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“Sex is power.”

–Camille Paglia

Cast of Characters

MADAME POISSON, an attractive widow in her 40s

GENEVIEVE, her maid

PIERRE LABUERRE, an ardent young man

PIERRE LABOUEF, an old man in ill health

PIERRE PARDIEU, a handsome politician, conceited and greedy

INSPECTOR IDIOT (pronounced Ih-dee-oh), a police inspector

Time

The past.

Place

A country like France.

Author Note

This play may also be performed under its original title *The Savage Sex*.

MADAME POISSON'S GUIDE TO HEALTH, WEALTH AND MURDER

A COMEDY OF BAD MANNERS

by DW Gregory

(Scene: A drawing room. MADAME POISSON reads a love letter as GENEVIEVE enters.)

GENEVIEVE. You rang, Madame?

MADAME. Ah, Genevieve. Another letter from my young lover Pierre LaBuerre. He's grown so ardent, he demands that I marry him at once. What do you think?

GENEVIEVE. Dump him, Madame.

MADAME. That's a bit harsh, Genevieve.

GENEVIEVE. He is a man, Madame, and like all men, no matter how ardent, is only good for one thing.

MADAME. Passion!

GENEVIEVE. Hailing a taxi.

(She poses.)

It's that air of authority that comes with the testicles, I speculate.

MADAME. I'll send a reply.

GENEVIEVE. No need, Madame. He is downstairs.

MADAME. At this hour?

GENEVIEVE. I told him you weren't receiving, but he insisted.

(Enter PIERRE, an ardent young man.)

PIERRE. My darling!

GENEVIEVE. Monsieur! You must wait to be admitted.

PIERRE. I am admitted!

(He glides across the floor and falls to his knees.)

An admitted slave to my love!

(He kisses MADAME's hand.)

In your presence, I lose all sense of reason!

MADAME. As well as all sense of time.

(He kisses MADAME's hem.)

PIERRE. I want only to touch you and kiss you and feel you and caress you and squeeze you and undo your shoelaces. Let me lick your stockings?

MADAME. Oh, do try to control yourself.

PIERRE. Whatever for?

MADAME. For decorum, if nothing else, Pierre.

PIERRE. I throw decorum to the window. It is a construct, a—a—an artificial reality imposed upon me by a society that quakes in fear of Natural Man! What do I care for decorum!

GENEVIEVE. Shall I bring the home brew Madame?

(MADAME regards PIERRE, who is chewing on her hem.)

MADAME. Excellent notion. I am sure Monsieur would like some—refreshment.

PIERRE. You are refreshment enough for me, my pet.

MADAME. Make it a double, Genevieve.

(GENEVIEVE leaves.)

PIERRE. My little pigeon, soon you will be mine.

MADAME. Of course I will be yours, Pierre. But how can I be sure of *your* devotion?

PIERRE. Sure of my devotion? Sure of my devotion? Here is my devotion!

(He drops his pants, revealing boxer shorts festooned with red hearts.)

MADAME. Not now, Pierre. It's not even noon.

PIERRE. Morning, noon, night, what does it matter?

MADAME. Some rituals demand an adherence to schedule.

PIERRE. *(Chastised:)* I forgot myself.

MADAME. Here it is midmorning, and there you are—in a posture any decent woman can only associate with the late afternoon. Tea and crumpets come to mind. Now, as I was saying. If you want me to be your wife—

PIERRE. Oh yes!

(He lunges for her and she stops him.)

MADAME. Then I must have some assurance of your devotion.

PIERRE. You have my assurance. I am completely devoted.

MADAME. Words alone are of no use to me. I am a woman, and being a woman, I am governed by the heart, not the intellect. Words, which spring from the mind, buzz past me like a swarm of bees. I can do nothing but bat them away and wait for the pull of the tide or the next phase of the moon to dictate my actions. Therefore, I shall need something much more concrete than words to win my confidence in you.

PIERRE. A token of my affection?

MADAME. Indeed! Some token, some trifle of sentimental value, but otherwise, small and inconsequential—like your trust fund, for example.

PIERRE. What's mine is yours.

