

Women Rewrite Griselda: From Christine de Pizan to Julia Voznesenskaya

The story of Griselda became the mostly widely diffused and imitated tale of the *Decameron*. Within fifty years, its versions in Latin by Petrarch, in English by Chaucer, and in French by Philippe de Mézières and Christine de Pizan, helped to spread it among diverse audiences across Europe. It soon found its way into ballads and plays as well as narratives. Despite the presence of snide comments by Boccaccio's and Chaucer's narrators, the mixed response of Boccaccio's *brigata*, and the troubled reaction of many modern readers, in most versions Griselda is exemplary in some manner: for patience and fortitude, or for loyalty: to her husband or to her love or to her promise. In the earliest versions, she was not *necessarily* an example only for women: Boccaccio, writing in the context of the plague, implied her analogy with Job; Petrarch similarly proposed that she be read as an allegory of the human soul in its relationship with God. Yet women were often presented with the image of Griselda as a model for them of the perfect wife: thus 15th-century Italian wedding *cassoni* might be painted with her illustration¹; the 16th-century German Hans Sachs, depressingly, ends his dramatization of Petrarch's tale with the concluding remark that it teaches women how to be good wives and parents how to raise a girl by breaking her will so that she will become a good wife; the 17th-century

¹ Caldera 2011 cites a number of previous studies on this subject, and comments: "Va da sé come la novella di Griselda — modello di nobile costanza, di umile rassegnazione e d'inflessa fedeltà coniugale — si prestasse particolarmente ad essere rappresentata su oggetti direttamente connessi al matrimonio e alla vita domestica, come i cassoni e i cofani" (263), adding, "in ambito centro-italiano nella seconda metà del Quattrocento la storia di Griselda, con la sua duplice interpretazione di Boccaccio e di Petrarca, poteva garantire ai ricchi mercanti che commissionavano i cassoni nuziale, un soggetto edificante per una sposa in cui la nobiltà dell'animo finiva per superare lo svantaggio della mancanza di nobiltà di sangue" (264). In this same collection of essays, Komólsy (2011) offers Hungarian examples.

Frenchman Charles Perrault sent his verse narrative to the Duchess of Lorraine (niece of Louis XIV) as a wedding present.²

But among the many rewriters of this story are a few women. How were they reading it? Or more to the point, how were they rewriting it? What kinds of use did they see for this tale? As the women's movement gained traction in more modern centuries, men found the tale harder to reproduce.³ But modern women became more frequent among the tale's rewriters, precisely because of its troubling nature. Of the five women I will present here, three wrote in the twentieth century. Like the men, they span a broad range of countries and languages, French, German, English and Russian (though I confess having to read the Russian in translation). These women have no interest in allegorizations or analogies that associate Griselda's situation with that of Job or Everyman; for them Griselda is a woman first and foremost. Although the original Griselda tale emphasizes two relationships, that of wife and husband and that of subject and ruler, for these women there is no distinction; both are relationships of power differential. Although these women writers were most likely unaware of each other, they share certain strategies, as we shall see.

The first woman to reuse this story was Christine de Pizan, who places Griselda and three other women of the *Decameron* among historical (or presumably historical) figures from Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* in her *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (Book of the City of Ladies), written 1404–05. This remarkable work arranges nearly 200 women as examples within a framing argument in defense of women's value against the untruth, injustice and harmful impact of misogynist and misogynist⁴ writings. Christine certainly knew the *Decameron* but also Petrarch's version of the Griselda story, which had already appeared in three French translations, including one by a friend of hers.⁵ (She could also read Latin.) On one hand, she would have preferred Petrarch's serious moralizing tone to Dioneo's cynical and risqué jesting; on the other hand, Petrarch's Griselda stands alone, while

² More recent scholars, rejecting the allegorical or universalizing exemplary interpretations of this story, have reemphasized the specific historical or personal circumstances of the characters: Totaro (2005, 316–27) focuses on Griselda; Barolini (2013) focuses on Gualtieri; Barsella (2013) demonstrates the linking of domestic and political tyranny.

³ One remarkable modernization is Gerhart Hauptmann's *Griselda* play first performed in 1909.

⁴ On the importance of misogamy along with misogyny, see McLeod and Wilson 1994.

⁵ Philippe de Mézières was Christine's acquaintance. Bozzolo 1967, 3. Willard (1991, vi) suggests with regard to the Griselda story that "Christine was undoubtedly making use of this popularity, with a touch of irony, when she included it in her own book."

Boccaccio's takes her place among a wide array of other characters and tales.⁶ It is this latter approach that enabled Christine to merge Griselda's story with those of ancient and recent, pagan and Christian women.⁷ Christine is thus the first of several of our women writers to present Griselda not as a lone figure, unique or exceptional, but as one woman among many, whose life of patiently bearing domestic abuse unhappily evoked the realities of all too many women.

Christine divides her book into three parts, each narrated by one of three crowned females who come to comfort her in her study as she succumbs to depression and self-loathing in considering the pervasive misogyny in books both learned and popular. The three rescuers — Raison (Reason), Droiture (Rectitude) and Justice — tell Christine to trust her own experience more than the malice or envy of male writers, to clear away their false ideas and in their place erect with her pen a walled city that will defend and protect good women. The female examples that ensue are both inhabitants of the city and, at the same time, the stones of which the city is constructed (e.g., 1.14.4, 2.1.2).⁸ It is the ensemble of their examples that can become a general defense of women. In Book 1 Reason addresses the issue of what women are capable of: the initial examples are queens and empresses, capable not only of ruling and leading armies but of establishing cities and laws and civilizing human society; then come not only skillful practitioners but also inventors of the arts and sciences. Even though the social division of labor has excluded women from many fields, they are just as capable as — indeed, perhaps more capable than — men at learning and doing them.⁹ In Book 2, Rectitude turns to moral qualities, parrying male attacks on women as fickle, weak, and hostile to men, both by offering female examples

⁶ Another significant difference, which David Wallace points out, is that Petrarch describes and addresses only male readers, while Boccaccio addresses the ladies (Wallace 2009, 325).

⁷ Stecopoulos with Uitti 1992, 48–62, 49–50, argues that Christine is especially concerned to rectify Boccaccio's idea that women become great by overcoming their female nature with "virilem animum;" she wants to assert "that it is precisely in the *nature* of women to perform glorious deed." Just as importantly, McLeod notes that Christine's "viragoes exemplify a gender's, not an individual's, worth" (1991, 125).

