

Birds of America

MacBird
by Barbara Garson

Dwight Macdonald

The funniest, toughest-minded, and most ingenious political satire I've read in years is Barbara Garson's *MacBird*. A veteran of the Berkeley student wars, Miss Garson has had the excellent and obvious notion—obvious after she did it—of savaging our political Establishment with a burlesque *Macbeth*, all in Elizabethan blank verse—more blank than verse at times—and enriched by tags from other Shakespeare plays skewed to suit her purpose. It works surprisingly well, whether as sharply pointed satire or as sheer—or if you prefer, mere—high-spirited low-comedy fooling around; most commonly, as a peculiar mixture of both. That Shakespeare is Universal is well known, but, to Garsonize Lady Macbeth: Who would have thought the old bard had so much blood in him?

The stars are Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson as the MacBirds and the three Kennedy brothers as the Ken-O'-Duncs. The supporting cast includes the Earl of Warren, Lord MacNamara, the Wayne of Morse, and—her finest inspiration—the late Adlai Stevenson as the Egg of Head. The witches are individualized and politicalized: First Witch "a student demonstrator, beatnik stereotype"; Second "a Negro with the impeccable grooming and attire of a *Muhammed Speaks* salesman"; Third "an old leftist, wearing a worker's cap and overalls and carrying a lunch pail." They open the play as usual, the blasted heath becoming a hotel corridor during the 1960 Democratic convention:

1ST WITCH: *When shall we three meet again?*
2ND WITCH: *In riot!*
3RD WITCH: *Strike!*
1ST WITCH: *Or stopping train?*

The next scene gets down to the nitty-gritty with unShakespearean promptness. The Ken-O'-Dunc brothers are discussing the advisability of offering MacBird second place on the Presidential ticket:

JOHN: *Like? Dislike? What foolishness is that?*
Our cause demands suppressing sentiment.
ROBERT: *But, Jack, you know it isn't merely scruples.*
He has a fat, yet hungry look. Such men are dangerous.
JOHN: *Good God, this womanly whimpering just when I need your manly immorality!*

Miss Garson clearly knows her way around the political scene, and she wastes no time in establishing the characteristics of the opposing chieftains: the amoral, calculating efficiency of the Ken-O'-Duncs is contrasted to that MacBird look, so familiar to us all by now: "fat, yet hungry." She has plenty to say about our Establishment, all of it uncomplimentary, and she says it in a headlong style, full of verve and humor—a kind of genial ferocity. At \$1.00 (from P.O. Box 2273, Grand Central Station, New York, N.Y., 10017) her burlesque is the entertainment bargain of the year.¹

¹ Although *MacBird* is often called a parody even by such well-informed admirers as Robert Brustein, even, in an off moment, by me, it is of course not a parody since its aim is not to ridicule Shakespeare's style but to use it for comic effect on an incongruous subject. It is,

THE MOST DISTURBING and "controversial" aspect of *MacBird* is that the eponymous villain murders John Ken-O'-Dunc just as Macbeth murders Duncan. If this is taken to be the author's serious—or even satirical—implication, then her play sinks to the level of such ultrarightist tracts as *A Texan Looks at Lyndon Johnson* or the post-assassination lucubrations of the palindromic professor, Dr. Revilo P. Oliver, and it would not be worth reading, let alone reviewing. But I don't so take it, for several reasons. An author who would build a satire around such an insinuation, for which no shred of evidence exists save in the addled wits of crackbrains, couldn't possibly have written anything as funny as *MacBird*, humor being incompatible with solipsistic fanaticism.



Nor would such a writer be endowed with the sense of reality Miss Garson shows in her adaptation of the Shakespearean material, the joke always depending on deftly using the familiar old lines to comment on the actual current situation. The most obvious explanation seems also the best: That, having picked *Macbeth* as the Shakespearean play that best lent itself to topical satire, she was stuck with the plot line and, while she could (and did) make some changes, the central dramatic action, Macbeth's murder of Duncan, couldn't have been omitted without its becoming another play.² How onerous she found this nec-

rather, a burlesque (fr. Italian *burla*, "ridicule"), a form that goes back to the ancient Greek mock epic, the *Bavachomyomachia*, or the Battle of the Frogs and the Mice, which treated these miniature wars in high Homeric style. A more recent example, and one whose thrust, like *MacBird*'s, is satiric as well as humorous, is Hawthorne's "The Celestial Railway," which uses the framework of *Pilgrim's Progress* for an attack on the nineteenth-century faith in materialistic Progress.

