Librairie Gallimard, 1954), p. 282. A long-standing mutual respect between the two was broken by Gide’s *Les Caves du Vatican* in 1914.

Although the three voices of Paul Souday, André Beaunier and Pierre Lasserre were most often raised in protest against Claudel's writing, 'Par une étrange coïncidence, les trois dates de publication du drame de Claudel (fragmentaire, monumentale, courante) marquent également la mort des trois détracteurs les plus attendus.'⁶⁵⁹ Beaunier and Lasserre were accorded the distinction of being ritually mocked in *Le Soulier* by means of the dull savant Don Léopold Auguste and the (barely disguised) Pedro de Las Vegas.⁶⁶⁰ The gap of almost fifteen years between publication and performance, as well as the passing away of significant opposition to his play, almost certainly facilitated a positive reception of *Le Soulier* in 1943.

Although Louis Jouvet showed an interest in staging the play in 1930, he was quite severely rebuffed by Claudel on account of the play's length and what Claudel termed a lack of authority and experience (on his own part) with the public.⁶⁶¹ Indeed, a certain amount of frustration was experienced by directors trying to work with Claudel's demanding and often unrealistic instructions.⁶⁶² This changed in 1937 when Claudel met Barrault at performances of Cervantes's *Numance*, directed by the latter. Their mutual interest in the physical respiration of poetry and views on 'total theatre' led to Barrault's bold request to stage *Tête d'or*, *Partage de Midi* and *Le Soulier de satin*.⁶⁶³ Their correspondence shows that Barrault was the 'acteur and metteur-en-scène that Claudel had been seeking to make his work known to the public.'⁶⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Claudel was extremely reticent about staging *Le Soulier* in its entirety, suggesting that just the first

⁶⁵⁹ Pierre Brunel, *'Le Soulier de satin' devant la critique; dilemme et controverses* (Lettres Modernes, 1964), p. 33.

⁶⁶⁰ Claudel, *Théâtre II: Édition revue et augmentée; textes et notices établis par Jacques Madaule et Jacques Petit* (Éditions Gallimard, 1965), pp. 791-99. Hereafter, quotations from the play (*SS*) come from this edition.

⁶⁶¹ Celia O'Donovan, 'Paul Claudel and Jean-Louis Barrault: The Collaboration and Relationship of Dramatist and Director' (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1986), p. 68.

⁶⁶² Letter from Dullin to Claudel, 18 July 1939. O'Donovan, p. 27

⁶⁶³ O'Donovan, p. 29.

⁶⁶⁴ O'Donovan, p. 49.

'Journée' be attempted by way of experiment, or an easier play. Whilst the outbreak of war was partly responsible for delaying the staging of *Le Soulier*, Claudel's own hesitation was also a significant factor.

A four-day reading of the play broadcast on Marseille Radio from the 30 April 1942 was decisive in fuelling Barrault's desire to stage it, in alerting the press to a future production and in testing Claudel's response. The latter's criticism was forthcoming, particularly regarding the actors' preparation and the music.⁶⁶⁵ However, he was clearly impressed by Barrault's interpretation and, ironically, by the fourth section (since this was to be used very little for the 1943 staged version).⁶⁶⁶ Barrault then revised the play for a performance of two three-hour parts, gaining permission from Claudel in June 1942, after which the two reviewed and reshaped the text extensively, discussing details for the music and costumes. Armed with his approval letter from the author, Barrault presented the new version to the Comédie-Française's reading committee.⁶⁶⁷ While the beginning was enthusiastically accepted, the board insisted that the whole be condensed into a single five-hour performance to be staged the following winter, or that the second part be staged only if the first proved successful.⁶⁶⁸

Therefore, a new version had to be written which would 'suit' the Comédie-Française. The third 'Journée' had met with resistance and Barrault suggested an adaptation, to which Claudel appended extra changes, notes and stage directions, before the Comédie-Française finally assented in December 1942. Only then could the composer and

⁶⁶⁵ The press seized upon the inappropriate diction ('débit') of the actors which they found misplaced for Claudel's (demanding) poetry. See *Le Mot d'Ordre*, 6 May 1942.

⁶⁶⁶ Barrault, in his memoirs, confides that the most endearing element of the play which first retained his interest was *Sept-Épées*, another important omission from the 1943 performance.

⁶⁶⁷ German border police at Tournus tore up the letter. See Barrault, *Réflexions sur le théâtre* (Jacques Vautrain, 1949), pp. 155-57, for an account of the incident and a facsimile of the reconstructed letter.

⁶⁶⁸ Only one actor remained opposed to the play. Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow*, trans. by Jonathan Griffin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 128.

set designer (Lucien Coutaud) be contacted, the décor and costumes be ordered and the sets created. Further delays were caused by the German censorship body making its decision about a visa by consulting the full-length text from 1929. This allowed for the possibility of (pro-Resistance) changes being made to the text without the Germans' knowledge, in a similar way – perhaps – to *Jeanne avec nous*.

The delay meant that the Comédie-Française actually recommended deferring *Le Soulier* and instead staging Claudel's *L'Annonce faite à Marie*. However, Claudel's fury and Barrault's pleas prompted Vaudoier to intervene on their behalf to persuade the committee to pursue the more ambitious project. Barrault was, at this stage, merely a member (*sociétaire*) and not yet an employee of the Comédie-Française. He claims to have threatened to resign if *Le Soulier* was not performed, and that the committee was sufficiently swayed by the fact that money had been obtained for the sets, which were already being prepared. Instead of working towards an April deadline, however, the premiere would have to wait until November 1943. Not only was the 'extra' time used to rehearse the technical aspects of each main role, required by the demanding text, but it also enabled a huge publicity campaign: 'The whole, whole, whole of Paris was there.'⁶⁶⁹

The autobiographical nature of Claudel's plays encourages critical readers to seek his voice, motivations and message in the dialogue of his principal characters.⁶⁷⁰ He later admitted being horrified at the thought of his *Tête d'or* being staged because he would see himself exposed to the public.⁶⁷¹ This was perhaps even more marked in *Le Soulier de satin* given the author's claims that, 'ce grand livre [...] résume tout mon art, toute ma pensée et

⁶⁶⁹ Barrault, p. 148. Barrault deemed detailed rehearsals necessary to compensate for the, 'peu d'entraînement qu'ils ont plastiquement' (letter to Claudel, 12 March 1943). For the rehearsal schedule, see 'L'Intégrale du *Soulier de satin*', *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault 100* (Éditions Gallimard, 1978), pp. 54-56.

⁶⁷⁰ Claudel, *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 292.

⁶⁷¹ Claudel, *Journal II: introduction par François Varillon; texte établi et annoté par François Varillon et Jacques Petit (1933-1955)* (Gallimard, 1969), p. 470, note 1: 'Barrault m'avait écrit; il voulait absolument monter Tête d'Or, mais ça me faisait horreur, n'est-ce pas [...] comme si c'était moi à vif.'

toute ma vie.⁶⁷² Interviewed by Jean Amrouche in the early 1950s, Claudel revealed that, ‘Il est certain que dans *Le Soulier de satin*, Rodrigue a beaucoup de mes idées à moi’.⁶⁷³ He suggested that his ‘*explicit opus mirandum*’ is like a mirror revealing the different aspects of his personality.⁶⁷⁴ He once ripped up a twenty-page spiritual diary for the same reason.

Mais parce que mes confessions, mes confidences, mon moi intime, je l’ai mis tout entier dans mon œuvre dramatique et lyrique. Cette œuvre, ma conversion, mes passions, mes écartèlements, mes variétés, c’est moi tout frais sanglant jusqu’au point où j’arrête cette histoire, qui est très exactement la quatrième journée du *Soulier de satin*.⁶⁷⁵

Some critics suggest that the play crowns all his earlier achievements in the theatre by bringing a resolution to personal questions and an ‘apaisement’ to wounds still smarting from his 1900-1905 affair with Rosalie Vetch, a Polish woman he had encountered on his travels.⁶⁷⁶ Though the complete edition of *Le Soulier* gives the dates of composition as Paris May 1919 – Tokyo December 1924, the manuscript shows additional changes from 1925, not to mention the heavily-edited stage version created in 1942 with Barrault which underwent revision during the rehearsal process in late 1943 before being published the following year.⁶⁷⁷ Although Claudel’s diary tends to eschew introspection, and he declined to write narrative forms of confession in a novel for example, occasional comments suggest that *Le Soulier* provided the author with understanding and a sense of joyful resolution.⁶⁷⁸

During the last rehearsals for the play, ‘[he] had understood his work: he had just, twenty

⁶⁷² *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 270.

⁶⁷³ *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 327.

⁶⁷⁴ This expression of finality seals the final page of *Le Soulier de satin* (SS, p. 948 and p. 1112) and marks the end of Claudel’s full-scale dramatic output.

⁶⁷⁵ Paul Claudel, *Supplément aux Œuvres complètes* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 4 volumes, 1990-1997), volume III, p. 296. See also Emmanuel Godo, *Paul Claudel: La vie au risque de la joie* (Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005), p. 47.

⁶⁷⁶ *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 269. Incidentally, the ‘lettre à Rodrigue’ that takes 10 years to find its addressee was inspired by this relationship: ‘Et je trouve sur ma table une lettre de [Rosalie Vetch]. Après 13 ans!’ *Journal I*, p. 383.

⁶⁷⁷ The third ‘Journée’ was lost in an earthquake in Japan (September 1923) and entirely rewritten by Claudel.

⁶⁷⁸ *Journal I*, p. 417. Claudel’s condemnation of the ‘un-Catholic’ novel form are addressed in Marie-Joseph Legros-Guers’ article, ‘Claudel par lui-même: un choix d’écriture révélateur’, *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 100.

years after writing it, rounded it off.’⁶⁷⁹ Interviews with Claudel tend to understate the complexity of *Le Soulier* with the typical calmness of a retrospective summary, but his investment in the text and its autobiographical nature are significant for this study.⁶⁸⁰

Assessing the narrative

It is difficult to outline *Le Soulier de satin* without doing a disservice to the variety of styles, language, characters and dramatic techniques. For the purpose of investigating potential pro-Resistance content in performances given during the Occupation, I will summarise the text of the 1944 publication that resulted from the Claudel-Barrault collaboration. In this, I am little helped by existing commentaries which tend to revert to the original edition for a more complete analysis of what is a more satisfyingly complex composition.⁶⁸¹ ‘[T]out de nos jours incite à abandonner [la version pour la scène] pour revenir à la version intégrale, sinon pour la représentation du moins pour l’étude et le plaisir.’⁶⁸² Although there are plenty of useful lists of the changes made to the 1929 version in order to adapt it for a five-hour staged performance, the only substantial presentation of the 1944 publication comes from Joseph Chiari. He offers no accompanying explanation of why he has chosen the latter version, how it deviates from the original, or even how it was received by the Parisian public in 1943. He nevertheless concludes that it is unconvincing and entirely lacking in dramatic tension.

⁶⁷⁹ Barrault, p. 147.

⁶⁸⁰ This argument is put forward by Michel Lioure, in *L’Esthétique dramatique de Paul Claudel* (Armand Colin, 1971), p. 476, relating particularly to the changes made by Claudel in 1943.

⁶⁸¹ Jean-Bertrand Barrère, *Claudel: Le destin et l’œuvre* (Société d’Édition d’Enseignement Supérieur, 1979), p. 217: ‘Telle qu’elle est, plutôt que dans la version mutilée et adaptée “pour la scène”, cette œuvre est non seulement la plus ample et la plus personnelle de l’auteur, elle est aussi, sans nul doute, le drame lyrique le plus original du théâtre du vingtième siècle et probablement le restera.’

⁶⁸² Michel Autrand, *Le Soulier de satin: Étude dramaturgique* (Genève: Éditions Champion-Slatkine, 1987), p. 134.

It is a strikingly shallow analysis of the play which demonstrates a curious misunderstanding of the secondary episodes.⁶⁸³ These provide a parallel to, and relief from, the core of frustrated love and costly sacrifice which dominate the play, especially in the shortened version for the stage. Chiari goes so far as to write off entire scenes, saying they ‘are of no importance’.⁶⁸⁴ Although some elucidation of his standpoint appears to come later when he writes of a ‘choice between accepting or refusing [C Claudel’s] theology as a prerequisite to the enjoyment of some of his creations’, one has the distinct impression that Chiari was present at a performance of the 1943 version and was trying in vain to unravel the play’s mysteries.⁶⁸⁵

Le Soulier de satin, in its reduced form, begins with the Annoncier entering dramatically, exchanging greetings with the orchestra members who are warming up the auditorium, and instructing the audience of the play’s character whilst – literally – setting the scene, which is the world. He describes the context, designating the relevant parts of the décor with his stick, and even gives a sample of the opening lines. At the beginning of the 1944 text, Barrault gives extremely detailed technical instructions which highlight the interplay between the words, gestures, music and décor; the last three all participating to bring the text to life.⁶⁸⁶

The inviting tone of the Annoncier – ‘Il s’exprime “naturellement”’ – is immediately brought into contrast by the ‘*diction poétique*’ of a Père Jésuite.⁶⁸⁷ Attached to the stump of a ship’s mast and surrounded by dead nuns, he pronounces an eloquent plea for his brother, Rodrigue, to come to salvation through the unquenched desire for a woman.

⁶⁸³ Joseph Chiari, *The Poetic Drama of Paul Claudel* (London: The Harvill Press, 1954), p. 112: ‘they do not add a jot to the drama, which is better without them.’

⁶⁸⁴ Chiari, p. 95.

⁶⁸⁵ Chiari, 105.

⁶⁸⁶ ‘Toute la scène dans sa plus grande largeur, est donc occupée et *vit* le texte.’ *SS*, p. 956.

⁶⁸⁷ *SS*, p. 956.

The boat sinks, décor arrives from above and the wings for a smooth scene change, and two men appear.

The original version, in ‘hopeful’ anticipation of the play one day being performed, emphasises that, ‘Il est essentiel que les tableaux se suivent sans la moindre interruption. [...] Les machinistes feront les quelques aménagements nécessaires sous les yeux mêmes du public pendant que l’action suit son cours.’⁶⁸⁸ Don Pélage is a retired judge of unimpeachable character who has married a much younger woman, Doña Prouhèze, whom he places in the care of Don Balthazar. Prouhèze soon appears in another part of the grounds of Pélage’s house where she is aggressively pursued from the other side of a hedge by the rebellious Don Camille, who invites her to join him at Mogador, a deserted Spanish outpost in North Africa. Not only is there a hint that Prouhèze’s heart belongs to someone other than her husband, as indicated by the Jesuit’s prayer, but Camille’s salvation through Prouhèze is also prophesied.

An exceptionally brief scene follows, featuring a secondary storyline with Doña Isabel and Don Luis who confirm their mutual love and fix a future meeting. Meanwhile, Prouhèze warns both her protectors, Balthazar and the statue of the Virgin Mary – to whom she entrusts her slipper of the play’s title and a symbolic prayer – that she will do everything in her power to escape their care to join Rodrigue, with whose soul she shares a mystical link.⁶⁸⁹ The King of Spain follows this train of thought by educating the spectator on the all-consuming passion of the play’s hero, Don Rodrigue, who is chosen to command the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Rodrigue finally appears in the next scene, evading the king’s orders, and in conversation with his Chinese servant, Isidore, who mocks his

⁶⁸⁸ SS, p. 663.