⁸ Richards (2003, 45–46) points out the biblical and medieval sources of this idea, starting with 1 Peter 2:4–5: "and let yourselves be built, as living stones, into a spiritual temple."

⁹ Brown-Grant (1999, 152): "The concept of a sex-specific division of labour is fundamental to the type of defence of women offered throughout the *Cité*, one in which Christine seeks to convince misogynists of women's intellectual and moral potential for exercising virtue rather than to propose the reform of society so as to grant women equal access to all social roles."

of constancy, fortitude, and loyal love for fathers and husbands, and by turning the attacks against men with examples of weak, wavering, debauched and sadistic emperors, whose immorality in a powerful position caused enormous social harm. The third book turns to Christian saints and martyrs, with the Virgin Mary welcomed in as queen of the city. Thus we move from the literal builders of earthly cities at the beginning to members of the City of God at the end.¹⁰

Griselda appears in Book 2,¹¹ and is one of the rare figures to be mentioned in two different places.¹² When Christine asks why people rejoice at the birth of a son and are disappointed by the birth of a daughter, Rectitude explains how wrong this attitude is through a cost-benefit analysis of male and female children (2.7.1). People think that their daughters will cost them more because of the need for a dowry, but the expenses of raising and educating a son are similarly high. They think a daughter may “do something foolish” and dishonor the family, but if she is raised properly, she will live wisely; meanwhile sons get into “brawls or pursue a dissolute life, all to the grief and expense of their parents.”¹³ Daughters take care of their aging parents, while sons “long for their parents’ deaths so that they can inherit their lands and wealth.” Even affectionate sons go out into the world, while daughters stay closer to home and attend to their parents’ needs. The topic of women who took loving care of their parents leads into a series of examples, fifth and last of which is Griselda (2.11.2):

What a great love, enlivened in her by her loyal nature, made her so diligent in serving her poor father Giannucolo, old and sick, in such humility and faithfulness: a love which she so diligently cultivated and maintained in her purity, virginity, and in the flower of her youth! With great care and

¹⁰ Richards (2003, 52) remarks that her choice of city rather than convent as the model of her female community implies that women are rightfully citizens of both the Heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly city-state. Similarly, Book two tries “integrating Christine’s city into the *res publica*. Book 3 will show that the *Cité des dames* is a *civitas dei* as well” (McLeod 1991, 132).

¹¹ “Given the very exceptional nature of the heroines whose lives are recounted in Books I and III, the more direct relevance of Book II to Christine’s implied female readership is signalled by the fact that she places most of her examples of contemporary virtuous women, such as the princesses and noble ladies of France, in this section” (McLeod 1991, 165). Even these royal women are described and praised for domestic virtues and relationships. All four *Decameron* examples appear in Book 2.

¹² Dido is another figure who appears twice.

¹³ English quotations are taken from Pizan 1982. For the French text I have used the bilingual French-Italian edition: Pizan 1997.

solicitude, she earned a poor living for the two of them, through the labor and skill of her hands.¹⁴

Boccaccio says only that Gualtieri liked her beauty and “costumi” and that, after her return to her father’s home, “a’ piccoli servigi della paterna casa si diede sì come far soleva” (10.10.48).¹⁵

Petrarch elaborates:

She cheered her father’s dotage with inestimable love, and would pasture his few sheep, all the while wearying her fingers on the distaff; and then, returning home, she would prepare vegetables and a dinner in keeping with their fortune, spread his bed on the floor, and, in short, perform in the narrow space all the chores of an obedient, dutiful daughter.¹⁶

Christine follows Petrarch in elaborating, but instead of his specifications of her labors, adds details of her own: the father’s sickness, and the girl’s “flower of youth,” when she might be expected to want to have fun. Moreover, where Petrarch emphasizes drudgery (wearying her fingers), Christine emphasizes “skill.” This unexpected use of Griselda as a model of filial devotion prefaces her reappearance as an example of marital devotion.

Christine asks why misogynist literature blames women for making husbands miserable when reality is mostly the other way around (2.13). Rectitude exclaims:

How many women are there actually, dear friend –and you yourself know – who because of their husbands’ harshness spend their weary lives in the bond of marriage in greater suffering than if they were slaves among the Saracens? My God! How many harsh beatings – without cause and without reason – how many injuries, how many cruelties, insults, humiliations, and outrages have so many upright women suffered, none of whom cried out for help?¹⁷

¹⁴ “O! comment grant amour, par loyale nature en elle advivee, lui faisoit estre tant songneuse de servir si humblement et tant obeissamment son povre pere Janicole, malade et viel, qu’elle en sa purté et virginité et en fleur de jeunece nourrissoit et gouvernoit tant diligemment” (248).

¹⁵ Boccaccio 1976, 950–51.

¹⁶ *Sen.* 17.3 (in Petrarch 1972, 658–59). “Patris senium inextimabili refovens caritate, et pauculas eius oves pascebat, et colo interim digitos atterebat; vicissimque domum rediens, oluscula et dapes fortune congruas preparabat, durumque cubiculum sternebat, et ad summam angusto in spatio totum filialis obedientie ac pietatis officium explicabat.” The letter is entitled “De insigni obedientia et fide uxoris, ad Iohannem Bocacium de Certaldo” (in Petrarca 1975, 2:1316–17, with facing Italian).

¹⁷ “Ha! Chere amie, quantes femmes est il, et tu mesmes le scez, qui usent leur lasse de vie ou lien de mariage par durté de leurs maris en plus grant penitence que se elles fussent

One by one the negative qualities attributed to women are debunked, and Rectitude reproaches men for contradictorily expecting women to behave more constantly than themselves, despite women's being supposedly weaker. "Nor do they deign to repute women strong and constant for having endured such men's harsh outrages" (2.47.1).¹⁸ Griselda comes first among the examples of "very strong women" (2.49.5–2.50). The context makes her not unbelievably exceptional but almost normal, one among "many women" who put up silently with cruel husbands.