MADAME. And what's yours is mine, I know. But it would mean so much more if what's yours became mine before I became yours. Then I could be certain that you loved me for me and not for what you think I am, based on exaggeration, innuendo, rumor, and of course, reputation. I just so happen to have the document drawn up. Genevieve will serve as witness. Genevieve!

PIERRE. (*Taking the pen:*) Where do I sign?

(*GENEVIEVE enters with a decanter of wine unlike no other.*)

GENEVIEVE. Madame?

MADAME. Your signature Genevieve.

GENEVIEVE. Yesterday, Madame, you told me I was too stupid to know my own name.

MADAME. And so you are. Your name is Genevieve. Sign the paper. That's a good girl.

PIERRE. And so it is settled?

MADAME. I can never doubt you now.

PIERRE. Oh, my little guinea hen. Let us consummate our passion!

MADAME. But first, let us drink to our union.

PIERRE. Of course.

GENEVIEVE. Don't drink too much, Madame—

MADAME. Thank you, Genevieve—

GENEVIEVE. Inspector Idiot is downstairs.

PIERRE. (*In a jealous rage:*) Inspector Idiot? That fool! What does he want!

MADAME. No doubt collecting for the policeman's ball. (*Aside:*) Get rid of him.

GENEVIEVE. This is the third time this week, Madame.

PIERRE. Yes, I have seen him at odd hours pacing in the street in front of this house. He has designs on you, I know it! I'll speak to him myself!

MADAME. No need, my dear. No need. Genevieve can handle it.

GENEVIEVE. What shall I tell him?

MADAME. Make something up.

GENEVIEVE. You mean lie?

MADAME. Like a rug!

(*MADAME shoves GENEVIEVE out of the room.*)

MADAME. And now, Pierre, to our love—

PIERRE. To our love.

(*They toast. He drinks and tosses the glass aside.*)

PIERRE. Now—let us get down to business...

(*He moves to her, but wobbles.*)

MADAME. Something wrong?

PIERRE. How strange, my darling. Now that you are mine, I—feel so light-headed. (*He stares.*) You—you never told me you had a twin sister.

(*PIERRE collapses onto the floor and stays there through the rest of the scene. MADAME steps over the corpse, studies the document with satisfaction. Enter GENEVIEVE.*)

GENEVIEVE. Madame.

MADAME. I told you to get rid of him.

GENEVIEVE. Monsieur LaBoeuf.

MADAME. Monsieur Labouef? At this hour?

GENEVIEVE. He insists upon seeing you.

MADAME. Send him away!

(*MONSIEUR LABOUEF enters. He is an old man and moves painfully and slowly, like a run-down watch.*)

GENEVIEVE. Monsieur! You must wait to be admitted.

LABOUEF. No, thank you. I already ate. My darling, my darling, my darling!

(He crosses to MADAME, falls to his knees creakily and reaches for her hand. Finally he gets her hand and kisses it.)

MADAME. Do try to control yourself, Pierre!

LABOUEF. Why have you refused to see me?

MADAME. How can I be sure of your devotion?

LABOUEF. *(Standing up:)* Sure of my devotion? Sure of my devotion? Here is my devotion.

(He tries to unzip his pants, but the effort exhausts him and he falls back onto the couch.)

MADAME. Genevieve—the smelling salts!

GENEVIEVE. We used them all last week, Madame.

MADAME. Well, do something!

(GENEVIEVE revives LABOUEF by splashing Madame's glass of home brew in his face.)

LABOUEF. *(Coming to:)* Oh, my dear. You are a woman of great passion.

MADAME. You still have your clothes on, Pierre.

LABOUEF. So I do. I should like to get much further than this today.

MADAME. I told you before, Pierre: I can consent to nothing less than marriage.

(LABOUEF produces a diamond ring in a case.)

MADAME. *(Studying it:)* Of course, if we are to be married, I must have more than an ordinary engagement ring to seal our pledge.

(She motions to GENEVIEVE to leave.)

LABOUEF. Nothing about that ring is ordinary. My first wife wore it to her grave.

MADAME. How charming. But yet, it is only a diamond. And a diamond will do for other women, but for me, who has been so often injured by love—it will take much more than a gemstone to win my confidence in you.

LABOUEF. I shall never betray you, my dear.