⁶⁸⁹ The play’s title may have been inspired by a poem entitled ‘À une Madone: ex-voto dans le goût espagnol’, in Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Flammarion, 1991), p. 104: ‘Je te ferai de mon Respect de beaux Souliers | De satin, par les pieds divins humiliés’.

master's obsession with Prouhèze and defies the waters of Christian baptism, to the annoyance of Rodrigue.

Scene eight introduces a brighter love theme with Doña Musique, on whose behalf Pélage, and now the Sergent Napolitain, are campaigning to find an appropriate husband. The sergeant shares his thoughts with Prouhèze's servant, the Nègresse Jobarbara, in a (rare) moment of comic relief featuring a chase worthy of pantomime. Prouhèze and Musique then share their respective love intrigues and the spectator learns that Prouhèze will be, for Rodrigue, 'Une Épée au travers de son cœur.'⁶⁹⁰ This metaphor is immediately translated into action as Rodrigue is injured in a tussle where, in coming to the rescue of Saint Jacques' statue on its annual pilgrimage, he kills Don Luis.

A Rumba melody from the play's overture returns to accompany the Nègresse's moonlight dance. She is surprised by Rodrigue's servant who announces his plan to engineer Prouhèze's escape from the inn where she is Balthazar's captive. The closing three scenes of the first 'Journée' return to the inn where Prouhèze is dressed like a man, her guardian angel keeping watch as she struggles to escape through thorn bushes represented by actors.⁶⁹¹ This is the realisation of her oath to the statue of the Virgin Mary: 'Je vous préviens que tout à l'heure [...] je vais tout mettre en œuvre contre vous! | Mais quand j'essayerai de m'élancer vers le mal, que ce soit avec un pied boiteux!'.⁶⁹² As Balthazar places his troops to guard the inn against the soldiers in search of Musique – diverted by Isidore to create cover for Prouhèze – he lets slip to L'Alfèrès his conflicting emotions regarding his beautiful captive whose escape he has facilitated by withdrawing the guard by the thorny ditch. The final scene sees Balthazar resigned to the siege,

⁶⁹⁰ SS, p. 992.

⁶⁹¹ SS, p. 995-97: 'les Épinex (personnages). [...] *Plastiquement, elle luttera trois fois contre les buissons épineux.*'

⁶⁹² SS, p. 976.

welcoming his death amongst an opulent feast of food and song provided by Isidore, who has just been arrested, while Musique, the Négresse and the Sergeant are seen sailing away in the distance.

After an aborted entr'acte, the Annoncier reappears to speed the play along, and a series of carefully coordinated stage movements, including an embarrassing false entry, leads to the second 'Journée' and a meeting between Pélage and Doña Honoria, Rodrigue's mother, who is tending her son's wound. Despite their loveless marriage, Pélage shows his faith in Prouhèze's virtue by sending her – on the king's orders – to command Mogador, with the renegade Camille as her lieutenant. He lucidly explains the incompatibility of the only two things Prouhèze is capable of giving Rodrigue – 'À la place du salut, vous ne pouvez lui donner que du plaisir' – in the hope of persuading her to flee.⁶⁹³

The cosmic, and physically commanding, presence of Saint Jacques (the name given to the Orion constellation which matches his outline) then dominates the stage as he traces the trajectory of Prouhèze and Rodrigue's boats en route to Africa, the latter chasing in vain against adverse winds. Pélage and the King of Spain then decide to send Rodrigue to deliver letters to Prouhèze advising her to return to Spain. They know she will instead accept her destiny to suffer in exile, while Rodrigue will be irrevocably pierced with desire, spurring him on to conquer the Americas. From this point it is understood that the love-struck heroes will be tempted almost beyond breaking point, but will choose to sacrifice earthly satisfaction for the sake of their respective spiritual missions.

Rodrigue shows momentary weakness in a conversation with his captain, who reminds him that Prouhèze ordered cannon fire against their boat so as *not* to be caught up by Rodrigue. Another timely intervention comes when the remains of the Père Jésuite's

⁶⁹³ SS, p. 1022.

shipwreck, the Santiago, knock against the side of Rodrigue's boat three times as a symbolic reminder that he should obey God's will. The next scene establishes Prouhèze's power over Camille and precedes a lyrical interlude confirming Musique's intuition: her idyllic man does indeed exist and has dreamed of her. The form of a dove on her shoulder is confirmation, and the two become one with nature as night falls.

A long confrontation between Rodrigue and Camille in an old torture chamber at Mogador ensues, and their identical shadows reveal their complementarity. Camille humiliates Rodrigue by presenting Prouhèze's refusal of the regal request, while Rodrigue declines to call her a definitive third time because, between salvation and women, 'Le choix est fait et je ne demande pas mieux que de vous laisser les femmes.'⁶⁹⁴ The scene is pregnant with Prouhèze's silent presence behind a curtain and the 1944 text contains a symbolic union of her shadow with Rodrigue's as a character (*L'Ombre double*) accusing the lovers for allowing an embrace that would leave its eternal mark but bring cruel separation in the present. To Claudel's dismay, the right effect of part-sung, part-spoken voices against the backdrop of a screen projection could not be achieved for the 1943 performances, and the scene was abandoned.⁶⁹⁵ However, Prouhèze and Rodrigue express in turn their unrequited love while the Moon hints at the eternal repercussions of their sacrifice and brings a foretaste of peace and joy to their hearts.

The Annoncier begins the second part of the play by filling the audience in on the time elapsed since the first, including the Catholics' victory over Protestant 'heretics' at the Montagne Blanche and the glorious conquests of Rodrigue, now Vice-Roi des Indes and further detested by the Spanish court. Humorous allusions are made to the enormous cast

⁶⁹⁴ SS, p. 1049.

⁶⁹⁵ 'Je regrette [...] surtout, surtout, surtout *L'Ombre Double*. [...] C'est vexant d'avoir échoué (la seule fois!) dans notre réalisation.' SS, 1469 (letter to Barrault, 9 October 1943).

Claudé originally had at his disposition, now clamouring in the wings to be selected. The Annoncier recounts the journey of the now fabled 'lettre à Rodrigue' – Prouhèze's plea for rescue passed from hand to hand around the globe. It ends up in the dusty jacket of an equally dry academic (Don Léopold Auguste), where it is discovered by Isabel and her husband Don Ramire, both of whom seek in vain the approval of Rodrigue. Rodrigue's hunger to possess the world, predicted by the king, inspires only hatred in his soldiers. This is evidenced by the following scene with Almagro, to whom he offers the land south of Lima in a similar gesture to the king's from the first 'Journée'.⁶⁹⁶

After Camille symbolically completes his wife Prouhèze's rosary with its missing bead, aware of the spiritual presence surrounding her, a key scene in the play is acted out between Prouhèze and her guardian angel, who is now visible to Prouhèze. It is revealed that Prouhèze must renounce Rodrigue and accept to die by his hand and for his salvation, because even her sinful desire – that is, love outside the sacred union of marriage – can serve God's purpose, as the epigraph Claudé attributes to Saint Augustin makes clear: 'Même le péché! Le péché aussi sert!'.⁶⁹⁷

The superficial nature of his military title, and Isabel's taunting imitation of Prouhèze's voice, amplify Rodrigue's despondency, though he is eventually prompted into action by the discovery of Prouhèze's letter. Despite arriving ten years late, it nevertheless causes him to leave for Mogador, cruelly dispossessing Don Ramire of vital artillery, money and troops. Meanwhile, Don Camille penetrates Prouhèze's motives, suggesting she expects reward for her temporal sacrifice by obtaining Rodrigue in the next life. As Rodrigue's boat waits below the sheer cliff of Mogador, negotiators are sent out to meet

⁶⁹⁶ SS, p. 1065: 'Prends ce bout de mon Amérique. Attrape-la par la queue. Je fais attention à toi.'

⁶⁹⁷ SS, p. 1073. The words '*Etiam peccata*' do not appear together in the appropriate context in Augustin's writings, and Barrère convincingly argues that Saint Thomas d'Aquin's analysis of Paul's Letter to the Romans, *in the light of* Augustin's own ideas, is a more likely source. Barrère, pp. 267-69.

him in a small craft, with Prouhèze on board. Claudel significantly revised this scene (initially a lengthy encounter between the ill-fated lovers) in which an ultimatum is offered to Rodrigue: ‘Allez-vous en [*sic*] et Don Camille conserve Mogador. [...] Si vous retirez votre flotte, il propose de me laisser partir avec vous.’⁶⁹⁸ Rodrigue holds Prouhèze responsible for his misfortune and, unable to bear the humiliation of accepting Camille’s proposition, resigns himself to the solitude of his sacrifice, symbolised by the figure of the cross made from the remains of the Père Jésuite’s boat.⁶⁹⁹

Their heart-rending separation is almost complete, after a final temptation from Prouhèze – ‘Un seul mot et je reste!’.⁷⁰⁰ First, however, knowing she will die in the blast of Mogador’s citadel at midnight to stop it falling into the hands of the Moors, Prouhèze gives her child, Doña Sept-Épées, to Rodrigue’s care. The play’s Épilogue traces Rodrigue’s fall from grace and subsequent humiliation in two short scenes. The King of Spain hides the failure of the Armada and pretends to offer the rule of England to Rodrigue, while the soldiers mock the sentiments of Sept-Épées’s touching letter to her ‘father’.⁷⁰¹ Much like Claudel’s literary hero, Rimbaud, Rodrigue has lost a leg in Japan and is now imprisoned on a boat to be sold as a slave to a gleanng nun, but he has the last laugh as a cannon announces Sept-Épées’s safe passage to the boat of her lover, the young Don Juan d’Autriche, who is destined to defeat Islamic forces at the Battle of Lepanto. Friar Léon, who previously married Prouhèze and Camille, provides nostalgia and words of comfort, hope and assurance of Rodrigue’s eternal destiny to close the play.

⁶⁹⁸ SS, p. 1092.

⁶⁹⁹ SS, p. 1098: ‘cette croix déserte, c’est la couche, toi et moi, qui nous était réservé.’

⁷⁰⁰ SS, p. 1099.

⁷⁰¹ Although Sept-Épées was born from the union between Prouhèze and Camille, even the latter acknowledges that she more closely resembles Rodrigue, who is considered to be her spiritual father.

The significance of changes made for the 1943 version

Whereas the original play was divided into four separate ‘acts’, in the manner of Golden-Age Spanish plays and Japanese Nô, the stage version couples the first two into a single part, running without a break. Only three scenes (out of twenty-eight) are completely cut, because they feature characters that neither reappear nor affect the main action. The majority of deleted lines are from lengthy monologues reflecting on psychological, mystical or historical themes. However, the second part, followed by an *Épilogue*, abandons the entire text of the original fourth ‘Journée’ with the sole exception of the final scene. Instead, it cursorily represents the most relevant events (scenes two, four, nine and ten) with mimed sequences following on quickly from each other, and using carefully coordinated lighting and the movements of a semi-transparent curtain. A similar scene, narrated by the *Annoncier*, Claudel’s self-appointed master of ceremonies, begins the third ‘Journée’, also telescoping four scenes of the original (one, two, four and six) into a light-hearted update of the leading protagonists’ adventures, much of which happens simultaneously.⁷⁰² In total, only eleven of twenty-four scenes are retained from the third and fourth ‘Journées’. Consequently, a bigger role – of presentation, mediation and comedy – is given to the *Annoncier*.

Claudel implied in the original text that many of the stage settings would be impossible to represent, but Barrault’s interpretation transformed this potential obstacle into an active participant of the drama. Self-mockery is evident when the *Annoncier* reads out the 1929 stage directions in desperation, declaring, ‘Je m’en lave les mains.’⁷⁰³ In essence, the stage version gives priority to passages which further the principal action, so the third ‘Journée’ is almost entirely devoted to elucidating the complex interactions

⁷⁰² SS, p. 1060. The author does not insist on intelligibility.

⁷⁰³ SS, p. 1036.

between Rodrigue, Prouhèze and Camille, whereas the original had also featured an enormous cast of saints and academics. The more the action progresses, the bigger the cuts become. Where the original version becomes more and more diverse, the stage version is dramatically condensed in order to follow the various peregrinations of the leading characters.⁷⁰⁴ Just five characters have lines in the stage version's *Épilogue* as opposed to the (minimum of) thirty-three listed in the original fourth 'Journée'. The dimensions are necessarily reduced and the succession of scenes is made more efficient; for example, Barrault reversed scenes nine and ten in the first 'Journée' in order to maintain the set from scene eight.

To all intents and purposes, this new version of the play was designed as an expert interpretation of how to achieve the technical and practical requirements of the script for live performance. It is an invaluable historical source because it documents the process of preparing a play and editing a text for performance in occupied Paris. According to Barrault, *Le Soulier de satin* offered an opportunity to realise his 'rêve du *théâtre total*.'⁷⁰⁵ In short, this is when all the performance elements of music, mime, props, décor and speech are accorded equal importance and contribute to forming a single spectacle.⁷⁰⁶ That so much space is devoted to the characters' movements, diction, attitudes, sounds and silences, is indicative of a desire to explain and communicate the meaning of the text to the spectators. Indeed, three pages of the 1944 Pléiade edition are given over to instructions for décor, lighting, music, atmosphere, interactions and gestures that precede the first spoken words of the play.

⁷⁰⁴ Olivier Quéant, *Images de France*, December 1943.

⁷⁰⁵ Barrault, *Réflexions sur le théâtre*, p. 160 (author's original emphasis).

⁷⁰⁶ The influence of Japanese Nô theatre, which Claudel attended during his time as ambassador in Tokyo, can also be detected: 'The Nô is the union of word, gesture and music to express a metaphysical idea.' O'Donovan, p. 25.

Both playwright and stage director went to great lengths to entertain Parisian audiences by making what was initially a mammoth, complex and mystical work into a (relatively) concise and fast-paced play redolent of the cinema. Novel elements were not wanting, according to Barrault, who was thrilled to see the public accept their experimentation as perfectly normal.⁷⁰⁷ The fact that the sea was portrayed by a chorus of swaying actors, Rodrigue sleeping on his boat by leaning his head on a miniature model, and Prouhèze sleeping in her tent by a tiny white frame covering her feet, shows how much the project's success depended on the audience's imagination and the theatre's power of suggestion.⁷⁰⁸ Indeed Claudel later reflected that the 'habilité de l'ingénieur dramatique' was responsible for the sustained attention of the spectators for five hours; 'et le public – j'en ai reçu des échos de tous les côtés – n'a, à aucun moment, été fatigué'.⁷⁰⁹ However, this opinion is by no means universally accepted. According to Henri Amouroux, the audience returned to the theatre after a bomb alert, 'pour ne l'abandonner qu'à 18 h. 40, fatigués, scandalisés, enthousiasmés, partagés entre la crainte de passer pour des imbéciles ou pour des esthètes.'⁷¹⁰ Le Boterf also records one incident of a particularly hostile – and highly ranked – member of the audience falling asleep during the performance: 'C'est peu après [le début] qu'Abel Bonnard s'endort dans son avant-scène et se réveille à 18h40 sous le vacarme des bravos.'⁷¹¹

A striking claim was made 60 years later about Olivier Py's staging of the complete version of *Le Soulier de satin* in 2003: 'les spectateurs n'eurent pas de mal à ressentir que

⁷⁰⁷ Barrault, *Réflexions sur le théâtre*, p. 155. '[C]es conventions nouvelles [...] non seulement n'ont pas choqué mais sont passées pour ainsi dire inaperçues. Elles n'étaient relevées ni par les applaudissements, ni par une désapprobation.'