Christine's marquis, like Boccaccio's, seeks to test his wife's "constancy and patience,"¹⁹ not the Petrarchan test of *fides coniugis*.²⁰ But where Boccaccio's and Petrarch's Gualtieri at the moment of revelation, praises his wife's proof of "pazienza" or "fides," Christine lists multiple qualities: "this should be a sufficient test of your constancy and of the faith, loyalty and great love, obedience and proven humility" (2.50.4).²¹ Such a list counters the usual misogynist attacks.²² Meanwhile the marquis is introduced from the start as having something wrong with him: "there was a marquis of Saluces named Gualtieri. He was a handsome and honest man, but he behaved in an extraordinarily strange manner" (2.50.1) ["bel de corps et preudomme, mais moult estrange de meurs" (346)].²³ We are asked right away to regard Gualtieri as critically as we regard men's writings about women. In the examples that follow Griselda, male folly and malice cause women's

esclaves entre les Sarrasins? Dieux! Quantes dures bateures, sanz cause et sans raison, quantes laidenges, quantes villenies, injures, servitudes et oultrages y seuffrent maintes bonnes preudes femmes qui toutes n'en cryent pas harou" (254).

¹⁸ "[N]e ilz ne les daignent reputer fortes et constans quant elles endurent leurs durs oultrages" (336).

¹⁹ "[P]our esprouver la constance et pacience de Gliselidis" (348).

²⁰ *Sen.* 17.3; "cupiditas [...] fidem coniugis experiendi" (1322), "benevolentie et fidei coniugalis experimenta" (1328), and at the revelation scene, "fides [...] tua" (1336).

²¹ "[I]l doit assez souffire l'espreuve de ta constance et de la vraye foy, loyauté et grant amour, obeissance et humilité" (354).

²² Brown-Grant (2003, 91–92) writes: "Whereas Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* [...] had found virtue in those women who, as viragoes displaying "manly" qualities, succeeded in transcending their sex, Christine devoted over half of her text to women who, as wives, had virtuously performed the role that was specific to their sex. More importantly, Christine presents these good wives as not only benefitting their own husbands but also serving to maintain or restore social cohesion in general." Thus "men's failure to give women credit for all they do for them" constitutes not only "personal ingratitude" but also "social injustice."

²³ We can connect this to Boccaccio's introduction of Gualtieri with a reference to his "matta bestialità" (10.10.3).

sufferings, while the women demonstrate patience, constancy, and forgiveness –but only after eliciting the men’s confessions of wrongdoing.²⁴

Perhaps the most remarkable rewriting comes in the play *Griselda* by another Frenchwoman, Louise-Geneviève Gillot de Sainctonge.²⁵ I am afraid that I will have to repeat here briefly some of what I have written about her elsewhere,²⁶ but I want to put her play into this new context of women’s *Griseldas*. Like Christine, Mme. de Sainctonge seeks to critique the false notions of men about women. However, whereas Christine presents *Griselda* as a heroine, dignified in her constancy in the face of the ups and downs of fortune, Mme. de Sainctonge deprives both *Griselda* and Gualtieri of dignity. She turns the story into the banal case of a husband wanting to put aside his wife for a new younger woman. He is not testing *Griselda*, nor does he know that the young woman he desires is his own daughter. Thus he has no control of either events or information. Meanwhile *Griselda* appears as the pathetic spouse in an abusive relationship, cruelly manipulated by her husband, while her friends and supporters try, quite sensibly and sympathetically, to get her to break free of this abuse.

Mme. de Sainctonge herself seems — like Christine — to have been happily married for a number of years, and then widowed in middle age, whereupon she began writing. In 1714 her collected works — apart from her opera libretti and full-length books, which were printed separately — were published in Dijon.²⁷ They include the play of *Griselda*. The play was apparently not performed, and it is not clear exactly when it was written. Her source was Charles Perrault’s verse narrative, based on Petrarch and published in

²⁴ Earl Jeffrey Richards (in Pizan 1997, 22) notes that this series of tales contrasts the fortitude and constancy of the women with the “volubilità capricciosa e omicida dei loro mariti.” Kellogg comments that Christine offers all these examples because she sees that “history has been remembered badly” (2003, 132), excluding women’s fundamental contributions in a way that produces social injustice. Her book not only seeks to correct that history, but also “encourages other women to participate actively in the remembering with her.” Similarly, McLeod argues that the *Cité des dames* “seeks to give women a recognized share of earthly fame and a place within a social and historical order,” in order to “refute misogynistic authorities that deny her a positive self-image.” (1991, 117). As McLeod elsewhere suggests, “the book’s most important legacy may be its realization that self-images are made in part by cultural forces subject to manipulation” (1992, 45).

²⁵ Also Sainctonge or Xaintonge.

²⁶ Sainctonge 2010. All English quotations are taken from this translation.

²⁷ Sainctonge 1714. A previous collection of poems, without the *Griselda* play, had been published as *Poésies galantes* (Sainctonge 1696).

1691.²⁸ Perrault had dedicated the piece as a wedding gift to the king's niece, whose mother — the Princess Palatine and wife of King Louis's brother — had been a repeated dedicatee and patron of Mme. de Sainctonge. Her reworking of the tale is thus a response to the implications of Perrault's using Griselda as a model for wives. She turns it instead into a lesson for husbands.

The husband's problem (in this case he is a prince) is that he thinks he knows that women are deceitful, materialistic and coy. Therefore, he does not believe that his wife truly loves him but assumes instead that she is clinging to her marriage for its wealth and status. Similarly, he does not believe that the young Isabelle, a visitor at court whom he does not realize is his daughter, truly rejects his advances, but thinks she is just playing hard to get. His belief that women are fickle not only gives him hope that he can win Isabelle but also enables the confidante Phénice to trick him into believing that Isabelle has agreed to the wedding, a lie intended to cover her escape. Men still hold smugly onto the false 'knowledge' about women that Christine had tried to destroy.

The playwright adds a new bit of cruelty to the plot: the Prince gets Griselda to woo Isabelle for him by telling her: "That all of my joy is depending on you, / Should make you happy, whatever you do... Unless your devotion you thus demonstrate, I will know you're a devious, ambitious ingrate" (3.4). To her confidante's horror, Griselda accepts this psychological blackmail: "Yes, whatever my lot, it will welcome appear / If it pleases you, husband, so cruel and so dear. / [...] I will service your passion to demonstrate mine" (3.5). The confidante remonstrates, "Dead set against reason, your heart still excuses / That ungrateful man for his cruel abuses" (3.6). We are not at all encouraged to support Griselda's course. With 'reason' as a virtue repeatedly extolled, Griselda's explicitly irrational behavior is rather blamed than praised. The confidante, conspiring with Isabelle and Isabelle's young suitor, remarks that "in spite of herself we must lend her our aid" (4.2).