MADAME. You say that now, but you are a man, and like all men, governed by your carnal nature. You cannot help it; it is part of your make-up. Women are made for home and hearth and men, the hunt. That's why so many men become accountants. Try as you might to control the forces that engulf you—you must ultimately give in to your baser self.

LABOUEF. I should love to give in to my baser self.

MADAME. Of course! That's why I cannot marry you. We'd be together only a few short weeks and then—you'd find comfort in another bed. Or several beds, it hardly matters.

LABOUEF. Not so. In forty years of marriage, I never slept with anyone.

MADAME. Is that really true? Then seal your promise with a token of your esteem for me. It would be so much easier for me to believe you if I had some trifle, some trinket—

LABOUEF. Real estate.

MADAME. Some parcel of property.

LABOUEF. (*Producing a deed.*) My hunting cabin in the Ardennes. I've deeded it to you.

MADAME. Oh, Pierre. How could I ever have doubted you?

LABOUEF. Come, let us consummate our passion.

(He moves to embrace her, but she gets up and he falls over.)

MADAME. Of course, but first—a toast to our union.

LABOUEF. Union first, toast later. Damn. (*Still struggling with his zipper.*) I never could work this thing.

MADAME. I'll call Genevieve. She's good with zippers. In the meantime, to us—

LABOUEF. My dear, I usually don't drink before noon.

MADAME. Yes, well, there are quite a few things one ought not do before noon. To us.

LABOUEF. To us.

(A toast, and he drinks.)

LABOUEF. Which way to the bedroom?

(MADAME indicates.)

(He starts for it, then stops.)

LABOUEF. My, my.

MADAME. Something wrong?

LABOUEF. I don't know. It's been so long— I can't tell whether I'm having an orgasm...or a stroke.

(He dies.)

(GENEVIEVE enters.)

GENEVIEVE. Madame—

MADAME. Genevieve, if it's that damned inspector—

GENEVIEVE. The Honorable Monsieur Pardieu of the Town Council.

MADAME. Monsieur Pardieu! That lying thief!?

GENEVIEVE. The same. Shall I send him away?

MADAME. Yes! No—! First tell me what he's wearing. That lush silk shirt that he wore to his swearing-in ceremony?

GENEVIEVE. Oui Madame, and the gold cufflinks he wore before the inquisition by the grand jury.

MADAME. Tell him to wait. I'll draw a bath.

(PARDIEU enters. He is a handsome, middle-aged man, pompous and self-assured. He marches in grandly, coat over his arm, and bows with a sweep and a flourish.)

PARDIEU. My darling! It is I!

GENEVIEVE. Monsieur! You must wait to be admitted.

(PARDIEU tosses his coat onto GENEVIEVE and approaches MADAME with a flourish.)

PARDIEU. Looking as exquisite as ever.

MADAME. Thank you, Pierre.

PARDIEU. I was referring to myself.

(He examines himself in a pocket mirror.)

(Looking in the mirror:) I have come to claim you at last, my dear.

MADAME. Well. Do try to control yourself, Pierre.

PARDIEU. Why have you refused to see me?

MADAME. Because you are a bore.

PARDIEU. An occupational hazard.

MADAME. All the same. I can't seem to overlook it.

PARDIEU. It doesn't matter. You must marry me.

MADAME. I think not.

PARDIEU. But our tastes are completely compatible. Even now that dressing gown is a perfect complement to my cravat.

MADAME. Perhaps. But you are still a self-absorbed and egotistical fool.

PARDIEU. Which explains why I am in such great demand for public office.

MADAME. Your conversation is trivial.

PARDIEU. Making me the perfect escort to any dinner party.

MADAME. Your intellectual range is narrow—

PARDIEU. Well, I am a Conservative¹, after all.

MADAME. And your sexual technique is absent.

PARDIEU. Absence of technique is considered by many to be the highest form of flattery.

MADAME. I can hardly be expected to spend the rest of my life with someone who holds his wardrobe in greater regard than his wife.

PARDIEU. But I insist!

MADAME. Well. If you insist, I can hardly refuse. Except for one small matter.

PARDIEU. (*Kissing her hand:*) What will it cost me?