⁷⁰⁸ *SS*, p. 1011: 'au théâtre nous manipulons le temps comme un accordéon, à notre plaisir, les heures durent et les jours sont escamotés. Rien de plus facile que de faire marcher plusieurs temps à la fois dans toutes les directions.'

⁷⁰⁹ *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 284.

⁷¹⁰ Amouroux, p. 468.

⁷¹¹ Le Boterf, p. 161.

durant les dix heures de la représentation, l'ennui était absent: force *épique* de l'œuvre.'⁷¹² Celia O'Donovan collected various eye-witness testimonies from theatre professionals active in 1943, including that of Jacques Dacqmire.⁷¹³ He also affirmed that the public was not deterred by the length of the play: 'Le spectacle durait fort longtemps, de longues heures et les spectateurs se pressaient des heures avant l'ouverture des guichets pour avoir une place dans la Comédie-Française.'⁷¹⁴

According to Olivier Quéant in the December 1943 issue of *Images de France*, almost the entire cast of the Comédie-Française was mobilised for *Le Soulier de satin*; that is, thirty-one actors.⁷¹⁵ While it may be seen as a mitigating factor that so many French people were involved in the production of *Le Soulier*, it has been argued that the play was toned down in order to adapt it for the Comédie-Française.⁷¹⁶ In an insightful article examining the political resonances of *Le Soulier* in comparison with Claudel's other writings and activities from the Occupation, Christopher Flood weighs the effect of losing much of the text from the third 'Journée' which contains (implied) criticism of German values and reflections on the First World War.⁷¹⁷ This seemingly minor reflection was sparked by Claudel's categorical denial to an interviewer from *La Gerbe* that the Great War had influenced the writing of *Le Soulier*.⁷¹⁸ Flood is not convinced, and expounds a couple of passages from the play which appear to contradict Claudel's statement, though he

⁷¹² Anne Ubersfeld, *Paul Claudel, poète du xx^e siècle* (Actes Sud, 2005), p. 154.

⁷¹³ Dacqmire was the stand-in for the Père Jésuite (Maurice Donneaud), and later played the Ange gardien.

⁷¹⁴ O'Donovan, appendix V, p. 291. See also *L'Illustration*, 11 December 1943: 'on ne trouve ici qu'une appréciation sans doute insuffisante d'une œuvre qui, même ainsi réduite, outrepassa singulièrement, à tous points de vue, la mesure commune de ce que nous sommes habitués à voir et à entendre dans une salle de théâtre, fût-ce la première de France.'

⁷¹⁵ *Le Cri du peuple*, 2 December 1943: 'Si le tout-Paris était dans la salle, tout le "Français" – ou presque – était sur la scène.'

⁷¹⁶ Barrère, p. 214: 'n'est-ce pas que le texte original ne lui paraissait pas assez adapté à la scène d'un théâtre comme la Comédie-Française?'

⁷¹⁷ See in particular the speech of the Saxons' spiritual guardian, Saint Boniface, in the first scene of the third 'Journée' of the complete version of *Le Soulier de satin*. SS, pp. 782-90.

⁷¹⁸ *La Gerbe*, 25 November 1943.

concludes that the issue constitutes a moot point given that the stage version ‘had removed material which had undoubtedly reflected the impact of the Great War.’⁷¹⁹

However, several other commentators refer to the text as emasculated or amputated, with the negative connotations that such words imply.⁷²⁰ When assessing the loss of relief in the stage version – originally provided by frequent comic and burlesque passages, which necessarily amplify the tragic tension by contrast – Pierre Ganne argues that the playwright’s consent to the cuts does not automatically constitute a justification. ‘Que Claudel lui-même ait prêté la main à une pareille réduction n’est pas un argument décisif: ce ne serait pas la première fois qu’un créateur *mutile* son enfant sous prétexte de lui faciliter la marche...’⁷²¹

Interestingly, Claudel never claimed that his cuts in any way betrayed the spirit of the play, despite his – perhaps paradoxical – insistence on the corresponding lack of a ‘côté de joie profonde [qui] paraît essentiel à l’esprit lyrique, et je dirai même à l’esprit de la création.’⁷²² However, in his March 1944 speech for the Cheminots gala, organised by the actress Marie Bell in recognition of the dedication of France’s railway workers – who played a significant part in Resistance activity, Claudel referred to ‘les coupures impitoyables pratiquées sur *le Soulier de satin*’ of which he was the self-declared ‘opérateur’ and ‘victime’.⁷²³ A decade after the premiere, he nevertheless expressed his opinion that the cuts did not detract from the main themes of the play.⁷²⁴

⁷¹⁹ Flood, p. 26.

⁷²⁰ Alain Baudot, “‘Le Soulier de satin’ est-il une anti-tragédie?”, *Études Françaises*, 5 (May 1969), p. 128: ‘Et pourtant l’auteur ne semble pas s’être trop formalisé de ces amputations.’

⁷²¹ *Les Critiques de notre temps et Claudel; présentation par André Blanc* (Éditions Garnier Frères, 1970), p. 126 (my emphasis).

⁷²² *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 286.

⁷²³ *SS*, p. 1476.

⁷²⁴ *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 285: ‘De sorte que vous ne considérez pas, après tout, que ce soit une amputation grave, et que vous demeurez satisfait des représentations du *Soulier*?’ (interview with Jean Amrouche).

Ambiguous lines or names provoking public outcry at Comédie-Française performances were quickly stamped out by the Germans, as I demonstrated in the opening chapter. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Claudel's text also required revising in order to avoid upsetting the Germans: 'il [Claudel] a revu pour la représentation de 1944 [sic] ce texte d'abord conçu avec plus de liberté.'⁷²⁵ A sample of the reviews from 1943, and their principal subjects of praise and criticism will now be examined for their insight into, and influence on, the first interpretations of *Le Soulier* and its (unexpected) popularity.

The reception among spectators and the press

While the French theatre-going public was attracted to *Le Soulier*, quite possibly because of its unusual length and unconventional style, and almost certainly because of the extensive publicity preceding the premiere, the press needed some persuading.⁷²⁶ It would have been ill-advised to deny the play's success, or attempt to cover up the enthusiasm of the spectators, though some journalists were ready to criticize Claudel, at least on aesthetic grounds. The reticence of many may be attributed to reverence for the Catholic poet, as if no challenge to his reputation as a genius could respectfully be made.⁷²⁷ Those who did find fault with *Le Soulier* were perhaps in the (excluded) minority and there are clear indications from sceptics that the press campaign was cunning in alienating Claudel's detractors.

⁷²⁵ Barrère, p. 214.

⁷²⁶ Amouroux, p. 468.

⁷²⁷ *L'Illustration*, 11 December 1943, and *Ondes*, 12 December 1943.

Foremost among them was Alain Laubreaux, who was furious at being refused a seat for the dress rehearsal of *Le Soulier*.⁷²⁸ However, one may advance that the play's greatest achievement was to compel even the most anti-Claudelian critics to admit that the performance was a triumph.⁷²⁹ This was the case for the reviewer of *Voix française*, the title of whose article reflects the concessions he felt obliged to make.⁷³⁰ For those familiar with the complexities of the 1929 text, it must understandably have been a shock to see the public engage so well with the play.

For the handful of critics who castigated the play, a reluctant acknowledgement was nevertheless made of its grandeur. Laubreaux, for instance, admitted that the writing was 'parcouru d'étranges beautés', despite his dislike of Claudel's language and style, which he accuses of combining the worst of Hugo and Dumas *fils* whilst unrelentingly assaulting the spectator with his theology.⁷³¹ This idea was taken up by other critics who recognised the richness of Claudel's poetry but suggested it provided unnecessary ornamentation to truths expressed more effectively and simply by the Catholic catechism.⁷³² However, another critic who utterly opposed Claudel's views both discerned and readily complemented beauty in the play: 'J'avoue que, personnellement, toute cette morale m'est odieuse. [...] Et puis après? *Le Soulier de Satin* est de taille à se passer de ma sympathie, ou de la vôtre.'⁷³³ It seems *Le Soulier*'s scope, visual impact and language were persuasive in such admissions.

If sharing Claudel's Catholicism was not a prerequisite to appreciating *Le Soulier*, in direct contradiction of Chiari's analysis, still less was understanding its intricacies. "Je

⁷²⁸ *Je suis partout*, 3 and 10 December 1942.

⁷²⁹ Barrault quotes 'a certain eminent person, with a considerable following at that time, who exclaimed, in the auditorium: "*La vache! Il a gagné!*"'. Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow*, p. 148.

⁷³⁰ Daniel Halévy, 'Analyse d'un succès', 18 February 1944. He was most surprised by the play's *popularity*.

⁷³¹ *Je suis partout*, 10 December 1943.

⁷³² *Combat*, 22 January 1944.

⁷³³ Claude Jamet, *Notre Combat*. The *Bulletin de la Société Paul Claudel* 15, pp. 8-11, abridges 1943 reviews.

n’y comprends pas grand-chose, mais je trouve cela absolument magnifique”, fit bientôt le tour du théâtre. Nombreux furent ceux qui la prirent à leur compte, trouvant qu’elle pouvait refléter assez honorablement leur propre pensée.⁷³⁴ The performers counted themselves among those who seized little of the play’s profound substance. ‘La signification de la pièce dépasse de beaucoup les acteurs qui la joue.’⁷³⁵ In fact, it seemed as if quite a few reviewers had failed to understand some of the crucial elements of the play, deceived by its apparent disunity.⁷³⁶ Some suggested that Doña Musique was superfluous to the plot and that there was too much comic contrast, despite the huge cuts made to the buoyant fourth ‘Journée’. This seems to me to constitute a gross misunderstanding of *Le Soulier*, as the spontaneous, joyful and liberated spirit of Musique provides an essential counterbalance to what is a largely oppressive story of frustrated love (the two heroes meet in only one scene).⁷³⁷

Perturbed perhaps by its lack of obvious structure and the epic nature of its verse, ‘La plupart s’obstinaient à juger l’œuvre mal construite, dispersée.’⁷³⁸ The sheer diversity of registers, settings, styles and characters was too much for some critics, who variously concluded that Claudel treated his theme too lightly, provided needless proliferation or had quite simply failed to compose an orderly work of art.⁷³⁹ It is revealing that the majority of reviews and personal reactions recorded for posterity admit to being overwhelmed by the epic scale and elusive poetry of the play. This might have been a fundamental weakness of

⁷³⁴ *Candide*, 12 December 1943.

⁷³⁵ Baudot, p. 130. Barrault recalls that an (unnamed) ‘sublime actor’ admitted he did not understand *Le Soulier* at all, which did not prevent him putting on a superb performance. *Memories for Tomorrow*, p. 128.

⁷³⁶ Claudel does not mind: ‘Si l’ordre est le plaisir de la raison, le désordre est le délice de l’imagination. [...] Il faut que tout ait l’air provisoire, en marche, bâclé, incohérent, improvisé dans l’enthousiasme!’ . *SS*, p. 952.

⁷³⁷ Claudel claims the comic passages and Musique’s character are vital: ‘une espèce de fusée, de rire, de joie, de bonheur qui s’élance du milieu de cette histoire assez sombre.’ *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 274 and p. 279.

⁷³⁸ ‘Le Soulier de satin et la critique, 1943-1963’, *Bulletin de la Société Paul Claudel* 15, pp. 8-11.

⁷³⁹ *Action française*, *L’Illustration* and *Méridien*, January and February 1944.

the performance; it was almost impossible to identify with such a lofty subject, the price of popularity was confusion and a veil was drawn over the discernment of those present.

It is hardly surprising that Claudel should comment solely on the ‘Article enthousiaste de *Candide* (Claude Roy) sur *Le Soulier de satin*.’⁷⁴⁰ One of the few, along with Robert Brasillach, to perceive the deliberate shape of the work and the pervasive symbolism of the sea, Roy devoted several articles to discussion of the play. Although the postwar claims of playwright and director significantly exaggerated opposition from the press, they still contain a germ of truth. The reviewers juggled genuine doubts about *Le Soulier*’s dramatic potential with recognition of Claudel’s ability.⁷⁴¹ In any case, the first performances caused a sensation; this prompts a focus on specific details in the 1944 text that may have added to its success and led commentators to speak of ‘spiritual Resistance’.

It is important to consider this term in detail. As mentioned in my first chapter, the French theatre-going public was looking for a morale boost, provided by common ideals and a reaffirmation of their national pride. It seems to me that patriotic and ‘spiritual’ values are conflated in such interpretations. Just as Guitry resurrected great French historic figures on the stage to remind the nation of its heights of glory, so *Le Soulier* was the result of a collaboration between an established French poetic playwright and former diplomat, a young French actor and *metteur en scène*, a French set designer, a (Swiss) French composer and the country’s biggest national theatre company. All in all, this was a very French project which overcame obstacles created by the war situation, such as material shortages, bomb alerts, the evening curfew, the German censorship and the presence of the

⁷⁴⁰ Claudel, *Journal II*, p. 469. The article in question appeared in *Candide*, 20 December 1943.

⁷⁴¹ *L’École et la Vie*, 8 January 1944: ‘Paul Claudel n’est pas, ne peut pas être un homme de théâtre; le représenter, c’est l’amputer.’ Thierry Maulnier, *Action française*, 12 February 1944: ‘des dons d’artiste que nul ne conteste et qui gêne [les spectateurs] plus d’une fois.’

occupier in the theatre itself. Perhaps *Le Soulier de satin* remained in the memories of 1943 spectators because it was, ‘la proclamation au milieu de la guerre du génie français’.⁷⁴²

Further examples of the ‘spiritual’ benefit of *Le Soulier* can be found in the individual testimonies of those who were encouraged by its message of hope and triumphal resolution. Claudel’s diary records a couple of such instances. ‘Pierre Devaux ancien prisonnier q[ui] me parle du bien énorme que fait mon œuvre dans les camps de prisonniers.’⁷⁴³ As early as 1940, Claudel received a letter of appreciation from, ‘Une demoiselle Cassal [qui] m’écrit pour me remercier du bien q[ue] lui a fait le *Soulier de Satin*.’⁷⁴⁴ It seems that the noble suffering of the main characters gave rise to a strong sense of empathy from contemporary audiences. ‘[Ils] étaient peut-être les confidents naturels de la douleur d’un peuple qui avait besoin de s’assurer de sa grandeur passée pour reprendre confiance en lui-même.’⁷⁴⁵

Contrasting interpretations of *Le Soulier de satin*

There is a striking consensus among modern commentators as to the most salient theme of *Le Soulier*, particularly for the stage version, which intensifies the plot by paring away many of the comical and lyrical interludes. Hindsight, and the proliferation of analyses of *Le Soulier de satin* since the Occupation, have somewhat tempered the criticisms in the press from 1943-1944 that there was a distracting diversity and an overly complex structure rejecting the sacred Unities of classical French theatre. I find this kind of judgment to be mistaken, particularly given that so many of the parallel scenes (of comic

⁷⁴² Ubersfeld, p. 153.