Griselda is not alone but has the support of other women: both Phénice and Isabelle (whose real identity she does not know). Completely unlike other dramatizations, which show Griselda mostly either isolated or with men, Sainctonge creates seven scenes with an all-female stage. The play even opens with Griselda and Isabelle conversing as friends. Isabelle, not a passive bride, resists the Prince's desires in every way she can and has no

²⁸ Perrault's poem was popular enough to be reprinted twice in 1694 and once again in 1695. Mme. de Sainctonge's play was written presumably some time between 1696 (the publication of her first collection) and 1714.

wish to cause Griselda's loss. Significantly, this resistance rather than submission to patriarchal will is part of her *virtue*. Moreover, what previous writers had praised as Griselda's endearing wifely patience is seen as useless or even part of the problem: "I have happily bowed to commands the most vicious / And never dared even to form my own wishes. / However, I've ceased to attract you, I see" (1.2). It is the resistant Isabelle who excites the Prince's passion; wifely submission only encourages abuse.

The horror of discovering that he has nearly committed incest finally makes the Prince rue his actions. The lesson of the play is that he should appreciate his sweet and loving wife of many years and not run after someone young enough to be — in fact — his daughter. The smug misogynist views with which he justified his own increasingly irrational behavior have deluded him. In the end, he acknowledges his error and humbles himself to his wife.

We jump now to the twentieth century, with its own versions of feminism motivating recurring interest in Griselda's tale.

Agnes Miegel (1879–1964) was born and raised in East Prussia, a businessman's only child, who in her mid-teens went to study in Weimar, and then furthered her education with travel to France, England, and Italy. She published her first book of poetry in 1901 (age 22), while working temporarily in Berlin as a schoolteacher.²⁹ By the time she was in her forties and fifties, her writings had won her an honorary doctorate from the local university in Königsberg in 1924, followed by other honors and prizes in the 1930s. I am sorry to say that subsequently she became an enthusiastic Nazi, but her Griselda poem is the work of her early years, published in her very first volume of *Gedichte*.³⁰

The poem has several contexts: one is the context of ballads, that is, narrative poems associated with both song and folklore. It was reprinted a few years before her death in her *Gesammelte Balladen*,³¹ along with a number of other poems from that 1901 collection. Together with this folk-narrative context comes a context of medievalism, or in her case medieval and renaissance-ism. The third context is portraits of women, whose names appear as the titles of a series of poems in a row: Griseldis³² follows Agnes Bernauerin, and is followed by Anna Bullen, Mary Stuart, Marie (granddaughter of the

²⁹ The Agnes Miegel Homepage offer a biographical portrait and chronology of her works: (<http://www.agnes-miegel-gesellschaft.de/biographie>).

³⁰ Miegel 1901, 1903.

³¹ Miegel 1959.

³² The form of the name indicates a Petrarchan rather than Boccaccian source, though in either case probably mediated by German versions.

English King Charles I), Madeleine Bothwell, Ys, Margarete von Valois, Abisag von Sunem (a Biblical figure), followed slightly later by Magdalena, “Die Kinder der Kleopatra,” and Santa Cäcilia. The volume begins with “Eva,” although women are certainly not its only focus. Let us look first at the “Griseldis” poem by itself, and then at some themes that it shares with surrounding poems, either in its first edition or in the *Gesammelte Balladen*.

Instead of telling the whole story, Miegel focuses on one scene: Griselda’s rejection by her husband. This is not a public but a private moment, which begins with gestures of affection from Griselda, rudely repulsed by her husband, here unnamed but given the title of “king.” The domestic rather than political nature of the scene is emphasized by the presence of the bed, which Griselda touches before leaving the room. The king makes no attempt at a political excuse; he declares flatly that he has become tired of her, and stresses her unworthiness from the first words, addressing her as “You child of labor,” a labor of which her “tan hand” still “speaks,” and comparing her blond hair to “your father’s field of rye.” There is no hint to the reader at all that this might be merely a test; even if we know the story, we are made to feel the plausible finality of this dismissal. Although her caress of the “gleaming sheets” might fleetingly suggest her attraction to material comforts as well as to her man, her gesture strokes the sheet flat, eliminating any trace of her presence. If the reader does not know the story, nothing suggests a happier ending to come. We do not see her children taken from her, but she is told to “forget that your womb carried a duke.” The possibility of any relationship between her and the child since its birth is negated. Griselda says nothing to her husband as she turns away and walks out, but we see that she is both hurt and frightened.

She walks out alone, without observers to comment or commiserate, into a cold and windy night. The shift from the bed and colorful lamp indoors to the cold dark night outside creates a vivid disjunction. Similarly, the dog at the gate that “flatteringly” licks the cold hand of the woman he still recognizes as his “mistress” provides a sharp contrast to the cruelly contemptuous behavior of her husband.³³ The green of the dog’s eyes is the last bit of color, visible in the light from within the castle that is being left behind. Might this dog evoke Odysseus’s faithful hunting dog that recognizes him as the returning master while the humans see only a beggar? But Odysseus is coming

³³ Regarding Miegel’s poem, Widmann notes the focus on one moment and the contrast between husband and dog (1906, 536 and 555–56). The collection entitled *Die deutsche Griselda: Transformationen einer literarischen Figuration von Boccaccio bis zur Moderne* (2010) makes no mention of Miegel.

home to a faithful wife (whose many years of faithful waiting resemble Griselda's), while Griselda here is leaving home, expelled by an unfaithful husband. The last line's reference to light from within the castle drives home the theme of exclusion.

An intense emotional atmosphere is created by simple and suggestive strokes. The rhyming couplets and parallel phrases maintain a connection with medieval and folk-song style: "Der König sprach es, Griseldis stand." "Sie sah nach dem König, — der wandte sich ab." The contrast between the speaking king and his silent farmer wife shifts to a contrast between the male human and the male dog. Both males will remain in their places, but the woman must go.

Evocations of Griselda's story are refracted in other poems in the collection. Just before "Griseldis," the poem "Agnes Bernauerin," in four quatrains, tells how Agnes, asked why she is pale and not singing, responds by recounting her dream: under a blood-red sky, she was shown a starry crown which, when she picked it up, became a funeral wreath. Near the end of the collection: "Chronik" is another four-quatrain poem about a shepherd's daughter, who sings as she guards the sheep. A young prince, hearing her and seeing her long golden hair, kneels to her and offers his crown. The bells ring for their wedding, "But the young queen never sang again." The cause is left mysterious; the events are only briefly sketched, and we are not allowed the intimate glimpses of the Griseldis poem. In all three cases, the country maid who is offered a crown or marriage to a king ends up forlorn, silenced and sad.

