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"Persona Non Grata" A Tragicomic One-Act

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Genovese, Maria K., ""Persona Non Grata" A Tragicomic One-Act" (2010). *Pell Scholars and Senior Theses*. 61.

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Persona Non Grata

A Tragicomic One-Act from Maria Genovese

Means to an End:

Manix – writer (female or male)

The jester – when he/she speaks there must be a spotlight on him/her

Judd – emotional and amiable

Clarence – impatient and insufferable

Mildred – naïve and open-minded

Prudence – mater-of-fact and prude

Curtain music: Band of Horses, “The General Specific”

Manix sits to one side of a park bench, center stage. On one side of the bench is a chair, and in that chair is a woman/man wearing a jester’s costume. Manix has a notebook and jots things down from time to time. He sits and jots for a few moments, then begins stroll back and forth in front of him – characters that will be significant later. Manix does not look up, but writes furiously. The characters eventually walk off the stage in either direction. The jester then climbs down from the tree, parades back and forth exaggeratedly, high-fives Manix, then resumes his place in his tree. The intensity of Manix’s writing increases according to the amount of activity going on before him. Enter Judd and Clarence.

Judd: And I said no, Mr. Nanahko, I don’t want to take the career profile test again.

Clarence: I said it once and I’ll say it again: corruption is a fine job, a fine job. Pays well, too.

Judd: Hey, Clarence? Sometimes when I’m sitting really still I move back and forth a little when my heart beats.

Clarence: Yeah? Well that’s normal.

Judd: Clarence? Would you let me fight for you?

Clarence: [irritated, gruff] What? What the hell are you talking about? [pause, and then] Well, I mean, I guess if I was up against a really formidable enemy, like an avatar.

Judd: A dinosaur?...Clarence? Do you think you might love me?

Freeze. Enter two ladies, Mildred and Prudence. Prudence is slightly larger than Mildred and waves a fan in any and all directions.

Prudence: I hear Mr. Nanahko has plans to move out of the house of god a week from Sunday.

Mildred: Oh? And where does he plan to settle?

Prudence: Somewhere in Argentina. His mistress is flying out to meet him the next day, and his wife won't join him for a month. Let's laugh...[they laugh].

Mildred: Remember when I lived in that little cottage with the yellow shutters? There was that bird's nest above my window...

Prudence: I hear they'll have a staff of forty...

Mildred: And one day a hawk flew by and ate the babies...

Prudence: I wonder which one of them he loves...

Mildred: My mother still played Elvis while she cooked dinner, though. Remember when I didn't shave my legs for a year?

Prudence: For I think it's safe to say one cannot love two people at once...

Mildred: Sometimes I'd reach down and stroke my calf, because the texture was amusing...

Prudence: If you love two people, then you don't love either one of them...

Mildred: Fuzz from my skirts would get stuck in the hairs. Remember when I woke up next to Claude on that misty morning? We were in a dark room and the sheets were like velvet albumens.

Prudence: I find that as long as I love myself, I simply cannot love anyone else.

Mildred: Up until then, Claude made me stutter. And one time I said breast when I meant to say best, which was embarrassing.

Prudence: [upon noticing Judd and Clarence; angrily] Shit! What are they doing here?

The two women freeze. The jester comes down from his tree and retrieves a table and two chairs from the wings. He sets them down to the side/front of the bench opposite his tree, then gets a broom and sweeps the top of the table and seats of the chairs. Manix looks on and fans himself with his notebook. Once the jester returns to his tree, the characters unfreeze and Manix writes. Clarence and Prudence sit down at the table, while their friends remain standing beside them.

Prudence: Allow me to introduce my friend, Mildred. She makes me feel good about myself.

Clarence: This here is my good buddy.

Judd: Well we don't really know what I am.

Prudence: [bangs on table] Can we get some service around here?

Manix gets up and walks over as if to serve them. He rips a page out of his notebook, crumples it into a ball, and places it in front of Clarence. He does the same for Prudence, and then returns to his bench. Clarence and Prudence make eating motions (use rice paper?).

Mildred: I love watching men eat. It's just something they've always done; even when they were little boys...Does it smell like dirt to you?

Judd: Oh, sorry...I forgot... [he reaches into his pockets, takes out two handfuls of dirt, and places them on the table.]

Prudence: [to Mildred] Well?

Mildred retrieves the broom and sweeps the table. Manix gets up and returns the broom to the wings while Mildred lies down on his bench.

Manix: [ready with notebook and pen, like a therapist] What seems to be the problem?