⁷⁴³ Claudel, *Journal II*, p. 479. This comment appears between two notes about *Le Soulier* (performances reduced by electricity cuts and Claudel’s speech for the Gala des Chemins de Fer organised by Marie Bell), so one may reasonably assume that it is this work Claudel is referring to in particular.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁷⁴⁵ Carolyn Evans, p. 8.

relief) were removed for the performance. Furthermore, the clear thread of Prouhèze's and Rodrigue's sacrifice is evident throughout the play and is not only mirrored by minor subplots, but presents a model of altruism: 'Car [Rodrigue] est de ceux-là qui ne peuvent se sauver qu'en sauvant toute cette masse qui prend leur forme derrière eux'.⁷⁴⁶ According to Dussane, this propensity towards abnegation in the face of serious temptation and oppression reflects the values of the Resistance:

En 1943, la guerre clandestine ne pouvait plus être ignorée, même de ceux qui n'y participaient point. On savait déjà les séparations, les héroïsmes, les immolations. [...] Le sacrifice héroïque de Prouhèze et de Rodrigue devenait le symbole de tous ceux dont on ne pouvait ouvertement parler.⁷⁴⁷

Certainly the idea of overcoming extreme temptation to give up hope or take an easier path is a strong element of the play and, while the main characters make human errors and are subject to moments of weakness, they surpass themselves in their ultimate sacrifice. In the light of the heroic individual acts of the Maquis, for instance, Dussane sees an edifying parallel in *Le Soulier*: 'le dépassement était l'essentiel et tous s'en repaissaient'.⁷⁴⁸

I find it difficult to equate the two as easily as Dussane because such sentiments, although located in the play, had no direct equivalent in terms of Resistance action. Nothing in the dialogue suggests a particular individual attitude towards either the Occupation of France in general, or the Germans and Vichy in particular. In addition, Rodrigue and Prouhèze are unmistakably portrayed as exceptional characters well beyond the reach of normal citizens and elevated to an uncommon level of spiritual awareness. It cannot convincingly be said that they offer an example which might relate to the audience's specific preoccupations.

⁷⁴⁶ SS, p. 959.

⁷⁴⁷ Dussane, p. 44.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

On the other hand, given the context of a defeated France, the closing line of the play can hardly have failed to stir the – doubly – ‘captive’ French audiences of 1943.⁷⁴⁹ Despite being unchanged from 1924, this joyful cry of hope must surely have gained new overtones of optimism and defiance in occupied Paris. Barrault was of this opinion when he described the final preparations for *Le Soulier*: ‘the rehearsal ended on the irresistible emotion of the final words: “*Délivrance aux âmes captives.*” When I think of France at that moment – what a line!’⁷⁵⁰ When the King of Spain describes the kind of man he needs to conquer the Americas, France could easily be substituted, in the mind of the spectator, for Rodrigue: ‘Il me faut une âme absolument incapable d’être étouffée, il me faut un tel feu qu’il consume en un instant toutes les tentations comme de la paille, | Nettoyé pour toujours de la cupidité et de la luxure.’⁷⁵¹ Certainly, when Claudel talked with hindsight about the main thrust of the play, he evoked the relevance in 1943 of a sacrifice needed in the present in order to earn a reward in the future.⁷⁵²

The fate of other characters in the play has already been shown to be dependent on the sacrifices of Rodrigue (and Prouhèze), but so – implicitly – is the fate of the spectator. The Annoncier’s confidential ‘Fixons, je vous prie, mes frères, les yeux...’ invites the audience to participate in the action and share the emotions of its principal characters.⁷⁵³ Soon afterwards, the Père Jésuite prays not only for Rodrigue, but also for ‘cette multitude avec lui qu’il implique obscurément’.⁷⁵⁴ Frequent emphasis is placed on the theatricality of the play, to the extent where the specific location in time (the sixteenth or seventeenth century) and place (‘L’auberge de X’ or ‘Nous sommes dans la Sierra Quelque-chose’) is

⁷⁴⁹ SS, p. 1112.

⁷⁵⁰ Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow*, p. 147.

⁷⁵¹ SS, p. 1028.

⁷⁵² *Mémoires improvisés*, p. 279: ‘Toute l’œuvre est basée sur un sentiment de triomphe, d’enthousiasme, d’être venu au bout d’une situation très difficile.’

⁷⁵³ SS, p. 956.

⁷⁵⁴ SS, p. 959.

less important.⁷⁵⁵ The Annoncier seeks the complicity of the audience members: ‘Cette soupe à la pierre, Madame l’assistance, Monsieur le Public, c’est celle que nous allons vous faire manger comme dessert à ce frugal banquet et dont votre imagination aura à fournir les principaux frais.’⁷⁵⁶ He emphasises the superficiality of names and historical accuracy when given the task of presenting Prouhèze to the audience: ‘Maintenant, je vous donne la permission de vous amener Doña Prouhèze. (*Fausse sortie.*) Quel nom! Comme ça lui donne un petit air vraisemblable!’⁷⁵⁷ The kings of Spain are not given first names and titles are just for show: ‘je fais le Vice-Roi.’⁷⁵⁸

According to Alain Baudot, such deliberate attempts to show the mechanics of the theatre and emphasise the element of illusion end up involving the spectator even more. The latter is invited time and again by author and actors to participate and knows that the superficial elements of time, place, costume and names are not as important as the soul which they mask. He proposes that the willingness of the author to reveal the artificial nature of all theatrical elements actually – and paradoxically – persuades the spectator of the truth of what he sees on the stage.

La vraie vie n’est donc plus absente, dans *Le Soulier de satin*, mais *représentée*, c’est-à-dire rendue véritablement présente. Et si le théâtre n’existe plus, rien n’est permis. Nous qui sommes tous ces “hommes assemblés” autour de Rodrigue “dans l’obscurité” (III, xiii, p. 839), nous prenons part à sa destinée, car nous avons été invités à en être, non pas les spectateurs, mais les témoins. Cette vie qui se joue est la nôtre aussi.⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵⁵ SS, p. 986 and p. 1010.

⁷⁵⁶ SS, p. 1103. The Annoncier’s role bears close resemblance to the chorus of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*: ‘For ‘tis your thoughts that must now deck our kings. [...] And eke out our performance with your mind’ (prologue to act III). See also ‘*Le Soulier de satin* devant le public’, SS, pp. 1478-9.

⁷⁵⁷ SS, p. 1011. When Rodrigue’s mother mistakes her entrance at the beginning of the second ‘Journée’, the Annoncier is busy setting the scene: ‘Je vous présente la maman de Don Rodrigue. [...] Doña Quelque-chose... Honoria vous va-t-il?’. SS, p. 1010.

⁷⁵⁸ SS, p. 1078.

⁷⁵⁹ Baudot, p. 130.

In my view, Baudot does not correctly define the source of the audience's identification with the play. True life is not present through the artifice of theatre; rather, the world is shown to be as illusory or absurd as the process of theatre. The technique of revealing the artificial nature of the theatrical illusion already had a long history on the French stage. In *Le Soulier*, the complicity between actors and audience is created through the inviting tone of the Annoncier and the familiar plight of the leading characters, forced by higher authorities to make extraordinary sacrifices. Given the circumstances of 1943, Rodrigue's fate seemed to take on significance for the masses – that is, the French nation – and the possibility of audience identification was surely increased.⁷⁶⁰

It would of course be absurd to suggest that each line had direct relevance to the 1940s but, in addition to the Annoncier's role as mediator, mention is briefly made of the unusual circumstances of the Occupation. Using the analogy of the 'soupe à la pierre' to describe the play itself (a necessarily shortened 'frugal banquet'), the Annoncier asks the spectators to use their imagination to complete the feast, 'puisque le Métro imminent nous refuse le recours à des victuailles que l'auteur tenait pour vous toutes préparées. Bonsoir!'.⁷⁶¹ These words are an addition to the original text and provide an unusually explicit reference to the material restrictions of the Occupation. His 'ton naturel', and his interaction with both audience and performers, coaxes the spectator into his confidence.

The Frère Léon's final blessing, the last words to be heard by the audience, are thus by implication applicable to each spectator: 'Délivrance aux âmes captives!'.⁷⁶² Jacques Madaule considers that 'ce dernier mot résume tout le drame', and I am insisting rather heavily on this closing exclamation because it seems relevant to anyone who felt

⁷⁶⁰ Claudel, *Journal I*, p. 516, note 8. Claudel often used images to personify the French nation. The prow of Rodrigue's boat in *Le Soulier de satin*, for example; in one scene, it takes up the entire right side of the stage.

⁷⁶¹ SS, p. 1103.

⁷⁶² SS, p. 1112.

imprisoned by the German occupier and could therefore feel heartened by its sentiment.⁷⁶³ Just after the fiftieth consecutive performance of *Le Soulier*, Claudel wrote a short article examining why the public had been filling the Comédie-Française to bursting point over the previous four months. He suggests that the play allowed them to abandon their daily worries and be part of a different world of his own creation.

[Ce] pouvoir d'attraction, il me semble que le drame lui-même l'exerce sur cette multitude de gens, hommes et femmes, ici amenés de tous les coins de la France et de tous les rangs de la Société. Une espèce de vacuum opère. Tous ces êtres ont abdiqué leurs préoccupations et leur personnalité. Ils ont renoncé à la parole en faveur de celle du poète. Il n'y a plus que silence et attention, un étrange état de sensibilité collective et de communication magnétique.⁷⁶⁴

However, there are dangers inherent in equating such complicity with a 'theatre of resistance'. Firstly, the audience at the premiere was hardly an eclectic mix of social classes, as only the Paris elite was invited. Secondly, subsequent 1943 audiences contained many German officers in addition to the French people gathered in the Comédie-Française. In Le Boterf's list of the huge array of society's most unlikely bedfellows present among the spectators of later performances, ranging from black market dealers to clergy, women of questionable virtue to government representatives, the words 'des hauts dignitaires allemands' jump out from the page.⁷⁶⁵

A somewhat embarrassing anecdote is reported by the same author who documents Claudel's (fourteen) curtain calls, at the end of which, 'Claudel ne s'aperçoit pas que la salle s'est vidée et qu'il ne reste plus qu'une poignée d'officiers allemands goguenards, applaudissant comme cent afin d'assister à son manège'.⁷⁶⁶ The irony of the image can

⁷⁶³ Madaule, p. 474.

⁷⁶⁴ SS, p. 1477.

⁷⁶⁵ Le Boterf, p. 160.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 160-61.

hardly be lost on a modern commentator examining claims made by Claudel and Barrault, in particular that, ‘It seemed as if the vital strength of the French was arising again, on their national stage, under the noses of the Germans’.⁷⁶⁷

Thirdly, even if a sense of common experience and complicity had been shared, there is a huge step from acknowledging a warm reception to identifying a specifically pro-Resistance content or ‘message’ universally accepted by the French and, consequently, invisible (or meaningless) to the Germans present. However, what was undoubtedly unique about *Le Soulier* during the Occupation is that it offered, in the place of a Greek model of crushing destiny bringing death without hope, ‘Une tragédie sur la joie’.⁷⁶⁸ The last words of *Le Soulier* are a cry of triumph and we are fully assured, by means of prophetic lines throughout the play, that Rodrigue (and Camille) will be saved by Prouhèze’s sacrifice.⁷⁶⁹ Thus the French could somehow, like Rodrigue, discern an ineffable sense of calm joy and freedom.⁷⁷⁰

Anne Ubersfeld was present at a 1943 performance and recalls the atmosphere: ‘Il faut avoir vu la ferveur des spectateurs, leur attention sans faille.’ But she goes further, giving her full support to Claudel’s explanation of *Le Soulier*’s success.

Claudé écrit en 1946 à Jean-Louis Vaudoyer à propos du *Soulier*: ‘L’immense succès de la pièce fut certainement dû en partie à la joie qu’eut le public français de voir réaliser au milieu des ténèbres glacées de l’occupation ennemie une œuvre de joie, d’espérance et de beauté.’ Il a mille fois raison. [...] Mon souvenir personnel l’atteste.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁶⁷ Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow*, p. 148.

⁷⁶⁸ Letter from Barrault to Claudel, 26 April 1939.

⁷⁶⁹ ‘Les voies directes de Dieu, le temps est venu pour lui [Rodrigue] qu’il commence à les fouler. [...] J’ai fini ma tâche avec toi. Au revoir, sœur chérie, dans la lumière éternelle!’ (Ange gardien). *SS*, 1075-6.

⁷⁷⁰ *SS*, p. 1110: ‘Vous comprenez ce que je disais quand tout à l’heure j’ai ressenti obscurément que j’étais libre?’.

⁷⁷¹ Ubersfeld, p. 153.

Perhaps such an appreciation has overtones of a shared Catholic faith which, in this instance, is evoked in the adjectives employed by the author. The overall experience referred to is certainly one of spiritual exaltation.

The various critical judgments of *Le Soulier de satin* raise the extremely contentious issue of whether it can be considered acceptable to bend to German rule by accepting their conditions for performance, specifically the visits of their *Schillertheater* company to the Comédie-Française.⁷⁷² Indeed, in March 1943, only a few months before the premiere of *Le Soulier*, the German theatre company performed *Kabale und Liebe*, which for some constituted a serious stain on French history. ‘Des invitations ont été adressées au gratin de la collaboration et aux plus grandes vedettes de la capitale. [...] Ce festival d’amitié franco-allemande.’⁷⁷³ A second visit occurred in mid-November 1943, just two weeks before *Le Soulier*. Given that the Comédie-Française had to collaborate closely with the *Propagandastaffel* and submit to Vichy’s cultural body – the Administration des Beaux Arts, it has been said that they were simply a showcase for the Germans, whose discretion was largely responsible for allowing French plays to be performed at all.⁷⁷⁴

Significantly, the staff of the Comédie-Française was put on trial at the Liberation for allowing it to be run by the occupying forces.⁷⁷⁵ At this time, Claudel was listed as a member of the (formerly clandestine) Comité national des écrivains (CNE). On 28 May 1946, this organisation passed a motion to expel any member who would accept the candidature of ‘un écrivain collaborateur’, and they were opposed to Vaudoyer’s admission to the Académie-Française on the grounds that, ‘[il] mit la première scène française à la

⁷⁷² Their 1941 visit was the first time the Comédie-Française had ever featured a foreign work in its original language. Fuchs-Betteridge, p. 90. See also *Les Nouveaux Temps*, 15 February 1941.

⁷⁷³ Le Boterf, pp. 126-27.

⁷⁷⁴ Flood, p. 24. See also the detailed memoirs of R. Cardinne-Petit, *Les Secrets de la Comédie-Française, 1936-1945* (Nouvelle Éditions Latines, 1958).

⁷⁷⁵ The national theatre also performed Molière and Musset on tour in Vichy at the end of the 1941-42 season.

disposition de l'ennemi. [...] D'aucune façon [le CNE] ne devra s'engager sur la voie où cet ancien Administrateur de la Saison allemande au Théâtre-Français prétend l'amener.'⁷⁷⁶

Claudé violently opposed what he deemed a slanderous proposition, and said as much in an official response to the Comédie-Française on this subject. The incident is nonetheless indicative of postwar attempts to apportion blame to those (official) bodies who accepted compromise in occupied Paris.

If it were possible to claim for *Les Mouches* that the actors influenced the audience's interpretation of the play, it is surely of significance that many of the same actors were involved in *Le Soulier de satin* as in Montherlant's *La Reine morte*. Ten actors performed in both, with Madeleine Renaud, Jean Yonnel and Julien Bertheau holding principal roles in each play. Mirroring the initial reluctance of the Comédie-Française to stage such a difficult play, the actors did not even turn up to the first rehearsals.⁷⁷⁷ The Comédie-Française was an institution under strict control, as its administrator had to be approved by the Germans and cooperate in all ways with the occupier's cultural policy. It may seem an oversimplification, but France's foremost national stage operated in much the same way as the Vichy government: independently, though with strict guidelines from the German authorities. The postwar condemnation of the Comédie-Française, in this light, does indeed appear an appropriate parallel to the disavowed Vichy government, declared illegal and treacherous at the Liberation.