² She might have chosen *Julius Caesar*, but that would have raised the same problem—hard to get away from murder in Shakespeare—not to mention the temptation to type-cast Stevenson as Brutus to Kennedy's Caesar, with Johnson as fat-and-hungry-looking Cassius, which would have avoided the problem but would also have thrown any topical relevance into hopeless confusion.

essy I don't know, but it seems clear to me that she constantly signals that it is a mere plot necessity by wild departures from her usual respect for actuality whenever The Problem arises. Thus Lady Bird is absurdly made into a full-blown Lady Macbeth, the prime mover toward evil of a weak, indecisive husband: MACBIRD: "*I dare do all that may become a man. / Who dares do more is none.*" / LADY MACBIRD: "*I'm not a man. I am a lady and a Southern hostess.*" Miss Garson also takes great pains, unlike Shakespeare, to dissociate her villain-hero from the remotest actual connection with the murder of Duncan-Kennedy; MacBird does indeed press the king-president to come down for a visit at the ranch ("*So you can meet the people of my state. / You'll ride in rich regalia through the throng, / And feel the warmth and frenzy of their love*"), but the scene grows dim and misty when it

with most of the witches' material and all of the speeches of the Egg of Head, which express a humorously affectionate insight into Stevenson's political psyche in verse whose excellence may be due somewhat to the author's sympathy with that great Egg—as the success of the witches' lines may reflect her identification with their point of view—but perhaps more to the fact that he is in the play, as he was in reality, the only Establishment character with real style, morally and intellectually. But if Miss Garson rises, she also sinks. As Shakespearean pastiche, her play is technically much inferior to Max Beerbohm's parody of the Elizabethan manner in *Savonarola Brown* and to Nigel Dennis's extraordinary and sustained imitation, almost as long as *MacBird*, in *Cards of Identity*.

These stylistic lapses are paralleled by a chronic lack of taste in the content: the witches' dirge, in the form of a blackface burlesque of "Massa's in De Cold, Cold Ground," for the murdered President; the appalling and gratuitous joke about "early bird" on the next page, of which the less said the better; the First Reporter's comment after MacBird's press conference: "What a shit!"; the repeated insinuations that Ted Ken-O'-Dunc has lost his marbles—though I confess I found them amusing. And passages, all too common, like the following glimpse of the new President in action:

MESSENGER: *Beatniks burning draft cards.*

MACBIRD: *Jail 'em!*

MESSENGER: *Negroes starting sit-ins.*

MACBIRD: *Gas 'em!*

MESSENGER: *Latin rebels rising.*

MACBIRD: *Shoot 'em!*

MESSENGER: *Asian peasants arming.*

MACBIRD: *Bomb 'em!*

MESSENGER: *Congressmen complaining.*

MACBIRD: *Fuck 'em!*

Flush out this filthy scum; destroy dissent.

It's treason to defy your president. (His followers start to move doubtfully) You heard me! Go on, get your ass in gear. Get rid of all this protest stuff, y' hear?

There is no excuse for presenting our President as above except that, according to the daily press and to the recent biography by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, that is the way he is. The impeccable bad taste that pervades *MacBird* may be just what the subject calls for, precisely the approach most congruent to the atmosphere of Washington under the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson, and to his political style. The rapier would have been not only inadequate but also irrelevant. An enthusiastic laying about with the broad-axe was needed and this Miss Garson has provided.³ Though I'd

³ Her technique reminds me of the combat methods of Lewis Carroll's Tweedledee and Tweedledum: "I generally hit everything I can see—when I get really excited [says the former] And I laughed. 'You must hit the trees pretty often. I should think,' she said. Tweedledum looked around him with a satisfied smile. 'I don't suppose,' he said, 'there'll be a tree left standing for ever so far around by the time we've finished.'" Not many trees left by the time *MacBird* ends. Or twigs.