In the *Gesammelte Balladen*, another analogous poem appears shortly before "Griseldis." "Die Gräfin von Gleichen" tells of a crusader's wife who waits faithfully for his return for fourteen years. Her children die in a plague. Her relatives in vain urge her to remarry. She grows old. Finally, her husband returns: but with a new wife, a beautiful young Saracen princess who had rescued him from prison. (Oddly the Pope has consecrated this second marriage despite the existence of a live first wife.) Although her relatives are angered, she welcomes the pair, blesses the woman who has enabled her husband's safe return, urges them to start a new family, and walks off with a religious procession to end her days following the cross. Here is a Griselda tale with all the patience, fidelity, and self-abnegation, but without the miraculous reappearance of her dead children or the revelation that the young supposed bride is just one final test.

Like Christine de Pizan, Miegel places Griselda among other female examples who share certain features of her story, and like Christine, draws her examples from a mixture of history and literature, or perhaps assumes that the literature reflects an underlying historical truth. Helga Neumann and

Manfred Neumann, in their book *Agnes Miegel*, refer to the primarily female figures among the historical ballads (“Griseldis” included), commenting that the collection of sorrowful stories of these “proud and unbroken” women — all only briefly glimpsed — alerts the reader to Miegel’s feminist protest against women’s subordinate and powerless social status.³⁴ According to this view, these women, like the women in Christine’s *City*, are examples brought in to prove a point, although the point is left implicit. It is possible to see in at least some of them a protest against women’s ill treatment by men; although in some cases men are not to blame. However, I am not entirely persuaded that Miegel intended these as feminist examples, unless her interest in female figures as worthy objects of consideration is in itself a kind of feminism. Widmann instead sees the poems as an expression of the poet’s pessimistic worldview, made clear not only in the poems about women but in the entire volume.³⁵

Although writing about English women, Clare Brome Saunders offers a more plausible insight into Miegel’s work in her study *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* (2009). She cites Nina Auerbach’s observation that in Victorian England the duality of virgin and whore was replaced by a duality of Queen and victim, with a special popularity of figures who were both at once, e.g. Mary Stuart and Lady Jane Grey,³⁶ both figures in Miegel’s poetry. Although Saunders sees some writers (e.g., Elizabeth Barrett) using these figures “to show contempt for contemporary gender structures that demand female passivity,” her ultimate conclusion is less radical: “At the center of female medievalism is the demand for iconic, passive femininity to have an articulate voice, expressed by women rereading,

³⁴ Neumann and Neumann: “Bei den historischen Balladen sind es meist weibliche Gestalten, die dem Leser stolz und ungebrochen entgegentreten: Mary Stuart, Anna Bullen, Madeleine Bothwell, Agnes Bernauerin, Griseldis. Die redaktionelle Zusammenstellen dieser Frauen, deren leidvolles Geschick uns in einem wirkungsvollen Augenblick vorgeführt wird, läßt die emanzipatorischen Absichten Agnes Miegels durchaus erkennen: Mit Blickschärfe beobachtete die Dichterin offensichtlich die untergeordnete Rolle, die die Frau noch um die letzte Jahrhundertwende in familiären und gesellschaftlichen Leben spielte, und sie fand Stoffe, die dem Leser diese tragische gesellschaftliche Situation exemplarisch vor Augen führen sollen” (2000, 114). They note that contemporary critics preferred her magical medievalism to this “emancipatory intent.”

³⁵ Widmann 1906, 556. He refers also to “die pessimistische Umkehrung jener Balladenfassungen” (536).

³⁶ Nina Auerbach, *Women and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Harvard UP, 1982), 35–62, cited in Saunders 2009, 103.

and rewriting, medieval legend.”³⁷ In this light, while Griselda is not necessarily part of a social protest, her silence is given voice by the poet who wants her readers to see and feel Griselda’s subjective experience.

The ballad genre tends toward the tragic, and these cases can just as well be viewed as a kind of *De casibus*. Miegel’s repeated theme of women whose fortune changed from royalty to death³⁸ (Anne Buleyn, Marie Stuart, Madeleine Bothwell, Lady Jane Grey, Cleopatra) reinforces the tragic presentation of Griselda’s history, shorn of its happy ending. We can see why Widmann described Miegel’s representations as “pessimistic.”

A similarly bleak presentation of Griselda, once again among other fictional and historical women, comes to us in Caryl Churchill’s play *Top Girls*, first performed in London in 1982. Act I presents a dinner party of five women from different countries and centuries who gather to celebrate the promotion of the modern Englishwoman Marlene to managing director of a company. The guests in their order of arrival are Isabella Bird, a 19th-century world traveler, Lady Nijo, a 13th-century concubine of the Japanese emperor, Dull Gret (Dulle Griet), i.e., mad Margaret, the central figure in a painting by Breughel, the ninth-century Pope Joan, and Patient Griselda, whom Marlene introduces to the others thus: “Griselda’s in Boccaccio and Petrarch and Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage.”³⁹ Marlene knows the story and assists Griselda in telling it, sometimes commenting (“I don’t think Walter wanted to get married,” 75) and sometimes anticipating events; thus it is she who springs Walter’s revelation: “This is your daughter and your son,” 79).⁴⁰ But Griselda corrects Marlene’s reference to “the prince” with “He’s only a Marquis” (74).

Griselda’s retelling of her story to this tableful of women offers an interesting approach to understanding her responses to the events of her life. Recounting how the Marquis on his wedding day had stopped at her cottage, she reports:

The Marquis said it wasn’t an order, I could say no, but if I said
yes I must always obey him in everything.
Marlene: That’s when you should have suspected.
Griselda: But of course a wife must obey her husband. And of course I
must obey the Marquis.

³⁷ Saunders 2009, 54 and 183.

³⁸ Not all these sad endings involve intentional executions or abandonment: Madeleine Bothwell died of ill health shortly after marrying the King of Scotland.

³⁹ Quotations are from Churchill 1987, 74.

⁴⁰ Tycer (2008, 39) notes that Griselda tells the story from her own original perspective which does not realize — and thus does not inform the audience — that the children have been sent away safely.