In addition to the delicate and ambivalent position of the Comédie-Française as a whole, other negative factors tip the balance of the largely favourable assessment presented so far. Not least among these is the damning evidence of the press campaign which preceded the first performances. The sole article in *Comœdia* which appeared

⁷⁷⁶ Formal letter from Louis Aragon (31 May 1946) warning Claudé of the CNE's motion. Flood, p. 28.

⁷⁷⁷ Le Boterf, p. 159.

compromising for Sartre, despite the paper's softer stance of collaboration, is far outweighed by the interviews given by Claudel for the collaborationist publications *La Gerbe*, *Panorama* and *Paris-soir*. Flood also explains that Claudel's remark in *Paris-Soir* about his admiration for the diplomat Bismarck was at the very least badly timed and was duly seized upon by Claudel's detractors after the war.⁷⁷⁸ *Comœdia*, on top of a feature article based on an interview with Claudel for the day of the premiere, reported on the press conference held with Claudel, Barrault, Vaudoier and Coutaud, which certainly cannot have harmed the publicity for *Le Soulier*. An interview in *Panorama* the week before the premiere claimed that, at Claudel's apartment in Paris, 'Sans arrêt le téléphone sonne pour demander un rendez-vous, une interview, une conférence à la radio'. The play was front-page news and quite likely the biggest theatrical event of the Occupation.⁷⁷⁹

Judgments of Claudel and his play at the Liberation

Claims that the *Soulier de satin* represented an unbridled cry of freedom for a country determined to loose the shackles of the German oppressor appear unconvincing. Pleas made in defence of the play and its author since the liberation of France in 1944 fall into three main categories. The first of these is the claim that collaborators, particularly among the press, violently objected to Claudel's play because of its alleged support for the allies. Secondly, much has been made of the alleged German opposition to *Le Soulier*, with Claudel and Vaudoier going so far as to suggest that the occupier was responsible for putting an end to the performances.⁷⁸⁰ Thirdly, it has been argued that the play, like the activities and attitudes of its major contributors, was a symbol of French resistance to the

⁷⁷⁸ Flood, p. 25.

⁷⁷⁹ Dussane, p. 39: 'La plus étonnante aventure de la Comédie-Française esclavagée.'

⁷⁸⁰ This claim has also influenced recent writers. See Guérin, p. 316.

German enemy. These claims will now be analysed to see whether they are supported by documents from the early 1940s and, consequently, if they hold any sway in attributing a pro-Resistance interpretation to *Le Soulier de satin*.

After the Occupation Laubreaux was an easy target for authors and performers wishing to exonerate themselves, and he certainly had not minced his words when it came to reviews of (upcoming) plays. During the pre-premiere campaign for *Le Soulier*, a heated exchange of letters took place between Claudel and Vaudoyer, the former frustrated at delays to the acceptance and rehearsals of his play. Part of this correspondence was discovered, misinterpreted, then revealed to the public by Laubreaux. The passage in question dates from 17 December 1942 and is Claudel's response to the Comédie-Française's request to postpone performances of *Le Soulier* after the author felt obliged to concede significant cuts to the text.

[V]ous me demandez maintenant d'envisager l'ajournement jusqu'au mois de novembre prochain de vos promesses... Je crois, dans ces conditions, préférable de remettre la représentation de la pièce à un moment où les circonstances permettront plus de suite dans les desseins.⁷⁸¹

Laubreaux insinuated from this that Claudel was in fact hoping to delay the premiere to incorporate it into a pro-ally gala, welcoming Eisenhower into France's liberated capital. Writing in *Je suis partout*, Laubreaux exclaimed, 'Depuis plusieurs mois la représentation aurait pu avoir lieu. Mais on attendait...quoi?... Vous ne devinez pas?... Mais oui! bien entendu!... L'arrivée des Américains.' This was very misleading; on the contrary, Claudel

⁷⁸¹ Letter to Vaudoyer, 17 December 1942. Amouroux, p. 466. Claudel showed similar bitterness in 1947, when discussing a new staging of *Le Soulier*; at the first hint of a lack of enthusiasm from Barrault, Claudel wrote in his diary, 'Grosse déception. J'avais eu tort de compter sur lui. C'est fini.' *Journal II*, pp. 581-82.

was furious about the delays to *Le Soulier*, believing that the Comédie-Française were looking for excuses to avoid staging such a huge work.⁷⁸²

While Barrault was almost certainly accurate in saying that Claudel's pro-Gaullist leanings were well-known,⁷⁸³ it seems exaggerated to accuse the Comédie-Française, as did the collaborationist press, of being a 'repaire de gaullisme'.⁷⁸⁴ Laubreaux's contempt for the leading national theatre was no secret, and his pernicious comments were probably a gibe at the administrators rather than a serious political accusation. Accordingly, it is difficult to justify the claims made with hindsight by Claudel and Barrault which place a disproportionate emphasis on press opposition in a similar way to Sartre (and his supporters) in reference to *Les Mouches*. 'The newspapers, influenced by the German Occupation, were watching us with hatred. [...] The newspapers, in their hostility to this insurrection of the French soul, were waiting to tear us to pieces.'⁷⁸⁵ If anything, the press was a positive force in making *Le Soulier* famous before the audience even set foot in the theatre. After the first few performances, Claudel himself paradoxically acknowledged the favourable press in his diary.⁷⁸⁶ The vast majority of reviews, by admission of the playwright himself, were complimentary and most objections were on aesthetic rather than ideological grounds.

Another anecdote recorded in a letter from Claudel to Vaudoier in June 1946 recounts the perceived antagonism of a known collaborator, Ferdinand de Brinon, during the opening night.

⁷⁸² *Journal II*, p. 429: 'La Comédie-Française ne veut plus jouer *Le Soulier* et me demande *L'Annonce*.'

⁷⁸³ 'Everyone was aware of Claudel's Gaullist views.' Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow*, p. 147.

⁷⁸⁴ *Courrier français du témoignage chrétien*, 4 November 1944: '[la Comédie] peut s'honorer d'avoir été, à plusieurs reprises, dénoncée par tels virulents journaux de naguère, comme "un repaire de gaullisme".'

⁷⁸⁵ Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow*, pp. 145-7. Claudel's views are expressed in a letter of thanks for Vaudoier's commitment and support (June 1946). See *Journal II*, pp. 553-54.

⁷⁸⁶ 'Représentations triomphales. Acclamations, etc. On me fait venir sur la scène. 1[er décembre]. La presse *id.* [...] Article enthousiaste de *Candide* (Claude Roy) sur *Le S. de satin*.' *Journal II*, p. 467 and p. 469.

[L]a loge à côté de la mienne était occupée par M. de Brinon, et par ses invités, qui ne cessèrent de ricaner et de plaisanter. V[ous] n'avez pas oublié d'autre part les articles signés Laubeaux [*sic*] et Renaitour q[ui] parurent dans *Je suis partout* et dans *le Petit Parisien*.⁷⁸⁷

Claudél seems to equate their hostility with an objection to his play on political, or at least ideological, grounds. His argument, in the same letter, is that *Le Soulier*, 'est venu apporter à notre peuple meurtri et humilié [...] un peu de fierté et de consolation. [...] Les traîtres [that is, collaborators] ne s'y trompèrent pas.' I believe that Claudél is making a link here between two unrelated elements. The articles he refers to *preceded* the critics' viewing of *Le Soulier* and thus in no way object to the play's message of hope and pride, if indeed such a message can said to have been communicated. Besides, the mockery of a handful of individuals was evidently drowned out by the resounding approval of the majority, which Claudél acknowledges when speaking of the very same performance.

Not only has the alleged opposition to *Le Soulier* been exaggerated, but the element of compromise in dealings with Vichy has tended to be overlooked. Claudél admired Pétain, dedicating an *Ode* to him for a performance of his *L'Annonce faite à Marie* in Lyon. Since the war, Claudél's praise for the aged leader of the interim government has come under scrutiny, and the ode certainly haunted him, to the extent where he made various attempts to explain his position. In the complete volume of his poetry published by Gallimard in 1952, Claudél appended a comment, made with the benefit of hindsight, which stated that he had retained the poem as, 'un monument élevé à la fois à la Naïveté et à l'Imposture. Sa date [27 December 1940] lui sert d'excuse: la radio nous avait annoncé que, le 13 décembre, Pierre Laval avait été renvoyé et arrêté.'⁷⁸⁸ Notes made in his diary

⁷⁸⁷ Claudél, *Journal II*, pp. 553-54.

⁷⁸⁸ Paul Claudél, *Œuvres complètes de Paul Claudél II: Poésie* (Librairie Gallimard, 1952), p. 260.

attest to the speed at which he lost faith in the Vichy government and Pétain in particular, though he was quick to ask for their help on behalf of his Jewish colleague, Paul Weiller, and Claudel's own son, Pierre. It should also be said that while Claudel disowned his ode to Pétain, he also earned some 1500 francs from its publication.⁷⁸⁹

In fact, Claudel benefited from a relatively comfortable financial position from his Occupation activities. As a director of Gnôme et Rhone, a company which provided plane engines for the German war effort, Claudel regularly received percentages of the company's earnings.⁷⁹⁰ In addition, he received the promise of a generous subsidy of 50,000 francs for *L'Annonce faite à Marie* from Pétain after a personal visit to Vichy, which included a couple of meals with the Maréchal.⁷⁹¹ However, this extra money obtained from a close relationship with Vichy resulted from his initial trust in Pétain and a clear break can be seen towards the end of 1941 in his diary, the one place where Claudel unequivocally criticises the government for failing to condemn the execution of Jewish and Communist hostages by the Germans.⁷⁹² The suspicion was reciprocated; Vichy observed Claudel's movements very closely following his letter to the Grand Rabbin protesting against the (government's) mistreatment of Jews.⁷⁹³ By the time that *Le Soulier* was staged, Claudel was not even given royalties from the extra rise in ticket prices required to finance the large-scale performances.⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁸⁹ 'Il m'a eu. [...] Je le croyais loyal. [...] J'avais marché quoi! [...] Maintenant j'ai compris.' (3 September 1942). These comments were published in an article in *Candide*, 11-18 January 1962, entitled, 'Les Confidences de Paul Claudel à Henri Guillemin: Pourquoi j'ai écrit l'Ode au Maréchal.' *Journal II*, p. 340, note 3. Lardanchet published the ode in Lyon, December 1940. *Ibid.*, p. 357.

⁷⁹⁰ In early 1942, Claudel wrote, 'Je reçois mon tantième de Gnôme et Rhone.' *Journal II*, p. 391.

⁷⁹¹ Claudel, *Journal II*, p. 350.

⁷⁹² 'D[arlan] et P[étain], ce dernier "d'une voix brisée", engagent les Français à livrer les patriotes q[ui] ont tué les officiers Boches. Pas un mot d'horreur pour les massacres.' *Journal II*, p. 378. His hostility is mostly aimed at Laval: 'A la radio on dit qu'il n'y a pas une larme française q[ui] ne lui ait rapporté un sou' (p. 374).

⁷⁹³ 'Il paraît que les P.T.T. ont reçu l'ordre de surveiller mes comm [unications] téléphoniques et ma correspondance.' *Journal II*, p. 393. The letter to the Grand Rabbin is yet another example of Claudel's privately expressed opinion, made public in this case against his will.

⁷⁹⁴ Letter from Vaudoyer to Claudel, 10 December 1943. See Amouroux, p. 468.

It has been argued Claudel's problem was that he hoped for a more united Europe, based on a solid alliance between Germany and France, which could account for the lack of an obvious political stance in his writings, at a time when battle lines were clearly drawn.⁷⁹⁵ However, I believe that Claudel's views were very clear during the war. Though he later criticised De Gaulle for not seeking a united Europe, he was extremely consistent in his pro-Allied, anti-German and especially anti-Nazi stance.⁷⁹⁶ In a government file on Claudel, a document was preserved which contained details about the playwright, his family, occupation and political leanings, including the following: 'Sur le plan extérieur: Semble dévoué au Maréchal. Désigné comme anglophile et gaulliste.'⁷⁹⁷ His admiration for Pétain, itself short-lived, had no link to the Vichy government's decision to collaborate, which Claudel (privately) found both humiliating and unacceptable. On the other hand, proof of such convictions remained out of the public eye at the time, which became problematic for Claudel after the war.

A further claim made after the Liberation was that there had been German opposition to *Le Soulier*, Claudel and Vaudoyer. According to Harold Hobson, the occupier requested that performances of *Le Soulier* be stopped. He claims that the *Propagandastaffel* were uneasy about the play's success with audiences and recommended its gradual withdrawal after fifty consecutive showings. There is no evidence of such a move by the Germans, though it is a fact that the frequency of performances had to be reduced in early

⁷⁹⁵ I am not sure that, 'Claudel a toujours rêvé à la réconciliation entre l'Allemagne et la France' (Ubersfeld, p. 154). His diary expresses physical hatred of Hitler, criticises the German spirit and rejects Laval's efforts to reunite the two countries.

⁷⁹⁶ Ubersfeld, p. 157.

⁷⁹⁷ *Cahiers Paul Claudel 7: La Figure d'Israël* (Éditions Gallimard, 1968).

1944 because of electricity shortages in the capital.⁷⁹⁸ It was finally removed from the theatre's schedule after sixty appearances, though it was performed again later in the year.

Only a couple of years ago, a commentator made a striking (and equally unsupported) claim: 'Les autorités allemandes s'efforcèrent *en vain* de raréfier les représentations.'⁷⁹⁹ The Germans not only had no qualms with the play's dialogue, but they also attended performances in large numbers. Given the notoriety surrounding the play, it might have seemed quite suspicious if they had suddenly objected, particularly as public knowledge of such a decision would surely have drawn attention to the potential political ramifications of *Le Soulier*. However, no evidence or explanation has been advanced as to exactly why the Germans might have suddenly opposed the play after such a long run.

In a similar pattern to both *Jeanne avec nous* and *Les Mouches*, the claim that *Le Soulier* is part of a 'theatre of resistance' has relied on an assumption that the Germans opposed the theatre directors (or administrators). In the same way as the audacity of Pierre Dux in staging *Jeanne avec nous* (here playing the part of the Annoncier) and the risks taken by Dullin for *Les Mouches* had been highlighted, claims for *Le Soulier* centered – in Claudel's view – on an opposition to Vaudoier. According to their correspondence, Vaudoier was fired as a direct result of his involvement in *Le Soulier*.

L'entreprise était pleine de risques [à raison] de votre situation personnelle à l'égard des Autorités occupantes et du Gouv[ernement] de Vichy, qui ne tarda pas à faire preuve des sentiments qu'il nourrissait à votre égard en v[ous] déstaurant brutalement, quelq[ues] jours après la Première.⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹⁸ '(22 mars) Pour des raisons d'électricité, on ne donne plus *le Soulier* qu'une fois par semaine. Réception des acteurs à l'occasion de la 50^e.' *Journal II*, p. 478.

⁷⁹⁹ Guérin, p. 316. He also claims that *Le Soulier* was performed seventy times in nine months.