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not want to push the point too far, I suggest the stylistic crudities may be inextricably intertwined with the special charm of *MacBird*, which is the freedom with which the Elizabethan rhetoric is roughed up for comic or satiric effect, the Bard being treated as irreverently as the President. Nothing sacred. As Hamlet said to the players: "We'll e'en to't like French falconers, fly at anything we see." Although I am no friend of broad comedy, I find broadness here, given this particular subject, exhilarating and somehow liberating. So much dignified cant has overlaid the reality of our current Establishment politics that it is refreshing to have it brushed aside by a ruthless, if over-exuberant, housekeeper. It would have been better, of course, if Miss Garson had managed to combine the literary finesse of Beerbohm and Dennis with her all-out attack on the accepted political fundaments, as Brecht was able to do, but one really can't demand genius. And she has solved, in her own slam-bang way, the problem of satirizing a reality so grotesque that it often seems to defy exaggeration, producing its own built-in parody, so to speak. The reek of Johnsonian politics perhaps is better suggested by such passages as these than it would have been by more polished verse:

MACBIRD: *This here is the winter of our disquiet,
Made odious by that son of . . .*
CRONY: *Yeah.*

OR:

LADY MACBIRD: *I just don't know . . .*
MACBIRD: *I gotta hand it to me. I sure got style. MacBird, you're so damned sharp.*

OR:

MACBIRD: *Whatever you read about the demonstrators,
Whatever you hear about those that burn their draft cards,
Remember that there are always some in every crowd.
But the bulk of the two hundred million people in America.
And the bulk of the three billion people in the world,
Thank God there are men like you.
Keep your chin in and your chest out*

*And do your duty as you see it . . .
Your parents and your dependents
May not see some of you again,
But they will always be mighty proud
That you came this way, and so am I.
I. Thank You.*

To be pedantic, that last passage isn't actually from *MacBird*. But I'm sure Miss Garson would have put it in, unless it had sounded a little broad as burlesque even to her permissive ear. Our President, however, had no such qualms when he thus addressed an audience of American and native troops in South Korea during his recent Far Eastern tour. He spoke from his heart, impromptu and spontaneous, uninhibited by any static from his speech-writers. All hail, MacBird!

THE MOST STRIKING, and to me admirable, quality of *MacBird* as political comment is its complete rejection of and alienation from our political Establishment—all of it. Miss Garson's alienation is so drastic, her viewpoint so high above the struggle, that she can give us a sympathetic picture of MacBird when he ruminates, after John's coronation, on those cool, stylish whiz-kids of the opposing clan:

*Now do our princelings pipe in tenor tones,
Our bass-voiced elder statesmen cast aside,
Our ancient counsellors yield to college pups;
Grim-visaged politics has smoothed his face;
Our manly wars give way to mincing words;
And now instead of mounting saddled steeds
To fight the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly at a yachting party.
He struts before the wanton ambling nymph.
But I am not cut out for merry meetings,
For fancy foods and poetry and lutes.
I am stamped out in stern and solid shape
And thank the Lord I lack the frippery
To sport and blithely laugh in foreign tongues*

*While lightly touching on affairs of state
At fox hunts, polo parties, garden teas.
Yes, I am made of sturdy, homespun stuff.*

Or, as the original put it, according to the Evans-Novak biography (p. 2): "They say Jack Kennedy had style but I'm the one who's got the bills passed." MacBird is an easy target, but the Ken-O'-Dunc clan doesn't come off much better. Their opposition is shown throughout as calculating opportunism, and at the end, when MacBird confronts Robert and confidently repeats to him the witches' promise—"No man with beating heart or human blood / Can ever harm MacBird or touch his throne."—it is kind of sad, really, to hear Robert reply with Miss Garson's ingenious variation on Shakespeare's "*Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped*":

*Your charm is cursed. Prepare to hear the worst.
At each male birth, my father in his wisdom
Prepared his sons for their envisaged greatness.
Our first gasped cries as moist, inverted infants
Confirmed for him our place as lords and leaders.
To free his sons from paralyzing scruples
And temper us for roles of world authority
Our pulpy human hearts were cut away,
And in their place precision apparatus
Of steel and plastic tubing was inserted.
The sticky, humid blood was drained and then
A tepid antiseptic brine injected . . .
Thus steeling us to rule as more than men.
And so, MacBird, that very man you fear,
Your heartless, bloodless foe now lifts his spear!*

MacBird staggers and dies of a heart attack, after which Robert doffs his armor, pays reverence to the corpse and then—completely reversing Shakespeare's ending, which has Malcolm, after a few remarks about "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen," re-

storing the lawful order and concluding with prosaic respectability: "So thanks to all at once, and to each one / Whom we invite to see us crowned at Scone"—promises to continue faithfully the building of MacBird's "Smooth Society":

*My lords, black sorrow hovers o'er the land.
MacBird, our brilliant leader, lives no more . . .
So, choked with grief, I pledge my solemn word
To lift aloft the banner of MacBird.*

Well, really! How alienated can you get?