- Isabella: I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn't seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn't have wanted to go abroad while I was married.
- Marlene: Then why bother to mention it at all? He'd got a thing about it, that's why.
- Griselda: I'd rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village.
- Marlene: Yes, that's a point.

As Isabella points out, marriage vows continued until fairly recently to include the wife's vow of obedience to her husband; and as much as she loved traveling, she "naturally" would not even have *wanted* to do so while married. Thus she supports Griselda's attitude that it was not a sacrifice to give up her own plans because she had already internalized the idea that marriage means not having or wanting one's own plans. Griselda notes the double power relationship, political as well as marital, and feels happier about obeying a man who is socially her superior than one from her own social level. Even Marlene, who remains unmarried, can accept the idea of obedience to a superior as something analogous to her own experience of professional obedience to a boss.

Griselda defends her surrender of her daughter by saying, "It was Walter's child to do what he liked with" (77), and although other women protest, Nijo, who has been in a similar situation as an emperor's concubine, says, "No, I understand. Of course you had to, he was your life. And were you in favour after that?" "Oh yes," says Griselda, "we were very happy together. We never spoke about what had happened" (77). Here the court culture makes its own demands that do not interfere with the affectionate personal relationship. Nijo's story represents that of all the many imperial concubines whose babies were commonly taken away. Nijo only comments that it was better to have a child taken at once, as hers were, than after six weeks or (in the case of Griselda's second child) two years when one has formed an attachment. Even Isabella accepts the idea that in giving up her children, "I can see you were doing what you thought was your duty," though she has a harder time accepting Griselda's going on happily afterwards. But Nijo and Griselda have both been raised to accept the idea of serving a 'master.' So too, when Griselda leaves for home, Nijo concurs: "Better to leave if your master doesn't want you" (78).

Moreover, Griselda rejects the notion that Walter was "a monster," as Marlene calls him (79). When Marlene comments snidely about the marriage, "And at first he seemed perfectly normal?" Griselda replies, "Marlene, you're always so critical of him. Of course he was normal, he was very kind." "But Griselda, come on, he took your baby." And here comes Griselda's interpretation of Walter's motives: "Walter found it hard to believe I loved

him” (76). We see suddenly the plausible psychology of the Marquis who, having married a peasant, wants desperately to know that she loves *him* and not just his status and wealth (precisely the suspicion of Mme. de Saintonge’s Prince). Although Griselda quotes Walter’s excuses about the people’s discontent, she feels that she has seen through it to the real truth: “Oh it wasn’t true. Walter would never give in to the people. He wanted to see if I loved him enough” (77). When asked whether she could forgive her husband after the reassemblage of her family, Griselda says, “He suffered so much all those years.” *He* suffered so much, unsure whether the woman he loved truly loved him in return, and driven to test her in ways that were likely to destroy the very love he hungered for. This interpretation allows Griselda to feel that there is a reason for his actions, and even a reason that is sweet to her.

Of all five women’s histories, this is the one that makes Marlene say, “I can’t stand this. I’m going for a pee” (77). The moment that elicits this response is Griselda’s surrendering of her first child to a man who she assumes will murder it. Thus Marlene misses also the surrender of the second child, the rejection of Griselda, and her recall to prepare the palace for the new wedding. As Marlene reenters, Griselda is saying, “The girl was sixteen and far more beautiful than me. I could see why he loved her.” Marlene’s desire to miss most of the story, especially the loss of children, may become clarified when we learn in a later act that Marlene has gladly given her own daughter, born out of wedlock, to be adopted and raised by her sister: like Walter! Indeed, Marlene’s success in the business world has been made possible by dumping this unwanted child, Angie, on her sister Joyce, who remains in the low-paid working class from which Marlene has risen, nor does Marlene want to acknowledge the child as her own even years later. Griselda’s meek patience and subordination to male power represent everything Marlene has rejected. But in the process, she has exploited the patience and affectionate nature of another woman. Marlene, who has called Walter “a monster,” is reluctant to see herself in that monster.

Marlene exclaims, “You really are exceptional, Griselda” (79); but the other dinner party guests tend to undermine Marlene’s assessment and to suggest that at least elements of her story are shared by women’s lives more generally. The childless Isabella says, “I did think it was remarkably barbaric to kill them [the children] but you learn not to say anything” (79), thus normalizing Griselda’s silent acquiescence. The courtesan Nijo, whose children were permanently taken away from her one by one, says, “Oh. Oh I see. You got them back... Nobody gave me back my children” (79). When Griselda is sent home to her father, Nijo comments, “At least your father wasn’t dead. I had nobody.” Furthermore, Nijo, who, having permanently

lost the Emperor's interest, left court and became a Buddhist nun, sees Griselda's return to favor and life at court as a much happier ending than her own: "when I fell out of favor I had nothing. Religion is a kind of nothing and I dedicated what was left of me to nothing. ... Haven't you ever felt like that? Nothing will ever happen again. I am dead already" (61). In relation to the real life of Nijo, the fictional example of Griselda seems not so bad, not so extreme.

What remains exceptional about Griselda is her endless forgiveness. Other women reach a point where abuse triggers angry violence. In Nijo's case — one she shares with her fellow concubines — it is when the Emperor allows his attendants to join him in beating the women. Their revenge is to do the unthinkable and beat the Emperor with sticks (80–81). For Dull Gret it is the Spaniards' slaughter of two of her children that sends her armed into a battle against devils in hell, even though, unlike Griselda, she had eight other children besides. Nijo is clearly identifying with Gret's account of giving the devils a beating as she interjects "Take that, take that" (82). Nijo's tale of anger and revenge causes Griselda's final reflection: "I do think — I do wonder — it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to" (81). This comment, while still exculpating Walter (he "had to"), shows Griselda contemplating an alternative that appears impossible but "would have been nicer." This too potentially connects with material later in the play: it would have been nicer if Marlene and Joyce's father had not repeatedly gotten drunk and violent to their mother (Act 3, 138–39), but while Marlene accuses him of being a "bastard," Joyce recognizes that he was just as much a victim of the social and economic system: "What sort of life did he have? Working in the fields like an animal. Why wouldn't he want a drink? ... It's not all down to him. Their lives were rubbish. They were treated like rubbish." While Marlene says, "I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" (140), for Joyce it is not a matter of individuals but of "us and them," with severely limited options for "us," and she eagerly awaits the revolution. These sisters are not "sisters" in the feminist sense; their politics divide them.