⁸⁰⁰ Letter to Vaudoier, 1 June 1946, in *Journal II*, p. 553.

Vaudoyer in fact handed in his resignation the following year, thus was almost certainly not forced out of his position by either Vichy or the Germans.⁸⁰¹

While it is difficult to prove any campaign from the occupation authorities against *Le Soulier*, there is evidence of German antipathy to Claudel, even though the German presence and enthusiasm at the 1943-1944 performances was not insignificant and the *Propagandastaffel* had found nothing wrong with the text of *Le Soulier*. This may seem perfectly natural, given that it had been completed in 1924 (Claudel and Barrault were still working on the new version for the stage), but it is worthy of consideration that Claudel's name actually featured on the Otto list of banned authors. Some of his writings were censored for their references to the Allies and, in particular, the frequent use of Jewish, American or British names and locations. For this reason, *Le Père humilié* (Pensée has a Jewish mother) and his essay, 'Quelques réflexions sur le métier diplomatique', were banned.⁸⁰² Indeed, Claudel was on the first Otto list of 1940, as he had made various public denunciations of Nazism and German foreign policy in his 'Adresse au peuple allemand', for example.⁸⁰³ His house in the Isère and his apartment in Paris were both ransacked by the Germans, and Claudel boasts with black humour about the Germans displaying posters of his decapitated image at his countryside home.⁸⁰⁴

Claudel was worried about returning to Paris, because his reputation with the Germans placed him in a potentially risky situation as a well-known face.⁸⁰⁵ Another delicate situation arose when Claudel's private protest against Jewish persecution was

⁸⁰¹ Christopher Flood, p. 28, and Guérin, p. 292: 'En mars 1944, Vaudoyer démissionne suite à un désaccord avec son ministre de tutelle.' Vaudoyer was replaced by Jean Sarmant.

⁸⁰² July 1941.

⁸⁰³ Claudel, *Œuvres complètes de Paul Claudel 29: Prose et poésies diverses* (Gallimard, 1986), pp. 324-30.

⁸⁰⁴ 'Les Boches m'en voulaient particulièrement. Ils avaient fait mon portrait sur toutes les portes avec la tête coupée. C'est un miracle qu'ils n'aient brûlé le château.' *Journal II*, p. 323.

⁸⁰⁵ 'Jacques Paris q[ui] m'engage à ne pas rentrer à Paris: ce pourrait être dangereux pour moi. Il paraît qu'un journal allemand a publié mon portrait [...] parmi des "fauteurs de guerre"!'. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

made public at the beginning of 1942. 'Le Gr[and] Rabbin Isaïe Schwartz ayant jugé à propos d'envoyer de tous côtés des copies de ma lettre, je me décide par prudence à ne pas me servir de mon *Ausweis* et de ne pas me rendre en zone occupée.'⁸⁰⁶ However, despite the apparently hostile intentions of the Germans who vandalised Claudel's château at Brangues on their way into Paris, he was to experience little more than mild suspicion from the occupier.⁸⁰⁷ The Germans in no way impeded the staging of *Le Soulier*, granting its performance visa as early as 24 December 1942.⁸⁰⁸ Extensive delays and restrictions to its length were imposed by the Comédie-Française rather than the German authorities.

In his memoirs, Jean-Louis Barrault devotes a substantial section to *Le Soulier de satin* and recounts a curious encounter with a German officer serving an order for Barrault to direct a work by the German composer Hans Werner Eck at the Paris Opéra at the behest of his superior, the Kommandatur.⁸⁰⁹ Barrault records that the officer declared the occupier's dislike of Claudel and threatened to ban *Le Soulier* and even send Barrault to work in Germany. According to the stage director, Honegger visited him the following day to say that the German officer had intervened on Barrault's behalf so that he would not be deported, in thanks for which Barrault duly sent a polite letter. There is evidence of substantial persistence on the part of Barrault in order to stage *Le Soulier*, which was a landmark for his career and the first fruit of an extremely rich collaboration with Claudel, but unfortunately no documents have come to light to corroborate his anecdote. Whilst one should be wary of dismissing the story out of hand, we have seen elsewhere both Barrault's and Claudel's capacity to embellish or distort the truth concerning the press reaction to *Le*

⁸⁰⁶ *Journal II*, p. 388.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 319. Guérin, p. 313: 'Charles Maurras le dénonce à la Gestapo.'

⁸⁰⁸ The enigmatic Gerhard Heller has been credited with helping *Le Soulier* through the German censorship. Ubersfeld, p. 152.

⁸⁰⁹ *Memories for Tomorrow*, p. 146. Barrault could not recall the name of the work in question, but it would be ironic if was the same one about which Claudel wrote in September 1942, 'Le musician all[emand] Werner Egk [*sic*] donne un *Christophe Colomb* plagié de mon œuvre avec D[arius] M[ilhaud].' *Journal II*, p. 413.

Soulier, so caution is advised before concluding that the Germans were in any way reticent about the staging of Claudel's play.

In my opinion, by far the most convincing postwar claim in support of *Le Soulier* as belonging to a 'theatre of resistance' is that it gave a feeling of hope and pride to a subjugated nation seeking an outlet to express their desire for freedom. However, very few audience members would, in all likelihood, have translated this into direct action against the occupier; I have certainly not found any record of resisters among the spectators.⁸¹⁰ However, the testimonies of those present or participating frequently indicate that the play offered a salutary sense of 'spiritual Resistance'; that is, a morale boost from the ideas and attitudes expressed by the play. That all the participants were French and almost all equally praised by reviewers also gives an indication of the overwhelming success of a French national project, and the (perhaps patriotic) joy provoked by Claudel's powerful and evocative French poetry: 'la scène française se trouve ennoblie par une œuvre qui apporte en nous richesses et espoir.'⁸¹¹ Pride was expressed at the end of the Occupation about the achievement of French theatre.

Il demeurera à l'honneur de la France occupée, d'avoir monté un spectacle aussi étonnant, d'une telle qualité que le *Soulier de Satin*, de M. Paul Claudel, sur notre première scène nationale, la Comédie-Française [...] à laquelle notre génie français apporte ce qu'il a de meilleur.⁸¹²

Vaudoyer and Barrault's intervention on behalf of *Le Soulier* to ensure its safe passage to the stage, despite the occupier's plans to see German culture prioritised and the Comédie-Française's suggestion of a more frivolous play to replace Claudel's, speaks

⁸¹⁰ Guérin, p. 290, says Dux was a resister and Julien Bertheau wrote anonymously in *Les Lettres françaises*.

⁸¹¹ André Castelot, *La Gerbe*, 9 December 1943. In *L'Illustration*, 11 December 1943, Madeleine Renaud, Jeanne Sully, Aimé Clariond, Dux and Honegger are singled out for their virtuosic contributions.

⁸¹² 'Libération des âmes captives', *La Semaine à Paris*, 21 décembre 1943.

volumes about their commitment to *Le Soulier*. Indeed, Barrault threatened to resign rather than settle for the easy entertainment of De Létraz's *Bichon*, and he acknowledged a huge debt to Vaudoier, whose defence of *Le Soulier* would inevitably put his job on the line, if not to the extent that Claudel later claimed.⁸¹³ After all, Barrault was very young and relatively inexperienced and the sheer scale of the project was unprecedented.⁸¹⁴

Given the initial hesitation on the part of the reading committee, it is noteworthy that Vaudoier managed to convince the company that such expenditure was worthwhile. Fifty costumes were needed, along with vast numbers of gloves (2645 francs), shoes (twenty-one pairs for the men) and fake beards (34,370 francs). Barrault mentions with no small trace of relief in his memoirs that the decision to order the sets for *Le Soulier* before rehearsals started could well have been crucial to saving the production, because significant (hence irreversible) commitments had to be made early on.

Le Soulier portrayed an unshackled human spirit consistent with Claudel's private stance during the war and he was the first to encourage spectators to understand his personality through the traits of his fictional characters. He was also unwilling to allow his plays to be adulterated by editing references to Jews or the Allies – a decision which could affect his finances and, potentially, his career. His play *L'Échange* was banned in 1943 because he refused to change the American names and locations or remove English dialogue. He also objected to his *Protée* being performed in August 1942 without the music of Darius Milhaud, his Jewish friend and former secretary. His outrage with an interpretation of *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* in Lyon, manipulated to portray the English as

⁸¹³ Barrault, *Memories for Tomorrow*, p. 145, and *Réflexions sur le théâtre*, p. 149.

⁸¹⁴ Ticket prices were increased to cover costs (100F from 70F in the stalls, for example). Amouroux, p. 467.

obnoxious, was borne out in a strongly worded letter in which he completely disassociated himself with the production.⁸¹⁵

Furthermore, Claudel continued privately to write – rather than speak – his mind on the issues of collaboration, resistance and the Nazis. He wrote regularly for *Le Figaro* magazine before it was banned in Paris by the Germans.⁸¹⁶ Furthermore, he composed a Resistance poem which, while not actually published during the Occupation, nevertheless expresses hope for an Allied liberation, shame for France’s submission to the occupier and confidence in the nation rising again.⁸¹⁷ If Pétain was the temporary beneficiary of Claudel’s trust at the beginning of the Occupation, De Gaulle seems to have been the mainstay of his confidence from the outset until the Liberation. I believe that critics have tended to overemphasise the importance of the ode to Pétain (which became an irrelevance just a few months after its composition), though it remained, as Claudel admitted, an example of his naivety and a regrettable mistake.⁸¹⁸ There is a tendency among commentators to avoid mention of Claudel’s ode to De Gaulle from September 1943, although its date is potentially revealing. September 1943 was hardly late for expressing allegiance to De Gaulle, but, standing alone and unpublished, it by no means proves a genuine commitment. However, in June 1940, Claudel responded to a personal call from Churchill and travelled to Algeria to help a possible French Resistance.⁸¹⁹ His diary entries from this trip show frustration at his ineffectiveness. Claudel had retired from the position

⁸¹⁵ ‘Je tiens à protester énergiquement contre l’interprétation que v[ous] avez donné de Jeanne et q[ui] constitue la trahison la plus indigne. [...] P.S. Je vous avais demandé et v[ous] m’avez promis que rien ne serait fait pour rendre les Anglais odieux.’ *Journal II*, pp. 367-68.

⁸¹⁶ One contribution was a poem dedicated to his granddaughter, who he hinted was named Marie-Victoire in anticipation of Allied success in the war campaign (21 November 1942).

⁸¹⁷ ‘La France parle, 14 September 1943, *Œuvres Complètes*, pp. 270-74.

⁸¹⁸ André Blanc, *Claudel* (Bordas, 1973), p. 41.

⁸¹⁹ Blanc, p. 39.

of French diplomat in 1935 and was too old to join De Gaulle at the latter's request, though his two sons were active in America and a son-in-law in England alongside De Gaulle.

The Germans did not restrict Claudel's activities, but he did earn a close monitoring from the Vichy authorities after his letter to the Grand Rabbin was made public. Given the widespread lack of French intellectual (or public) support for Jews, it is important to acknowledge that, even though Claudel did not envisage public dissemination of his letter, its content was bold and subversive in the context of the government's policies towards the Jews. A brief extract from the letter is sufficient to illustrate its central thrust.

Je tiens à vous écrire pour vous dire le dégoût, l'horreur, l'indignation qu'éprouvent à l'égard des iniquités, des spoliations, des mauvais traitements de toutes sortes dont sont actuellement victimes nos compatriotes israélites, tous les bons Français et spécialement les catholiques. [...] Je suis fier d'avoir parmi eux [les Juifs] beaucoup d'amis. [...] Que Dieu protège Israël.⁸²⁰

Happily, the documents relating to the measures taken against Claudel have survived, so insight can be gained into the observation of his activities, though it should be said that the result of the investigation brought no accusatory evidence against Claudel and no further action was taken after 21 May 1942. However, copies of Claudel's letter were distributed both in the Saint-Rémy area of Paris by the Jew Bernheim and to the prisoners of the Drancy camp by a Croix-Rouge delegate, Annette Monod-Leiris, in 1942. Emmanuel Godo goes so far as to insist that, even if all other evidence in defence of Claudel's Occupation activities is taken out of consideration, the letter to the Grand Rabbin alone

⁸²⁰ Letter to the Grand Rabbin of France, Isaïe Schwartz, 24 December 1941. A photographic image of the letter forms the inside cover of the *Cahiers Paul Claudel 7: La Figure d'Israël* and is printed among the official documents pertaining to Claudel's government file (pp. 323-27), as well as in Godo, p. 272.

proves his integrity.⁸²¹ However, this is just one document to counteract accusations of collaboration against Claudel. His stance during the Occupation was complicated, at best.

Conclusion

If one were to categorise the activities of French playwrights using only the extremes of pure Resistance or undivided Collaboration, Claudel would fall victim to a gross oversimplification. In much the same way as Montherlant, his attitudes were ambivalent. An unfavourable interpretation of his stance could certainly be justified, though not without closing one's eyes to the frequent anti-Nazi writings and pro-Jewish support he offered throughout the Occupation. In this way, a narrow view of Claudel as an economic collaborator benefiting from the war situation as a director of Gnome et Rhone, as well as for his writings, can be made to seem particularly damning.

By allowing the performance of an anodyne, emasculated version of *Le Soulier* in France's foremost state theatre, at a time when it was under the formal control of an officially collaborationist government, and under the constant oversight of the *Propaganda-Staffel*, he derived personal gain from colluding in keeping the wheels of cultural production turning for the ultimate benefit of the Germans, who had chosen to administer France in this particular way for their own interests. To have co-operated with journalists from collaborationist newspapers, and to have bowed to the applause of German officers merely compounds the issue.⁸²²

One could even argue that while the Germans did not have a single objection to the text of *Le Soulier*, Claudel (and Barrault) may have felt it necessary to cut potentially problematic content to avoid the risk of offending the occupier, though this can hardly be proved. It should also be said that Claudel did not have a say in the way the Comédie-Française was run and Barrault was only a member, thus subject to its reading committee

⁸²¹ Godo, p. 271: 'cette lettre, cette lettre qui, à elle seule, et pour l'éternité, est l'honneur de Paul Claudel'.

⁸²² Flood, p. 29.

and administrator. While the performance certainly did no harm to their respective careers, *Le Soulier* was, ultimately, an important event for French theatre, despite the presence of Germans in the auditorium and the war raging outside. At no time did Claudel publicly approve of collaboration with the Germans, and he certainly maintained an intense opposition to Laval and utterly rejected Pétain's concessions to the occupier, whatever his personal admiration for the latter may initially have been.⁸²³

It would be hard to support a view that Claudel was a collaborationist in terms of his ideas, for he was vehemently anti-defeatist and opposed all forms of collaboration espoused by individually named clerics, whom he accused of failing to denounce German massacres of French hostages or the persecution of Jews. On the occasion of Cardinal Baudrillart's funeral, for example, Claudel's anger at the Church's attitude was very biting: 'Pour l'émule de Cauchon [Baudrillart], l'Église de France n'a pas eu assez d'encens. Pour les Français immolés, pas une prière, pas un geste de charité ou d'indignation.'⁸²⁴ He remained pro-British and showed a keen interest in all allied movements by including regular military updates in his diary, along with a wish for the German capitulation and the liberation of France.⁸²⁵ However, it would be equally simplistic to suggest that he was a resister, or that *Le Soulier de satin* provided any kind of political allegory of the contemporary situation by suggesting a specific attitude to adopt against the occupier. Claudel was largely absent from Paris, secluded for the most part in his Isère residence. He made no public statement against the Germans, despite the abundant references in his

⁸²³ *Journal II*, p. 334, p. 358 and p. 413: 'Négotiations pour la paix de L[aval] et du M[aréchal]. On cède tout. La France se rend comme une fille à son vainqueur. [...] Le pauvre Maréchal entouré de crapules: Pierre Laval [...] mais que penser du Maréchal! Un degré de plus dans la honte! Y aura-t-il jamais assez de crachats pour cette gueule de traître!'

