

LETTERS

MACDONALD'S MACBIRD

Dear Mr. Macdonald,

First I would like to say that the entire tone of your "Birds of America" article in the December 1, 1966 issue of *The New York Review* reminded me of those wonderful speeches that the president of my undergraduate university would make in response to the threats of the radical reform group on campus. He always expressed such delight that such a group had come to the fore and yet in interpreting such a movement he would invariably omit those points which were most important to our position; the points which, in fact, made ours a radical reform group.

You have not omitted the most provocative points in Barbara Garson's *MacBird*, you have merely told us that they "shouldn't be taken seriously, for goodness sake." Mr. Macdonald, I do not feel that it is the role of the critic or of the reviewer to tell the reader what the author means and does not mean. This is absurd. The role of the author and the reader is nil when the reviewer proceeds to make such revelations. You may comment on the validity of the points that are made, you are expected to do so, but to say here she means it and here she doesn't is supreme irresponsible gall. And yet while discrediting these provocative points by stating that Mrs. Garson was being forced to follow the story line of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (what lack of creativity) you claim to take such delight in the play. Why? Your article actually sounds as if you were quite concerned, upon reading the play, that people might take Mrs. Garson's implications seriously. Then in writing your review of the play you have said that you liked it; this is especially annoying. If a person does not like a particular piece of literature it is easier to either ignore or argue away his point of view on the basis of the differing world views of the critic and the author. But you love *MacBird* even after milking it dry. Mr. Macdonald, you love Macdonald's *MacBird*, not Garson's, and the two have a minimum in common.

Stephen Newman

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Dwight Macdonald replies:

Were my correspondent, who signs himself "Class of 1966," objecting to my literary estimate of *MacBird*, I could understand how "the entire tone"

of my review might well remind him of his former Prexy, another elderly hypocrite who undercut by praising with faint damns. For it is indeed rich in those qualifications and discriminations I learned in the Yale College Class of 1928, and I can see how they might strike him as niggling if not downright suspicious. As Mario Savio warned his followers at Berkeley—among them, the author of *MacBird*—"Never trust anyone over thirty."

But Mr. Newman's objections are political, and here I can't follow, gen-

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erational impasse or not. He accuses me of emasculating the play by advising the reader not to "take seriously" what he calls "the most provocative points." But I write: "The most striking and, to me, admirable political quality of *MacBird* . . . is its complete rejection of an alienation from our political Establishment—all of it"—the Kennedys as well as the Johnsons—and I quote, with approving glosses, some of the more drastic passages. There is, however, one "provocative point"—his plural is over-enthusiastic—the only one that fits his complaint, i.e., the only aspect of *MacBird* I say "shouldn't be taken seriously," and that is the "implication" that the murder in Dallas paralleled the one in Dunsinane—or, to name names, as my correspondent doesn't venture and I can't blame him, "provocative" being a mild term—that Johnson-Macbeth contrived the murder of Kennedy-Duncan. "Your article sounds as if you were concerned . . . that people might take Mrs. Garson's implications seriously," he writes. And so indeed I was. (Why Mr. Newman, as counsel for the defense, insists on hanging this particular albatross around his client's neck is as obscure to me as how the cause of "radical reform" is thus advanced, and generation me no generations.) I couldn't believe that a satirist who in the rest of her play showed so shrewd and realistic a grasp of American politics could have seriously taken off on such a flight into cloud cuckoo land, and my hypothesis, or guess, which I gave evidence for from the text, was that she was simply stuck with Shakespeare's plot and was giving the reader warning signals, whenever the assassination came up, by shifting into deliberate, absurd fantasy quite different from her usual tone.

Mr. Newman disagrees: that albatross to him is a badge of rectitude. He also thinks I have exceeded the critical speed limit: "Mr. Macdonald, I do not feel that it is the role of the critic to

tell the reader what the author means and does not mean. This is absurd." Or, on later reflection: "supreme irresponsible gall." Maybe, but I have at least one supporter, Barbara Garson: "You caught perfectly the relationship between me and the *Macbeth* plot. It's quite true that I said Johnson killed Kennedy because of the plot. I have no proof and no reason to believe it. In fact I never thought seriously of the possibility while writing the play. . . . I'm just the opposite of the people who had the idea seriously but couldn't bear to live with the thought. I couldn't seriously believe it but it was fun to play with it anyway. You got just this spirit in your article by saying 'how onerous she found this necessity I don't know.'" Apparently not very onerous—as I noted in the review, she is an irretrievably comic writer—but the point is it was a necessity, not an intention. I was wrong, though, in attributing the superior quality of the Egg of Head's speeches to the author's greater sympathy for the original than for the rest of the cast: "I certainly don't have any respect for Stevenson's style 'morally and intellectually.' Regardless of his in-

ternal dilemma, this is how I summarize his objective role, ('objective role—a useful old Trotskyite term which may displease you [it does—DM]: "Again Great Egg, your tongue gilds even death./Your well-draped words oft veil a bloody fact.' . . . Yup, him and all his moral dilemmas just smooth over things like the Bay of Pigs." Correction accepted, but on the Great Egg's late original, to her "Yup" I must oppose a firm "Nope." Qualified, of course.

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