Judd: Well, everything would be perfect if everyone was the way you wanted them to be.

Mildred: Everyone would be everything if you wanted them to be perfect.

Prudence: That's where you're wrong, Mildred...

Clarence: I'm perfection personified. Personification is a literary device.

Manix: What are you trying to say?

Mildred: Persona non grata. That's where this is leading. There's one among us. But who is it?

Mildred scrambles to her feet and Manix resumes his position on the bench. Prudence and Clarence stand. Clarence waves at Judd and then gestures towards the table, and Judd returns the table and chairs to the wings. The two men and two women then form a line across the front of the stage, to the side opposite the tree. A sort of audition takes place.

Manix: Next!

Clarence: One of us better go up there.

Prudence: Oh? And who do you suppose that should be?

Clarence: Judd, remember when you asked if you could fight for me?

Judd: Well, yes-

Clarence: I need you to fight for me now. Get up there, Judd. Fight for me.

Mildred: No, Judd. Don't do it. He doesn't care about you.

Prudence: Mildred!

Clarence: Mildred!

Judd: Mildred?

Clarence: Don't listen to her, Judd. I mean it's not like you have anything better to do.

Mildred: I'm in love with you, Judd.

Prudence: Mildred! We had a deal!

Mildred: I can't wait for you, Prudence. I have needs. Judd...I have needs.

Judd: Do you need sustenance? Did you forget to go grocery shopping? I forget too sometimes.

Clarence: [to Judd] Why don't you make a list?

Prudence: No, Clarence. He remembers what he needs; he just forgets to go shopping.

Mildred: [to Judd] You could get one of those cheap planners from the drugstore...

Prudence: YOU are a cheap planner from the drugstore, Mildred. Literally.

Clarence: [mockingly] Oh, shit! What now?

Judd: Are you people kidding me? That grocery store bit was a complete joke. Did you honestly think I was that stupid?

Mildred: No, Judd, I-

Judd: Forget it. You know what; I will be the one to get up there, just so I can leave you all behind. If you'll excuse me... [he goes and kneels in front of Manix (as in a church pew)...as does Mildred...as does Prudence...as does Clarence].

J, M, P, and C: Our writer, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they word be done, in life as it is in fiction. Give us this day our daily book, and forgive us our-

Jester: That's enough.

Clarence: There are only two reasons a person should ever be on his or her knees.

Prudence: Well Mildred doesn't believe in God.

Clarence: [lewdly] That only leaves one reason...

Mildred: Stop it! I am a romantically deprived person and it is only natural that I would allow a work of fiction to take on the role of lover.

Judd: Making love out of fiction...that's real life.

Jester: That's enough.

Manix: [lifts a hand towards the jester] No. No, keep going.

Prudence: But now we can't keep going. Now the only natural behavior is to engage in meta-fiction. Meta-life.

Manix: She's right.

Clarence: If you're aware of exactly what is going on, everything is meta-fiction.

Jester: Well then why don't you all assume a new position and begin again?

Prudence: Physically or intellectually?

Mildred: What about emotionally?

Judd: Sometimes I go outside when it's really windy and hold my eyelids open so my eyes get really watery and I can cry.

Jester: Cut to Judd going for a walk and holding his eyelids open.

Lights flash. The jester's in the tree and Manix is on his bench with writing equipment. Judd, Clarence, Prudence and Mildred leave the stage, then Judd comes back on (lighting back to normal), as if going for a stroll in the park. He uses his fingers to hold his eyelids open, and thus cries. Enter Prudence and Clarence, as a couple.

Prudence: What's he doing?

Clarence: Is he...crying? Yes! Quickly, dear – walk very fast and let's not look him in the eye.

They exit.

Manix: What sensory perceptions do you have?

Enter Prudence, Clarence, and Mildred. Step by step, while saying the following lines, they move closer to Judd. They seem like they will embrace him...they raise their arms...but never actually touch him.

Prudence: Judd, honey, what's wrong?

Mildred: Judd, Mom asked you what's wrong.

Clarence: [to Mildred] It's ok, kiddo, he's upset.

They are frozen with their arms in the air, unable to connect, for this part:

Judd: My heart – there's a cut or a scrape...or a fire...something bad...

Clarence: What? A scrape? What do you mean?

Judd: It hurts so much that it is hurting everything else and I can't heal it myself...I want to but I can't; all I can do is make it hurt more! It's just...sometimes I wake up and I know the odds are against me. The odds that I'll do something significant are so slim that they render optimism obsolete. Sometimes when you say 'good morning,' I say 'morning' back but in my mind I see M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G. Mourning. I know I've got it made. I just don't know what to make of it.