Churchill's emphasis on the combination of gender and class relations brings her play closer to Boccaccio's story than the play of Mme. de Sainctonge. Yet she shares with Sainctonge and Christine the treatment of Griselda's situation, and even her responses to it, as more banal than exceptional. The normalizing of Griselda's situation, its presentation as a reflection of many other women's lives, serves Churchill's call not to look to the individual success of people like Marlene, which necessitates the exploitation of others, but to reform the entire economic and social value system so that everyone — both men and women — can live "nicer" lives. As she said

in an interview, “Socialism and feminism aren’t synonymous, but I feel strongly about both, and wouldn’t be interested in a form of one that didn’t include the other.”⁴¹

The very normalization of Griselda’s situation through its reverberations with pieces of the other women’s stories is more terrifying than a view of it as exceptional or unique. By the end of the act, we are seeing women enraged, terrified, and getting sick. Yet the very last sentences of Act 1 turn to the possibility of joy: Isabella gets one last piece of a speech, in which she talks about traveling to Morocco. “I was seventy years old. What lengths to go to for a last chance of joy. I knew my return of vigour was only temporary, but how marvellous while it lasted.” On one hand we admire this indomitable pursuit of joy despite years of pain (and we might compare it with Griselda’s happy ending); on the other hand we recognize—or will recognize by the end of the play – that this kind of temporary individual pleasure does nothing to alter the constraints of society that limit the possibilities of happiness for men and women alike.

The issue of happiness is central to my last example, which, unlike the others so far, is not explicitly a Griselda story. Nonetheless, I think it needs to be considered one more reworking of it, or at least a reflection on it, for it is the very last story in Julia Voznesenskaya’s *The Women’s Decameron* (1985).⁴² Voznesenskaya (1940–2015), who died only recently, grew up in Leningrad and became part of its unofficial cultural activity; she was sentenced in 1976 to four years of prison and exile for anti-Soviet propaganda, and at the end of the four years emigrated to Germany, where she was living when she wrote this book.⁴³

Given her prolific output and the quality of *The Women’s Decameron*, remarkably little has been written about her in any language I can read, and probably not much in Russian either given her status as *persona non grata*.

⁴¹ Cited in Merrill 1988, 71. Brown-Grant (1999, 93–94) argues that Christine sees women as a fourth “estate,” and that the social injustice of men’s ingratitude for what women have contributed to society is analogous to their ingratitude to the peasant estate for the labor which provides their food. In both cases, a mutual obligation has become one-sided. See also Otto Oexle (1994).

⁴² Copyrighted in Russian in 1985, it was translated into English by W.B Linton (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

⁴³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julia_Voznesenskaya accessed 7–6–2016, and the book jacket.

Practically the only essay, Barbara Zaczek's "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words," connects the overall message of the two Decamerons.⁴⁴ She sees Voznesenskaya reusing Boccaccio's technique of showing us both an objective reality and its recreation by language: in Boccaccio's case her prime example is the very first tale, where a physical wall separates the two rooms: that of the false confession and that of the two hosts who listen with astonishment; in the Russian case Soviet official views come early, only to be undermined by the women's narratives. Cormac Ó Cuilleaináin briefly discusses the work in the introduction to his *Decameron* translation, suggesting that Voznesenskaya chose the framed tale form rather than the novel in order to convey the "fractured society" of Communist Russia.⁴⁵

My decision to see the last tale as a Griselda story is based on the extent to which Voznesenskaya attends not only to the general idea of a collection of 100 stories told by ten people for ten days but also to the forms and features of Boccaccio's book. The narrators are ten women temporarily quarantined in a maternity ward. Emma, who has the idea of imitating the *Decameron* as a pastime, becomes in effect the permanent queen, as such telling regularly the ninth tale of the day. Already on day one, Irishka asks to be allowed to wait until last because she feels shy (4), so she regularly tells the tenth tale. Her request, of course, echoes Dioneo's though with a different motivation. In fact, Voznesenskaya follows Boccaccio's creation of both pattern and exception: as with Dioneo, the pattern of Irishka as tenth speaker hold true for only nine of the ten days.⁴⁶ This indicates to me a detailed observation of Boccaccio's form. When Emma asks the other women whether any of them have read the *Decameron*, "Naturally about half of them had" (2). The *Decameron* was in fact officially valued in Russia as a pioneer of social realism.

Each day has a topic (no free topics here), and within each topic, as in the *Decameron*, we get variations: stories about the better off or the poor, positive or negative examples of men or of women, of hetero- and homosexual relations, very short anecdotes and longer stories, happy and tragic endings, comic and serious tones, and a variety of types of discourse: official statements, jokes, first-person accounts or third-person narratives. Like

⁴⁴ Zaczek 2006. Another brief reference comes in Feinstein 1989, who discusses how Andrea Dworkin, Julia Voznesenskaya and Dacia Maraini respond as feminists to Boccaccio's "traditional sex story" as exemplified by the tale of Rustico and Alibech.

⁴⁵ Cormac Ó Cuilleaináin, "Introduction," in Boccaccio 2004, xliii–xlvi.

⁴⁶ The same is true of Emma as ninth speaker and Larissa as first. Some of the other speakers have a more varied position in the order.

Boccaccio, Voznesenskaya draws plot ideas from earlier literature as well as from contemporary experience.⁴⁷ At the end of each tale the women briefly exchange a few comments, banter and tease each other, and as they launch into the next story, phrases from the *Decameron* sometimes reappear: “I had prepared a completely different story for you, not the one I’m going to tell you now. ...” (2.6, 51); “Both the last stories prompt me to tell you...” (5.8, 131).

Unlike Boccaccio’s narrators, however, the Russian women hail from quite different parts of society: a tramp, a call-girl now married, a shipyard worker, a secretary, an engineer, a doctor of biology, a theatre director, a Jewish musician, a “party bigwig” and a dissident: the last two allowing for political disagreement such as Boccaccio hints at. Worldviews range from the worldliness of the tramp and call-girl to the self-respecting independence of the unmarried mother with a professional career, to the naiveté of the sweet plump secretary, shy Irishka, who has happily married her one and only sweetheart. As these women are generally speaking about their own lives or those of family members and acquaintances, the social range found within Boccaccio’s stories is necessarily mapped onto the narrators.⁴⁸ Despite this one major difference, I suggest that Voznesenskaya’s attention to the *Decameron*’s formal features supports my claim that the final story is a kind of Griselda tale.