MADAME. How can I be certain of your devotion?

PARDIEU. Certain of my devotion? Certain of my devotion? Here is my devotion!

(PARDIEU makes a show of removing his coat, his belt, and—reaching into his pants—producing a pistol.)

MADAME. Yes, I can see that you are very devoted.

PARDIEU. Marry me—or I will shoot myself.

MADAME. No need to make it an either or proposition. Come, let us toast our union.

PARDIEU. I'm sorry, I've given up the drink since the last financial scandal.

MADAME. Just one sip, Pierre. As a token of your esteem.

PARDIEU. For that, I have this.

(He produces a diamond necklace.)

MADAME. (*Seizing the necklace:*) Oh, Pierre. How could I have doubted you?

PARDIEU. Because you are cold, calculating and mercenary—the only woman I could ever love.

¹ Pardieu can also be a Progressive, depending on the preferences of the producer.

MADAME. Oh Pierre!

(He is about to get a kiss, but she tears away—at some point in this next exchange, MADAME must get the pistol and conceal it in the sofa cushions.)

MADAME. But first, let us drink to our union!

PARDIEU. I never drink, unless I'm forced to by circumstance or bad weather.

MADAME. If you do not drink, I cannot consent to marry you.

PARDIEU. Lesser women than you have driven lesser men than me to drink and drink heartily, but none drinks so freely as the man who drinks with his heart.

(PARDIEU drinks, throws the glass down, seizes MADAME and—the poison hits.)

MADAME. Something wrong?

PARDIEU. I don't know. For the first time in my life—I feel something...in my heart.

(He falls over dead. MADAME steps over him and studies the necklace.)

(Enter GENEVIEVE.)

MADAME. What now, Genevieve?

GENEVIEVE. You're going to need more home brew, Madame.

MADAME. Another suitor?

GENEVIEVE. Inspector Idiot.

MADAME. Send him away!

GENEVIEVE. But Madame—

MADAME. Genevieve, I don't want that meddling fool in my parlor.

(Enter the INSPECTOR.)

INSPECTOR. Too late, Madame. The meddling fool is already here.

MADAME. Inspector. How good to see you!

INSPECTOR. Your capacity to lie is exceeded only by your income tax, Madame.

(He spots the wine, and pours himself a glass.)

You won't mind if I refresh myself.

MADAME. Not at all. Have as much as you like.

(Throughout this next scene, GENEVIEVE tries to kill the inspector with a variety of implements – hitting him with a broom, trying to strangle him with the belt, attempting to stab him with a letter opener, to strike him with LaBoeuf’s cane, and to smother him with a pillow – all to no avail – until MADAME finally hands her the gun.)

INSPECTOR. You have been very rude to keep me waiting Madame.

MADAME. I keep all my men waiting, Inspector.

INSPECTOR. You will find, Madame, that I am not one of your men. You may think I am taken in by your charm, your beauty, and your interior decorating, but no, Madame, I am not so easily fooled.

(He sniffs the wine.)

A Bordeaux.

MADAME. We make it here.

INSPECTOR. As I am not a trivial man, Madame, I will not waste your time with trivial chatter. I will be brief and to the point.

MADAME. Pray do.

INSPECTOR. There are some police investigators who feel the need to cajole and persuade their subjects with a feigned camaraderie, but I am not one of them, Madame, I am not one of them. Some police investigators feel that a woman, especially, must be put at ease, made to feel comfortable and unthreatened, given the delicacy of the sex, but I do not adhere to that philosophy, Madame. *(Sniffs the wine.)* A recent vintage.

MADAME. We’ve only just uncorked it.

INSPECTOR. As I said, some police investigators feel the need to put their subjects at ease with trivial chatter about baseball and opera, but I am a firm believer that brevity is not only the soul of wit, it is also the mother of invention! Do you not agree?

MADAME. I must agree.

INSPECTOR. Which would make you a most agreeable woman were you not the subject of a police investigation! *(Beat.)* You are aware that several men are missing from our village.

MADAME. Oh?

INSPECTOR. Seventeen men, to be exact. All of whom, it has been rumored, were engaged to you.

MADAME. Rumors, inspector, do not an engagement make.

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NOT OVER!**

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