Mildred, Prudence and Clarence: [they lower their arms and begin to step away from Judd] We don't understand, Judd.

Prudence: I'm sorry, baby.

Mildred: You're such a baby, Judd. A fetus. Don't use my soccer ball without asking.

Clarence: Hey, could you take out the trash?

Prudence: Cereal. The C+ / B- range.

Clarence: Girlfriends. Condoms.

Mildred: [responding to Clarence] Yeah, right.

Prudence, Mildred, and Clarence: You're just living; it's fine. We'll be right over there [gesture offstage]. Come find us when you're done – Once you understand that in reality you're fine.

They exit.

Jester: How do you feel? Fine? Catharsis?

Judd: No. Catheter.

Pause. Lighting change.

Manix: That was simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, which means it was real, which means it was fake, which means it was ordinary, which means it was real, which means it was extraordinary, which means it was ordinary, which means it was fake but also real.

Pause. Lighting change.

Judd: LOVE SCENE! Enter Mildred!

Enter Prudence.

Judd: Where's Mildred?

Prudence: She...she's stuck inside of her own mind.

Judd: Shit. Is she smoking a cigarette?

Prudence: [pauses, then nods]

Judd: Shit! I guess it'll be a while then. No matter...you'll suffice.

Prudence: I always do...shall we get on with it?

They stand face to face.

Judd: I love you.

Prudence: I don't love you.

Judd and Prudence: [turning so they have their backs to each other] BREAK! [then they turn to face one another again]

Prudence: I love you.

Judd: I don't love you.

Judd and Prudence: [turning so they have their backs to each other] BREAK! [then they turn to face one another again] I love you.

Prudence: Problems.

Judd: I clip my toenails in bed.

Prudence: I'm clingy.

Judd: I hate your mother.

Prudence: I hate your mother.

Judd and Prudence: Just kidding. [to audience] Hating your significant other's mother is not as common as we as a society are led to believe.

Judd: We work out our problems...

Prudence: ...La dee da...

They kiss, then wait for Manix's response.

Manix: What the hell was that? If that was really the way things happened, I'd be out a job.

Judd: I don't know what to tell you, man. I mean I can offer you a few free tickets, that's it.

Manix: Five dollars.

Judd: Two.

Manix: Three.

Judd: Done.

Manix pays Judd three dollars.

Manix: [to the wings] Hurry up you guys!

Enter Mildred and Clarence. Manix, Judd, Prudence, Mildred, Clarence, and the jester all sit on the bench together and stare at the audience as if they were watching some sort of show, which they are. They are quiet for an exaggeratedly long time.

Clarence: What's going on?

Jester: Clarence in the grass, alas!

Prudence: [aside, matter-of-fact] That was a Gertrude Stein reference.

Clarence: If I go to a show and no one does or says anything for a few minutes, I feel awkward and panicky.

Judd: Wait, you mean like this?

Clarence: No, that was fine but if we had been quiet longer-

Prudence: We would have been quiet longer if you hadn't just spoken, you idiot.

Mildred: Now, now, Prudence, let's just try it again.

Manix: Starting now.

Jester: Starting now. Starting and ending now. Restarting now.

No one does or says anything for a couple minutes...enough time so that it feels exaggerated. Then, Manix should select a member of the audience and ask him/her a question (for real).

Manix: Sir/Madam, did that period of inactivity make you feel awkward?

Audience member will respond.

Manix: Why/Why not?

Audience member will respond.

Manix: Interesting. [*He can respond naturally.*] Well it's something to think about. Now then.

As Manix returns, C, P, J and M form a group opposite him. They act like he is a stranger.

Prudence: Who are you?

Manix: Who.

Prudence: Who?

Manix: Who.

Prudence: Who? [4 "whos" spoken in tones according to "Who Are You," by The Who.]

Manix: You knew who I was a minute ago...

Prudence: [shouting] I'm sorry – We don't speak your language!

Manix: But...we're both speaking English...I can understand you...

Prudence: That's odd. Here, I'll send out a translator.

She pushes Clarence out to serve as a translator.

Clarence: [to Manix] Beep beep beep boop boop beep boop.

Manix: I don't want to listen to your music!

Prudence: What did he say, Clarence?

Clarence: [deadpan] He doesn't want to lose to a lunatic.

Manix: I said no such thing!

Clarence: I have a nose-itch thing.

Manix: No!

Clarence: Yes.

Manix: That's not what I said!

Clarence: I wish you were dead!