⁸²⁴ *Journal II*, pp. 400-01. Claudel saw Baudrillart posing in a German helmet with Doriot to promote the Ligue Volontaire Antibolchévique: 'On se demande si ce malheureux bonhomme a complètement perdu la tête.' *Ibid.*, p. 382.

⁸²⁵ His diary records a New Year's wish for 1942: 'Puisse-t-elle n[ous] apporter la fin du cauchemar boche et la confusion des "collaborateurs"!'. *Journal II*, p. 385.

personal writings. Once his courageous comments made in support of the Jews were in the public domain, Claudel immediately feared for his safety and adopted a cautious attitude.

In the same way, the new stage version of *Le Soulier* did not alter the content in favour of a pro-Resistance interpretation. If anything, the condensed text was stripped of its more obvious responses to war and the Germans. In any case, the censorship bodies had no issue with (the complete version of) the play and the only obstacles to its performance were posed by the Comédie-Française and the material shortages of the war situation. There was no press opposition to the ‘message’ of *Le Soulier*, only objections to Claudel’s style, his mystical Catholic vision and his obscure poetry.

However, *Le Soulier* was a play of unprecedented dimensions, a significant achievement and a rich theatrical display staged three times a week in the face of exceptional deprivation. The unusual cost of the tickets and harsh conditions of winter only make its success the more remarkable. At the fiftieth performance, Claudel was quick to appreciate the extent of the play’s impact: ‘un public qui depuis quatre mois ne cesse, pour écouter la pièce, de remplir jusqu’au bord la vaste cuve de notre théâtre national.’⁸²⁶ He later claimed to have been so overwhelmed by the play that he had seen it thirteen times.⁸²⁷

It is striking that so many testimonies attest to the morale boost experienced at performances of *Le Soulier*, and one can hardly argue against the persuasive weight of these sources. The nature of such remarks, however, points more to a personal impression than a communal understanding of specific passages. Barrault was especially affected by the closing line of the play, though I have found no evidence suggesting audiences reacted specifically to these, or indeed to any other, words (as opposed to Montherlant’s *La Reine morte*, for example).

⁸²⁶ *SS*, p. 1477.

⁸²⁷ *Dictionnaire des pièces de théâtre françaises du xx^e siècle*, p. 561.

Indeed, as indicated by press articles and actors, the very complexity of the play prevented the reception of a time-specific message. While it avoids encouraging a specific attitude to adopt in the context of occupation, the play communicates a strong sense of pride, joy, hope and freedom which seems to have been an invaluable tonic to a humiliated people. This was one of the greatest theatrical events of the Occupation.⁸²⁸ The experience was a huge inspiration to Barrault and his desire to see it produced provided the French theatre with the beginnings of an extremely fruitful collaboration brought about by the war situation.

⁸²⁸ Le Boterf, p. 158: '*Le Soulier de satin* de Paul Claudel dont la création constitue sans conteste l'événement théâtral le plus important de toute la période de l'occupation.'

CHAPTER SIX

JEAN ANOUILH: *ANTIGONE*

Of the five plays I have examined in detail for this study, Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* had by far the greatest number of consecutive performances in its first run, which started on 15 February 1944. There had been 475 performances of *Antigone* by autumn 1947.⁸²⁹ It was staged again in autumn 1950 and by 1954 had been performed a total of 645 times. Several commentators refer to the latter figure, claiming that it was the number of 'consecutive performances' at the Atelier and implying that they all took place during the Occupation (at best specifying 1944-1945).⁸³⁰ Since the Atelier did not open for performances on Mondays, and showings of *Antigone* were later broken up by other productions, such a huge number of performances would have been impossible in that short period. However, despite the bitter cold of the lingering winter and increasing electricity shortages, which led to the actors crowding round a small area of natural light shining down from a skylight, audiences filled the Théâtre de l'Atelier to witness a play which had caught the public imagination.⁸³¹

Based on the original Greek version of the myth, Anouilh's play pitches the idealistic heroine against Créon, the voice of reason and compromise, in a conflict which provided a striking parallel to the Occupation: 'L'Antigone de Sophocle, lue et relue et que

⁸²⁹ Philip Thody, *Anouilh* (Edinburgh/London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), and Manfred Flüge, 'Verweigerung oder Neue Ordnung. Jean Anouilhs "Antigone" im politischen und ideologischen context der Besatzungszeit 1940-1944', thesis published by Schäuble Verlag Rheinfelden, *Reihe Romanistik* 25 (1980), I, p. 329.

⁸³⁰ John Harvey, *Anouilh: A Study in Theatrics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), Boittin and Forkey. Leonard C. Pronko, *The World of Jean Anouilh* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 255, cites 500 showings in 1944.

⁸³¹ 'Rarement, on constata une telle emprise d'un spectacle sur le public.' André Barsacq, *50 ans de théâtre* (Bibliothèque Nationale, 1978), p. xxiv.

je connaissais par cœur depuis toujours, a été un choc pour moi pendant la guerre, le jour des affiches rouges. Je l'ai réécrite à ma façon, avec la résonance de la tragédie que nous étions alors en train de vivre.'⁸³² Just a few months before the Liberation of Paris, such a subject could hardly fail to arouse strong reactions in a city torn between extreme allegiances. Indeed, spectators and the press were quick to seize on aspects of the play which seemed to boost or oppose their personal commitments.

It can be surprising for the modern commentator to discover that such radically opposed interpretations of the play were broadcast with almost equal intensity and with no concession to nuance. Anouilh was either labelled the worst collaborator because the tyrant Créon was seen as mollified, or hailed as a resister because Antigone was a voice speaking against oppression no matter what the sacrifice. Such polarised views, which do not allow for subtleties in the text, should no longer determine an understanding of *Antigone*, but they give valuable insight into the potential pro-Resistance impact of the play in 1944.

The Occupation was an extremely fruitful period for Anouilh. Six of his plays were performed, four for the first time, and his reputation as an entertaining and consummate dramatist was cemented. His choice of *Antigone* was doubtless determined by the circumstances of war. '[En] 1942 et 1944, il était difficile d'échapper à l'histoire: la guerre a influencé la rédaction d'Antigone et l'accueil du public.'⁸³³ It was the only one of his plays the author ever called a tragedy; although this qualification does not appear in publications of the play, it was included in the 1944 programme for *Antigone* and in later reflections by the author.

That the play was one of the rare theatre events to provoke a debate in the press about its political meaning is evidence both of multiple meanings inherent to the work, and

⁸³² Jean Anouilh, *Œdipe ou le Roi boiteux* (Éditions de La Table Ronde, 1986), back cover.

⁸³³ Marie-Françoise Minaud, *Étude sur Jean Anouilh: 'Antigone'* (Ellipses, 1997), p. 10.

of the suggestive power of the text and performance. That commentators still differ in their fundamental understanding of the main issues arising in the play points to a more complex picture than one might glean from early accounts. It will be seen that wholesale praise or rejection avoids important dramaturgical necessities such as theatrical illusion and the equivocation required for an enduring appeal. However it was received, and whatever form it took under the Occupation, *Antigone* is a play that has been performed and reinterpreted ever since, owing to its status as a work of art and not simply a propaganda tool.

This chapter will examine the writing, staging and reception of the play, as well as the contemporary reviews and public response, particularly in light of the play's post-Liberation reputation as a clear call to Resistance.⁸³⁴ Anouilh's own revealing response to the polemic will also be considered. I intend to demonstrate that although the interpretations of play and the subsequent efforts to appropriate – or disassociate from – *Antigone* were very much of their time, the play seems to suffer from a lack of clear support for either of the main protagonists, even when considered independently from the political concerns of 1944. However, despite ideological debates among critics on both 'sides', audiences went to the Atelier theatre in droves, enjoying and even strongly identifying with the characters.

Although Anouilh was put on trial at the Liberation, no reference was made to *Antigone*, or indeed to any of his theatrical output.⁸³⁵ Given the political debate created by *Antigone*, this fact deserves to be addressed, and I will do so at the end of my discussion. Anouilh's refusal to speak out about his life and political opinions has led to much unresolved discussion about his works, and at a time when there was great pressure on

⁸³⁴ Contrary to popular views, its reputation was less widespread in France than abroad (America, for example).

⁸³⁵ Added, p. 321.

public figures to take sides, Anouilh's *Antigone* was bound to create controversy. He has always claimed political neutrality, and specifically so during the Occupation. 'Anouilh est resté pendant toute l'occupation confiné dans son travail d'écrivain, professant qu'il ignorait volontairement la politique. Mais le public voyait autrement son œuvre.'⁸³⁶ This chapter aims to ascertain whether the play might have had a demonstrable impact on the Resistance and can therefore be counted as a source of French pride in dark times.

(Re-)writing *Antigone* during the Occupation

It was not until the late 1930s that Anouilh began to be recognised by the Parisian public and leading directors. His first attempt at modernising a myth with *Eurydice* (1941) had a mixed response, only a few dozen performances and a deficit in ticket sales which almost certainly led to the director, André Barsacq, delaying the staging of *Antigone*. Barsacq was hesitant about the (financial) risk of putting on another serious play, and Anouilh was working on lighter material. '[Antigone] n'a été jouée qu'en 1944 parce que Barsacq avait retenu deux autres pièces – et qu'il n'y croyait qu'à demi'.⁸³⁷ Certainly, the coffers of the Atelier theatre swelled during the staging of more comic or entertaining plays such as *Sylvie et le fantôme* or *L'Honorable Mr Pepys*, both of which broke records for the number of consecutive performances at this theatre. However, *Eurydice* was an important exercise in bringing the universal qualities of a myth into a contemporary setting; it takes place in the twentieth century and only the legendary names remind the spectator of the tragic destinies of the pair's mythical counterparts.

Perhaps the most enlightening aspect of this play for the purpose of my study is that *Eurydice* was seen as transposition of a myth to which Occupation audiences could

⁸³⁶ Dussane, p. 125.

⁸³⁷ Flügge, II, p. 43. 1979 letter from Jean Anouilh.

relate.⁸³⁸ Anouilh and Barsacq's friendship suffered because of the severe drop in ticket sales and a loss of more than 100,000 francs.⁸³⁹ However, Barsacq later acknowledged its qualities, which related strongly to the war situation.

'Eurydice', pièce où il s'attaque pour la première fois à un mythe antique, sortit en 1943 [*sic*], à un moment particulièrement pénible de l'occupation allemande. Paris, privé de liberté, souffrait du froid et de la faim, et les esprits étaient sans doute mal préparés à recevoir cette pièce amère. [...] violemment combattue par les uns, adorée par les autres, cette pièce, qui renferme d'authentiques beautés, ne fournit alors qu'une brève carrière. Pourtant [...] jamais encore la transposition du tragique ancien dans le monde de nos pensées et de nos angoisses n'avait été traitée d'une si originale façon.⁸⁴⁰

It is interesting that this description so closely resembles *Antigone*, in all but the brevity of its first run. *Antigone* was also staged at a very difficult moment of the Occupation where tensions were at their height between the Resistance and collaborators, and fuel, food and electricity were in very short supply. Furthermore, public and professional opinion showed a stark divide in its response to the play.

Anouilh's reputation was secured in part thanks to the enthusiasm of Pierre Fresnay and Georges Pitoëff, who enabled performances of *L'Hermine* at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre and *Le Voyageur sans bagage* at the Théâtre des Mathurins.⁸⁴¹ The latter led to film rights being bought by the American company Metro Goldwyn Mayer, bringing temporary financial comfort for the young author. In his memoirs Anouilh refers to *L'Hermine* as an overnight sensation which made him famous in the eyes of Parisian society.⁸⁴² Contrary to exaggerated accounts which suggest that Anouilh's financial worries were over, the money

⁸³⁸ Flügge, I, p. 217: 'Le mythe modèle l'âme du tragique. Aristote nous l'a fait oublier. Une simple lecture d'Eschyle nous le rappelle. Que Jean Anouilh s'en souviennent, c'est ce que montre "Eurydice". [...] Elle donne toutefois au théâtre contemporain le rare exemple d'une tragédie moderne. Chef-d'œuvre raté? Peut-être.'

⁸³⁹ Ibid., I, p. 243: 'notre amitié a pris un coup'.

⁸⁴⁰ Flügge, I, p. 217.

⁸⁴¹ The profit from 90 showings of *L'Hermine* was under 1500 francs and Fresnay himself forwent payment.

⁸⁴² Jean Anouilh, *La Vicomtesse d'Erival n'a pas reçu son balai mécanique* (La Table Ronde, 1987), p. 103 and p. 66: 'Tout Paris vint voir la pièce. J'étais d'un coup – toujours sans m'en rendre compte, devenu célèbre.' 20 years on, Pierre Brisson told Anouilh he had devoted six columns of *Le Temps* to *L'Hermine*.

(minus a cut for Anouilh's agent and 30% for the actress, Marie Bell) only ensured one year of financial stability. However, the money was a boon because it freed him to write. From 1937 onwards, Anouilh was to have at least one of his plays performed every year in a major Parisian venue, which was no small achievement given how difficult it was at the time for new playwrights to be recognised.⁸⁴³

Anouilh spent most of the Occupation in Paris and Manfred Flügge has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that much of the language of *Antigone* is similar to German and Vichy propaganda, and that the lead characters owe much to dominant figures of the time. However, he wrote *Antigone* outside the capital in Salies de Béarn (in the Pyrenees), away from the conflicts, German presence, evening curfew and deprivations of Paris. A recurring feature of his correspondence is the concern Anouilh shows for the correct tone of his play. Given that he composed one of his best-written and entertaining plays, *Le Bal des voleurs*, in just three nights, it is perhaps surprising that Anouilh should take several months over *Antigone*. There is evidence that Anouilh was cautious about including anything that might be interpreted as a direct allusion to the circumstances of the Occupation. 'Je passe par des alternatives de trouille et de confiance pour la censure. Je ne crains d'ailleurs que des mots, il faudra les éviter, le fond de la pièce devrait passer.'⁸⁴⁴

Whereas caution was only implied in Sartre's correspondence relating to the writing of *Les Mouches*, here it is explicit. The letter seems to indicate that Anouilh was concerned to avoid the dialogue of *Antigone* attracting special attention or suspicion from the Germans, though he appears confident that the overall tone of the play would not pose any problem. He specifically requested that Barsacq re-read the play and make appropriate cuts,

⁸⁴³ *La Vicomtesse*, p. 63: 'Mais c'était déjà un miracle à l'époque qu'un jeune auteur puisse se faire jouer.' Vermorel's attempts to find a theatre to stage his *Jeanne avec nous* are also worth bearing in mind.

⁸⁴⁴ Flügge, I, p. 244. The extract is from a letter to Barsacq dated 23 September 1942.

removing dialogue that might displease the *Propagandastaffel* (this appears to be the meaning of ‘dangereuses’ below) before a copy of the play was submitted for examination.

