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# THIS MONTH

# Phil Kerby

## The Two "Macs"

IT IS absurd that so many Americans, possibly several million, missed the humor in the murder of President Kennedy. But slowly, with guidance from some advanced intellectuals, in the vanguard as always, the country is beginning to comprehend the essentially comic aspects of the assassination.

Most responsible, perhaps, for this new awareness, is a talented and youthful writer, a mere slip of a girl, Barbara Garson, who has surfaced from the alienated political underground with *MacBird*, a burlesque *Macbeth*, which implicitly accuses President Johnson of involvement in the assassination of his predecessor.

The principal characters are Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson as the MacBird-Macbeths and the Kennedy Brothers, including the assassinated President, as the KenO'Duncs.

The comic possibilities are superb, and Mrs. Garson handles the theme so brilliantly that the distinguished literary critic Dwight Macdonald calls *MacBird* "the funniest, toughest-minded and most ingenious political satire I've read in years."

*MacBird* contains an embarrassment of riches. Example, after the assassination:

MacBird: My grief is deep. It floods when left to flow. But smile, my lords. Let's have a

little show. Entertainers! Send on the entertainers!

(Witches leap on dais. The first Witch plays a kneec-slapping rhythm on a banjo and the third Witch rattles a tambourine. They do a soft-shoe and some "walk-around steps." MacBird is obviously delighted and drinks heartily.)

Second Witch: (Singing in minstrel style to "Massa's in de Cold, Cold, Ground.")

Massa makes de darkies love him  
Cause he was so kind.

Now dey sadly weep above him  
Mourning cause he leaves dem behind.

How he loved his darkies dearly;  
Used to shake my hand.  
Now de world am sad and dreary  
Massa's in anodder land

This is followed by a chorus. One verse catches the humor of the whole:

Where de orange flame am blazing  
By de grassy mound.  
Dere old Massa am a lazing  
Sleeping in de cold, cold ground.

Funny? Of course it is, if you defer to Dwight Macdonald's interpretation of humor (the *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 1).

This "most ingenious political satire" suggests, to the uninformed, that MacBird (Johnson) murders John KenO'Dunc (Kennedy) just as Macbeth murders Duncan, and that, according to Macdonald—who turns a little square around the edges at this point—is "the most disturbing aspect of *MacBird*."

Why should this implication disturb a tough-minded critic? But it did leave Mr. Macdonald queasy until he hit upon "the most obvious explanation" of why the talented kid didn't really

mean it: "... Having picked *Macbeth* as the Shakespearian play that best lent itself to topical satire, she was stuck with the plot line. . . . *Macbeth's* murder of Duncan couldn't have been omitted without its becoming another play." Translation: "Sorry about that, but the implication against President Johnson had to be included or the satire wouldn't have come off successfully." The alternative—dropping the idea—never seems to have occurred to Mr. Macdonald. To suggest that Johnson killed Kennedy seems a more reasonable thing to do than to mar a work of art or to frustrate a young artist. [Mr. Macdonald recently wrote, in a different mood, of the late Senator McCarthy: "His methods were repugnant—to put it mildly—so many lies! such demagoguery! such frivolity." But here Mr. Macdonald misses the point he made so well in reviewing *MacBird*. McCarthy's road to fame lay in finding Communists where none existed. He was stuck with a plot line, and he couldn't have omitted it without his becoming just another Senator.]

Mrs. Garson was more forthright than her admirer. "It doesn't worry me," she said, "if people think he (Johnson) killed Kennedy. I really think I've got Johnson right even if he didn't do it." There is something so admirably direct in that statement that even the awe-struck Mr. Macdonald's perceptive admiration of the writer falls short. Only a paraphrase of her words could illuminate their meaning and do them justice: "He's guilty, even if he isn't guilty."

Mr. Macdonald, thrashing around a bit, finally decides, "In sum, *MacBird* is a tasteless, crude and wholly destructive satire" and "its viewpoint is so thoroughly crude, consistently alien-

ated . . . that only an anarchist\* like me could find much comfort in it, and only small comfort at that."

This doesn't dull his respect for Mrs. Garson's "excellent and obvious notion . . . of savaging our political Establishment with burlesque *Macbeth*." Mr. Macdonald's praise, based on no consideration save the author's skill, is a more savage comment, though quite unintended, on this era than anything the young lady has written, or is likely to produce, in the scabrous ripeness of her talent. *end*