Manix: This is an outrage!

Clarence: I belong in a cage.

Manix: This is bigotry!

Clarence: Your ass is as big as a tree.

Manix: Your translator is an incompetent fool!

Clarence: I'm incontinent and I drool.

Manix: That's it.

Clarence: Giblet.

Mildred: What's a giblet?

Prudence: 'Giblet' is a culinary term referring to a bird's organ such as the liver or heart.

Manix: You would know...

Prudence: What's that supposed to mean!?

Manix: Exactly what you think it does.

Prudence: What if I don't think it means anything?

Manix: Then why would you ask me what it meant?

M, C, P, J, and Mildred should begin to circle around each other like they are circling prey. The stage should become darker...The characters should speak in strange tones.

Clarence: What is the meaning of this?

Manix: You guys are fools. I mean really – you don't understand!

Mildred: Don't be mean!

Judd: A-ha! The word "mean" has more than one meaning.

Clarence: This conversation is literally meaningful.

Prudence: I know exactly what you mean.

Manix: Stop! [lights back to normal] Theory of Relativity. "Meaning" is a relative term.

Jester: It's Wednesday night and the West Pond Restaurant is surprisingly busy. Behind the bar there are two bartenders who look like they could be brothers. One of them has caramel-blond hair that trails down his face into a mustache and short beard. He is quite attractive, with a nice jaw-line that would make him an ideal fedora model. Thoughts of fedoras lead to thoughts of Frank Sinatra, and I find myself scanning the shelves behind the bar for Jack Daniels. I can't make out the labels, but the bottles of liquor and wine glisten like the contents of an odd sort of jewelry box. It occurs to me that bottles set against a dark wood background look so much better than bottles set on kitchen tables.

During this monologue Manix returns to his bench with a bottle of Jack Daniels and writes. The rest are in a tizzy.

Clarence: [with regard to the monologue, distressed] What was that all about!?

Prudence: We're supposed to figure out how those ideas apply to society.

Judd: Was it an allegory?

Mildred: See you later, alligator. In a story, allegory.

Prudence: Well Wednesday and West both start with "W."

Clarence: Yes. Yes they do.

Prudence: So the four dominant sectors of our society can be symbolized in the letter "W."

Clarence: Alliteration. But more importantly, symbolism.

Judd: Symbolism trumps alliteration.

Mildred: What are the four dominant societal sectors?

Prudence: Based on the insights offered with regard to the concept of beauty – both physical good looks and the extensive benefit of an aesthetically pleasing environment – I have concluded that the four social sectors are (she makes one line of the “W” with her hand in the air as she names each sector) people who look like they are related, people with the bone structure of a fedora model, icons, and people who use their kitchen tables inappropriately.

Clarence: That makes sense. [To Manix] Did you get all that?

Manix: All what?

Clarence: Don't be smart with me.

Manix: ...But isn't that the point?

Clarence: Isn't what the point?

Manix: To be smart...to gain knowledge...

Clarence: ...Don't be smart with me... Repetition!

Prudence: If Clarence were a superhero, his power would be the identification of literary devices.

Jester: Excuse me, Clarence, but aren't you forgetting something? I'll give you a hint: it's man's best friend.

Clarence: [thoughtfully] *Canis lupis familiaris*?

Prudence: [aside, matter-of-fact] That is the scientific name for the domestic dog.

Jester: No. Irony.

Clarence, Prudence, Judd, Mildred: [give a salute: lunge forward, throw hands in the air] irony!

Manix: That was kind of weird, you guys. By the way - irony is a human construct.

Jester claps.

Clarence: Are you going to explain?

Manix: No. Not directly.

Prudence: Well that's ironic.

Manix: No, it's not.

Prudence: [indignant] Well perhaps my thought process is simply more advanced than yours.

Mildred: [shakes head; softly] No.

Judd: I'm bored of this. Can we talk about something else?

Clarence: Like what?

Judd: I don't know...

Mildred: I have an idea! Let's pretend we're discussing our previous discussions!

Prudence: As a whole, you mean?

Judd: That's perfect! Manix – you're a writer; can you lead us?

Jester: [laughs] You can lead them to water but you can't make them think.

Using the bench and chairs, Clarence, Prudence, Mildred, and Judd arrange themselves in such a way that allows them to converse effectively. Manix should be a little apart from the group.

Clarence: Hi, my name is Clarence, and I'm an overly-analytic fool.

Manix, P, J, and M: Hi, Clarence.

Manix: Clarence, how do you feel about the lines you've had to say during this play; how would you interpret them?