S’il en est temps avant de donner *Antigone* à taper, relisez-la en pensant à la censure et si vous repérez des phrases dangereuses (les affiches, les discours du chœur à la fin) écrivez-moi, il vaut mieux que ça ne soit pas tripatouillé sur le manuscrit qu’on enverra.⁸⁴⁵

It is impossible to know what potentially dangerous content Anouilh is referring to – particularly in the final speech of the *Chœur* – as Barsacq’s cuts have not been recorded.

However, a potential allegory to the contemporary situation could be read in some of the closing words of the play, spoken by the *Chœur*. ‘Ceux qui croyaient une chose, et puis ceux qui croyaient le contraire – même ceux qui ne croyaient rien et qui se sont trouvés pris dans l’histoire sans y rien comprendre. Morts pareils.’⁸⁴⁶ This offers no clear comment, but may well refer to the taking of sides during the Occupation and the hopelessness of belief in either cause. It is striking that Anouilh was concerned to go through *Antigone* with a fine-tooth comb and was on the lookout for topical political allusions in the script. However, he aimed for a modern tone to strike a chord with the spectators, one that resonated with their preoccupations and the climate of the Occupation.

In this light, it is surely no accident that *Antigone* forms a single act, uses a bare stage and needs no special lighting. The play was written with the material concerns of the time in mind, making a notable contrast to *Le Soulier de satin* and prefiguring Sartre’s *Huis clos*. Natural light was even channelled so the stage could be illuminated by a skylight.⁸⁴⁷

Anouilh does not systematically modernize the text, as opposed to *Eurydice*. He retains the

⁸⁴⁵ Letter from Jean Anouilh to André Barsacq, 14 September 1942. André Barsacq, *50 ans de théâtre* (Bibliothèque Nationale, 1978), p. 44.

⁸⁴⁶ Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (Éditions de la Table Ronde, 1946), hereafter referred to as A., p. 123.

⁸⁴⁷ Barsacq, p. 45: ‘Durant les derniers temps de l’occupation allemande, les restrictions d’électricité avaient imposé ce dispositif utilisant l’ouverture centrale ménagée dans le plafond de la salle pour suspendre le lustre. Des miroirs orientables placés de part et d’autre du balcon renvoyait la lumière du jour sur la scène.’

original characters, the ancient setting of Sophocles's play (Thèbes) and a Chorus.⁸⁴⁸ Clear homage is shown to the Greek author in several passages which are almost identical to their ancient model, and there is restraint in terms of the language and the action.⁸⁴⁹ The sparse nature of the décor imitates the concision of the dialogue and the costumes were designed to be simple and neutral. The guards use a colloquial tone that brings the play closer to the contemporary situation, though such comic 'relief' intervening at moments of dramatic tension sometimes stretches the audience to breaking point.⁸⁵⁰ The text is littered with anachronisms, such as references to coffee and toast, racing cars, guns and cigarettes. Shocking as they might seem, they help make the play's ancient characters more appealing to a modern audience.⁸⁵¹

Antigone was approved by the *Propagandastaffel* in late October 1942, having been written between September 1941 and the summer of 1942. Anouilh insinuated in his 1987 memoirs that permission had been given quickly because the Germans thought it was a benign adaptation of the original. 'On avait dès 1942 demandé le visa de la censure pour *Antigone*, et le petit oberleutnant [...] s'était dit "in petto" (et en allemand): *Antigone* d'après Sophocle, ça doit être ennuyeux, et il avait tamponné peut-être sans lire.'⁸⁵² While there is substantial conjecture here, it is interesting that Anouilh should imagine using a mythical subject was sufficient to obtain approval from the German authorities, and that he

⁸⁴⁸ The Prologue is the chorus leader ('coryphée', in French). George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 171. *Eurydice* is set in a twentieth-century 'buffet de gare' in the French Midi.

⁸⁴⁹ The account given by the guard, Jonas, of Antigone covering her dead brother's body with earth, and her second encounter with Ismène, most closely resemble Sophocles's *Antigone. A.*, p. 50 and p. 98.

⁸⁵⁰ In a 23 June 2004 performance of *Antigone* (directed by Nicolas Briançon in Angers and recorded on DVD), the loudest audience laughter occurs in the penultimate scene with the guard, Jonas, and Antigone, despite the rising tension immediately preceding her death.

⁸⁵¹ Even a cursory reading of the play reveals a notable number of anachronisms: 'carte postale' (*A.*, p. 14), 'un film' (p. 54), 'une petite pelle qui nous servait à faire des châteaux de sable sur la plage' (p. 63), 'menottes' (p. 64), 'poupées' (p. 85), 'bars' (p. 87), 'tirelire' (p.88), 'chauffage', (p. 109), 'peluche', 'tricots' and 'confiture' (p. 120). Le Boterf, p. 164, believes the anachronisms are the exception rather than the rule, and conform to Anouilh's adopted style, rather than contradicting it.

⁸⁵² Anouilh, *La Vicomtesse*, pp. 163-64.

should hold to a stereotype of the ignorant *Propagandastaffel* not understanding the subtleties of French literature. Jean-Louis Barsacq speculates that his father deliberately delayed the submission of *Antigone* to the Germans to make sure the new lieutenant Rademacker would be responsible for granting the visa. The latter lived with a French actress, was highly considered in theatrical circles and allegedly lenient rather than punctilious in his examination of theatre scripts.⁸⁵³

As far as it is possible to tell, there was no objection from the Germans until the middle of 1944 when Friedrich Sieburg allegedly warned German authorities in Berlin that the play could only be having a demoralising effect on troops stationed in Paris.⁸⁵⁴ There appears to be no supporting proof of such an intervention, but Anouilh lingers on the incident in his memoirs, claiming that the Germans put pressure on Barsacq to withdraw *Antigone*. According to Anouilh, Barsacq was summoned by the *Propagandastaffel* and feigned total innocence, presenting the official stamp of the play's visa as proof of its authorisation. While he played for time, the Allied forces landed in Normandy, and *Antigone* became the least of the Germans' worries.⁸⁵⁵ He further speculates that Sieburg was 'Plus perspicace' about the play's meaning.⁸⁵⁶

All one can say with any great certainty is that the Germans never banned *Antigone*, and that performances were only very temporarily suspended on 18 August 1944, when all theatres still running were forced to close by order of the Germans. The next performance took place on 27 September 1944. It may be safe to assume that the Germans had fully approved the text with no reservations, not only because the stamped document of approval

⁸⁵³ Jean-Louis Barsacq, *Place Dancourt: La vie, l'œuvre et l'Atelier d'André Barsacq* (Éditions Gallimard, 2005), pp. 246-47. This hypothesis is based on a letter from Manfred Flügge.

⁸⁵⁴ Anouilh, *La Vicomtesse*, p. 165. Sieburg was the author of *Dieu est-il français?* (a 1929 bestseller addressing the pursuit of individual happiness at the heart of French daily life). Sieburg's Nazi discourse frequently focused on the word 'bonheur' famously banded about in Anouilh's *Antigone*.

⁸⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

was in Barsacq's possession, but also because large extracts of the play were published weekly in quarto format – with high quality photos – by *L'Illustration* from 26 February 1944. The regularity and presentation of these inclusions indicate that the official printing could well have begun before the premiere of the play.⁸⁵⁷

The premiere

It is not easy to pinpoint the exact date of *Antigone*'s first public performance due to inconsistencies in announcements that appeared in Parisian cultural newspapers. While 14 February was given by some as the opening night, this was a Monday and the Atelier theatre's day free from performances. The next evening was indicated by others,⁸⁵⁸ yet the official German-sponsored paper *Pariser Zeitung* released its first full review of the play on the sixteenth. It seems likely the Friday 11 February 'premiere' mentioned by some sources was a semi-private showing open only to 'le Tout-Paris. Du beau monde, bien habillé'.⁸⁵⁹

There were indeed restricted access performances for friends and family on Thursday 10 February (dress rehearsal), Friday, Saturday and matinees on Sunday with cut-price seats. The public premiere was Tuesday 15 February. I can only suppose the *Pariser Zeitung* reviewer had managed to see *Antigone* during the previous weekend. Jean-Louis Barsacq was stunned by the number of people present at the first performances, wondering where they had heard about it.⁸⁶⁰ The Parisian press certainly advertised the play during the previous week, though not as early as recent books on Anouilh tend to suggest by giving 4 February 1944 as the date of the premiere.⁸⁶¹ This would be problematic in any case, as 7

⁸⁵⁷ Flügge, I, p. 289. The first complete publication of the play by *La Table Ronde* appeared in 1946.

⁸⁵⁸ 'La générale d'aujourd'hui', in *Aujourd'hui*, 15 February 1944

⁸⁵⁹ *Place Dancourt*, p. 301. For documents attesting to a February 11 premiere, see André Barsacq, p. 44.

⁸⁶⁰ *Place Dancourt*, p. 302.

⁸⁶¹ Minaud, p. 9, and *Dictionnaire des pièces de théâtre*, p. 42.

February announcements advertised *Antigone* as forthcoming. Also, the previous play at the Atelier, *L'Honorable Mr Pepys*, had its 307th and last performance on 6 February 1944.

Almost certainly within a month of the premiere, performances of *Antigone* were interrupted by frequent bomb alerts and spread more thinly over each week because of electricity cuts. René Lalou evokes the atmosphere of Paris on a Sunday afternoon during an outdoor performance of Sophocles's *Antigone* in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, where the student actors had to raise their voices to be heard above the noise of patrolling planes. '[Ou] encore, cet après-midi où deux heures d'alerte et de bombardement interrompirent, place Dancourt, une représentation de l'autre *Antigone*, celle de Jean Anouilh.'⁸⁶² The political picture had completely changed since Anouilh had actually written the play. The two copies of the text required by the Germans had been submitted before the invasion of the Free Zone in response to the Allied landings in North Africa. At that time, the French were just becoming disillusioned with the Vichy government and the Resistance was more of a rumour than a clearly identified opposition movement. With hindsight, it seems inevitable that the play would be interpreted differently in 1944.⁸⁶³

The 1941-1942 context of *Antigone*'s composition became irrelevant for the press and audiences of 1944, and Anouilh's heroine was hailed as vital for the times. 'Mais oui! C'est bien l'Antigone grecque que nous connaissons tous...mais Antigone rajeunie, transposée; Antigone Parisienne de 1944!'.⁸⁶⁴ Anouilh's play was an innovative adaptation:

C'est la pièce d'Anouilh que je préfère. Elle est d'une pureté de cristal...non, non ce n'est pas une adaptation de Sophocle. C'est de l'Anouilh, sans mélange. Songez, par exemple,

⁸⁶² René, *Le Théâtre en France depuis 1900* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 104.

⁸⁶³ Flügge, II, p. 43: 'j'ai promené mon manuscrit comme un vieux tapis à vendre pendant deux ans'. The frustration of Anouilh at the absence of his plays at the Atelier is clear from his correspondence with Barsacq.

⁸⁶⁴ *L'Appel*, 10 February 1944. Flügge, I, p. 263.

que Créon qui, dans Sophocle, condamne Antigone à mort, tente au contraire de la sauver dans la pièce d'Anouilh. C'est une œuvre extrêmement originale.⁸⁶⁵

Before assessing the content and innovations of Anouilh's play in comparison with Sophocles's, it is worth examining the popularity of Antigone plays during the Occupation

Anouilh's play was by no means the first version of the Antigone myth to be performed during the Occupation. Sophocles's original was performed both at the Sorbonne (August 1944 by the Odéon troupe) and in French translation at the Théâtre de l'Odéon (1942). Léon Chancerel's version, written in 1934 for the *Scouts de France*, was given at Vichy youth camps in 1941. The only known performances of Garnier's *Antigone* (1580), adapted by Thierry Maulnier – theatre critic for *Action Française*, were given at the Théâtre Charles de Rochefort (formerly Tristan Bernard) in May 1944. Jean Bodin also wrote a little-known *Antigone* in 1940. Several *reprises* of Cocteau's *Antigone* (1922) occurred during the Occupation: first by the Rideau de Jeunes theatre company in April 1941, then in its opera form with music by Honegger at the Paris Opéra (January 1943 and again in 1944).⁸⁶⁶ Abel Bonnard's translation of Sophocles into French appeared in 1938 and was used by the Odéon. The topic clearly had wide appeal during the dark years of German presence in France, leading André Fraigneau to exclaim, 'Notre théâtre traverse aujourd'hui une crise aiguë d'“antigonnite”'.⁸⁶⁷ From the inter-war years, authors such as Cocteau, Giraudoux and (later) Camus had recourse to Greek myths in order to better express twentieth-century man's anxiety and existential dilemmas.

⁸⁶⁵ Interview with Barsacq, *Au Pylori*, 6 January 1944. Flügge, I, p. 264.

⁸⁶⁶ Incidentally, the premiere of Cocteau's *Antigone* on 20 December 1922 featured Charles Dullin in the role of Créon, Artaud as Tirésias, with scenery by Picasso, costumes by Chanel and music by Honegger. It thus featured several French artists who were prominent during the Occupation.

⁸⁶⁷ *Comœdia*, May 1944.

Anouilh's attempts at adapting myths began with *Eurydice* and fragments for an *Oreste* play thought to be written in 1942 as preparatory material for *Antigone*. Although not until much later did Anouilh return to the Orestia to complete his play *Tu étais si gentil quand tu étais petit*, it is significant that his first two full adaptations of Greek legendary subjects should have been written during the Occupation. Equally significant is the fact that the lighter style of Anouilh's 1930s plays never resurfaced in his career.

[S]on inspiration revint au noir et, par une fuite en arrière, il puisa aux sources les plus tragiques de la mythologie grecque. [...] Lorsque, la France libérée, le dramaturge chercha à retrouver les thèmes de sa jeunesse, il composa des pièces noires, brillantes, grinçantes, voire costumées, mais le rose avait disparu à jamais!⁸⁶⁸

While a new French adaptation of Sophocles was unlikely to raise eyebrows with the German censorship body, Anouilh does not use the *Antigone* myth as a clever cover for communicating subversive messages to audiences. On the contrary, George Steiner argues that it could well have been Anouilh's specific spin on the Greek myth that persuaded the German censorship body to approve *Antigone*.⁸⁶⁹ He also speaks mysteriously about a delay on the part of the Germans in giving a visa to *Antigone*, whereas all other accounts point to a much quicker acceptance of the script.⁸⁷⁰ Several decades after the war, Anouilh wrote that he had not even been aware of the Resistance or its clandestine press.⁸⁷¹ It seems much more likely that the choice of *Antigone* owed more to its timelessness as a legend and its universal appeal as an intense dramatic conflict than to any inherent political allegory.

Barsacq confirmed this hypothesis in an interview about the staging of *Antigone*.

⁸⁶⁸ Paul Giniestier, *Anouilh* (Éditions Seghers, 1969), p. 82.

⁸⁶⁹ Steiner, p. 194. Véronique Taquin, p. 15, also observes this judgment from Anouilh's opponents: 'certains lui reprochent d'avoir fait l'apologie de l'ordre établi en revalorisant la position de Créon – raison pour laquelle, d'après ses détracteurs, la censure allemande aurait autorisé la pièce'.

⁸⁷⁰ Boittin, p. 25: 'The speedy movement past the censors'.

⁸⁷¹ Flügge, II, p. 45: 'Les "Lettres Françaises" que je ne connaissais pas (je n'avais rien compris à rien).'