The only admirable characters are the witches who are promoted from their role in Shakespeare's play as neutral soothsayers to committed revolutionaries, prophets of a glorious future in which they will lead mankind into the promised kingdom after those bourgeois fakers have run their course. But such is the even-handed justice with which the author commends the poisoned chalice to everybody's lips that the witches, too, are treated with a comic realism—much about their present factional idiosyncrasies and almost nothing about that glorious future—which reduces them more to the level of the other characters, speaking existentially and not programmatically, than perhaps the author realizes. Miss Garson seems to be politically committed, right enough, but she is also a comic writer and her commitments are forgotten when she sees a chance to make a joke.

In sum, *MacBird* is a tasteless, crude, wholly destructive satire which roughs up everybody and everything, from Shakespeare to Vietnam, which would never be accepted by *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic*, and which is extremely funny, especially at its most tasteless, crude, and destructive moments. Its viewpoint is so thoroughly, consistently alienated from every statistically significant group or trend in American political life today that only an anarchist like me could find much comfort in it, and cold comfort at that. About all that can be said for it, aside from its being funny, is that at last the younger generation has produced a satirist. □

EXCERPTS FROM "MACBIRD" by Barbara Garson

REPORTER:
Your majesty, how do you view our future?
MACBIRD:
I'm glad you asked that, Bob—I have a dream.
We have an opportunity to move
Not only toward the rich society,
But upwards toward the Smooth Society.
My Smooth Society has room for all;
For each, a house, a car, a family,
A private psychoanalyst, a dog,
And rows of gardens, neatly trimmed and bedged.
This land will be a garden carefully pruned.
We'll lop off any branch that looks too tall,
That seems to grow too lofty or too fast,
And any weed that springs up on our soil,
To choke the plants I've neatly set in rows.
Gets plucked up root and all, by me, MacBird—
And this I do for you, my wholesome flowers.
I see a garden blooming undisturbed
Where all the buds are even in their rows.
An ordered garden, sweet with unity,
That is my dream; my Smooth Society.
(Applause from reporters which finally dies down)
I thank you gentlemen. Next question, please.

REPORTER:
Your majesty, how do you plan to deal
With rebel groups which thrive in Viet Land?

MACBIRD:
What rebel groups? Where is this Viet Land?
Who gave them folks permission to rebel?
Lord MacNamara, valiant chief of war,
What is this place I've just been asked about?

MACNAMARA:
It's way off to the East, eight thousand miles.
A little land we're trying to subdue.

MACBIRD:
What crap is this "we're trying to subdue"?
Since when do we permit an open challenge
To all the world's security and peace?
Rip out those Reds! Destroy them, root and branch!
Deploy whatever force you think we need!
Eradicate this noxious, spreading weed!

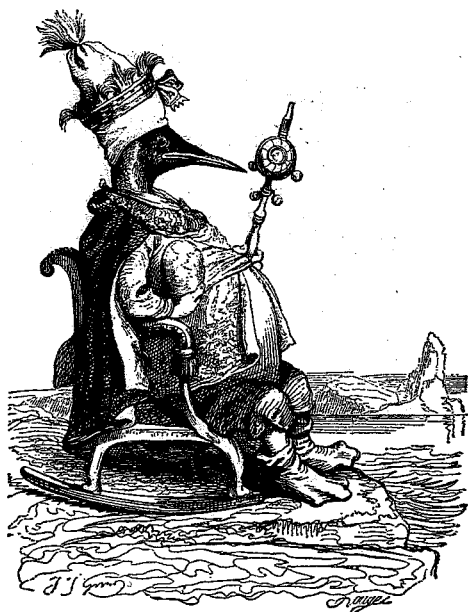
MACNAMARA:
Your word is my command. Your will is done.
That land will be subdued ere set of sun.

EGG:
I've heard some talk, I've thought some thoughts, but I
Prefer to wait, to give MacBird a chance.
This new regime, though watered with warm blood,
May grow and bloom in peace. As to your doubts,
There's rumors round but I have seen no proof.

ROBERT:
There's proof enough for one who wants to see.

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