Clarence: Let's see...I'm a dominant male. I exhibit the human tendency to label and categorize. I'm out of touch with emotion. I'm less dimensional than a real person but I like to think my extremity proves a point. I'm wearing a costume and I look pretty good in it, so...

Mildred raises her hand and Manix calls on her.

Manix: Yes, Mildred?

Mildred: Everything Clarence just said – is it true?

Manix: [Shrugs] Yeah, I mean I think so... I mean I perceive it to be true, I guess...

Mildred: Well if it's true then Clarence doesn't really have a problem. This whole time he's been living his life. Each one of us has behaved the way we want to behave, and these people [gesture to audience] chose to watch us. In this moment, everything is the way it is.

Prudence: [Mimics Mildred raising her hand] Um, I have an idea – how about you don't fuck everything up with your stupid, simple little philosophies? You always have to try to be so peaceful and patient and content. I'll tell you what: I'll listen to your philosophy when you come back with visual aides and secondary sources and artillery – and not a second sooner!

Judd: Uh-oh - Does anyone else's hands feel heavy?

Hands drop to floor. Everyone tries to lift their hands, but they can't. They should make a show of being heavy-handed.

Manix: I get it! We're being heavy-handed! Quick - everyone say something irrelevant.

Clarence: I'll go first. [Clears throat] It's 10:30 in the morning. [Hands off floor]

Mildred: In chapter 9 of The Immigration Reader, The Social Organization of Mexican Migration to the United States, Douglas Massey examines the development of Mexican social networks from a sociological perspective. [Hands off floor]

Prudence: Emoticon [makes happy face] slash emoticon [makes sad face]. [Hands off floor]

Judd: Rent is \$1900 per month. The utilities run around \$165 for gas, high speed wireless Internet, and electricity. The apartment is very large and bright, and has a washer, dryer, and dishwasher in the unit. [Hands off floor]

Clarence: [To Judd] But does it come with a stairway to heaven?

Prudence: [Aside] That was an allusion to the famous Led Zeppelin song "Stairway to Heaven."

Mildred: Heaven may or may not exist.

Prudence: I don't think you're qualified to make that decision.

Judd: Prudence is annoying and so is she [points to Prudence].

Clarence: I feel uncomfortable... [Slowly turns to Judd] don't look at me like that... Shut up, shut up! How dare you tell me I'm only uncomfortable because deep down I doubt god's existence!

Judd: ...Need I say more?

Mildred: I don't think so. Silence is worth a thousand words.

Prudence: [Aside] That was a play on the cliché, "a picture's worth a thousand words."

Judd: [To Prudence] Be quiet.

There is tension but it is weakened when a planted audience member disruptively gets out of his/her seat, walks across the stage, and exits the theater. The characters should watch him/her and seem taken-aback.

Manix: Well that was strange. [Calling after the person]: That was very strange of you to do.

Confusion.

Mildred: Well now what do we do?

Manix: I know! Now Mildred says: [points to Mildred]

Mildred: Well now what do we do?

Manix: I know! Now Mildred says: [points to Mildred]

Mildred: Well now what do we do?

Manix: I know! Now Mildred says: [points to Mildred]

Mildred: Well now what do we do?

Manix: I know! Now Mildred says: [points to Mildred]

Mildred: Well now what-

Mildred is interrupted by Judd, who starts running in circles around the stage in a wild panic. The others look on, and then line up so he can give them high-fives as he runs by. He slows to a walk, and then the characters shake hands with each other.

All: Good game, good game, good game.

Clarence: I never much cared for athletics.

Prudence: Don't play games with me.

Mildred: Monopoly is a board game that promotes capitalism. They should change the name to Poverty-Gap-opoly.

Clarence: I'd buy it. Barack Obama is a socialist.

Manix: Good. Socialism allows for the equal allocation of resources.

Prudence: This morning my toaster oven was acting like a communist so I threw it out – but not before I made mini-bagels!

Judd: [to Prudence] You are unintelligent.

Prudence is about to respond when the audience member returns with food and a drink. She/he walks across the stage and returns to his/her seat. Mildred, Judd, Clarence, and Prudence faint.

Manix: [to the audience member] You did this. These people are pretending to have fainted because of you. And for what? A snack?

Lighting shift. Manix holds the person in an intense stare as the Jester laughs, gets up, and walks over. The jester puts his/her arm around Manix. Manix faints.

Jester: ...I want to touch you...but why?

Manix, still on the ground, writes in his notebook as the lights fade to black. Curtain.

Curtain music: The Who, "Who are You?"