The topic of noble actions recurs in this *Women’s Decameron* but as the penultimate topic; the very last day is reserved for the topic of happiness, and the rubric announces that it offers “something about happy women in Russia in general.” Thus whereas Boccaccio’s Griselda tale is an example of magnanimous behavior meriting fame, Voznesenskaya’s final tale is part of the women’s search for a happy or happier life for themselves without any concern for being famous or remembered. “Lucky Mariya” is the subject of the final story, and one can get a good sense of the persistent ironies of the narrative from its beginning: “Mariya’s luck began the day they came to arrest her parents.” The luck is that, because she was playing hide and seek, she was not found and taken away. During the war her grandmother moves her to Siberia, which is lucky because people in Leningrad were starving to death. When Mariya’s parents, old and sick, are finally released and reunited with Mariya shortly before dying, “Mariya considered herself happy to

⁴⁷ She does so explicitly: e.g. “adding an unexpected Leningrad detail to Galsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga*” (3.7, 75) or “story two ... which in almost every detail resembles the drama of Othello, Iago and Desdemona, only in a camp variant” (5.2, 115).

⁴⁸ Ó Cuilleanáin discusses differences between Boccaccio’s and Voznesenskaya’s sets of narrators (in Boccaccio 2004, xlv).

have seen them, and that they died at home in a warm bed, and not on a camp bunk.” Her next bit of luck is that the husband who beats her and threatens to kill her if she seeks a divorce falls for another woman and leaves. A terrible injury at work maims her, luckily enabling her to spend the rest of her life with a disability pension and a room of her own in Leningrad. Spending most of her money getting drunk, she learns that by signing herself into a treatment center from time to time, she can save the pension money during those months to buy things she needs, such as a winter coat. Sitting drunk on a bench outside her apartment building, she “tells anyone who has time to listen how lucky she is.” As Zaczek comments, emphasizing her theme of the disparity between official discourse and reality, “All the events in Masha’s life that would under any normal circumstances have been considered tragic, become ‘lucky’ in the reality of the Soviet Union.” But I think that this tale is not only about undermining Soviet propaganda. The narrator sums up, “So that’s our Mariya. She’s quite a sight to look at, but if a person says she’s been fortunate from birth, how can you not believe her?” The audience of this tale is thus directly asked to consider in what happiness might consist, and what levels of misery we might be able to persuade ourselves to see as good fortune.

The tales of the final day seem to offer three basic sources of happiness. One — as in the case of Mariya — depends on luck. Zaczek points out that Russian uses the same word for both luck and happiness.⁴⁹ Katenka (10.5) is “lucky” that her devoted care of her grandmother was appreciated by an attractive businessman, who married her; the dissident (10.6) is lucky that her new beautiful dress arrived just in time for her to wear it when she was arrested and thus at her trial; a sick and impoverished pianist is made happy by “the miracle” of getting a chance to play the piano (10.8); Galina is lucky to find some very old but still edible dried onions behind a sack in the attic (10.9). Some of these examples prepare for the ironies of the final tale. Other examples of happiness — and there is an overlap here with luck — focus on small pleasures: a fruit-flavored fizzy drink that makes up for hours of waiting on line (10.1); the memory of a pretty girl in the park (10.4) — Valentina passes on advice that one keep a “basket” of happy memories like this one to review when needed. A third source is human kindness and affection. One example is quite pathetic: the impoverished old couple that keep being locked up separately in old people’s homes but are content to be allowed an occasional glimpse of each other or even just to know that the other is still alive (10.2). A pleasanter example is the woman who in a chance encounter many years later learns that an old boyfriend still thinks of her (10.3); or the

⁴⁹ Zaczek 2006, 242.

parents whose babies were switched in the hospital and who, discovering this five years later, work out a way of sharing the children without unduly upsetting them (10.7). Zina the tramp responds to this example with the exclamation, “God, it’s nice when people behave like human beings!” These categories and examples of happiness form the context for the final tale. Irishka, after telling it, observes about herself: “My friends, I am disgustingly happy, unforgiveably happy! I can’t remember a single day in my life when I didn’t feel loved by the people I lived with –my mother, my sister, my husband” (301). Her happiness is quite different from Mariya’s lonely “luck” and yet without the coldness of Valentina’s official description on day one of the happy Soviet family.⁵⁰

This truly happy if somewhat simple woman is the narrator of the final tale. Although the events differ, Griselda is, like Mariya, a figure to whom a series of terrible things happen, but who is perpetually content. Indeed, Griselda’s happy ending is quite a bit happier than Mariya’s, so Mariya can be seen as a one-up example, competing with Boccaccio’s: how much awful stuff can one endure and still consider oneself happy and fortunate at the end of life?

Just as Churchill normalizes Griselda’s sufferings by showing them shared, and worse, by Nijo and other historically real women, so Mariya’s life contains events that other stories in *The Women’s Decameron* have already shown happening repeatedly to others: arrests and life in prison camps, drunken and violent husbands, abandonment, poverty, and the difficulty of obtaining a private room to live in. Like Churchill’s Griselda, then, Mariya is positioned to be seen as better off than many real or realistic other women despite the whole pile-up of terrible blows, thus creating a grim observation on women’s real lives more broadly. Voznesenskaya shares Churchill’s feminist desire for better possibilities for women. But she also draws attention to the importance of affectionate personal relations.

The end of day nine introduces the topic of happiness through a comparison of Russia with the West. Following a tale about the rare event of being able to buy a kilo of bananas, Emma remarks to the others, and espe-

⁵⁰ Whereas readers of the *Decameron* have frequently linked the first and last tales as antithetical (from “il piggior uomo forse che mai nascesse” [1.1.15] to an inimitable saint, or from false to true sainthood), Zaczek (2006, 240–43) suggests a link in *The Women’s Decameron* between the fifth story — the first one by Valentina, who is introduced to us as “functionary in the city soviet executive committee” and really less a story than a one-paragraph bit of official propaganda on ‘a happy family’ — and the very last tale, though she notes that all the other women’s stories, and even some of Valentina’s, undermine the official rosy version of Russian life and society.

cially to the dissident, “You see what a happy life women have in this country, Galina? We manage to get something special and it makes us happy for three days. And you’re always grumbling at the government. Do you think women in the West have any concept of the joys of life?” (268). After a general discussion of all the basic items, from food to soap, that have been hard to get, Emma repeats her point. “See how lucky we are?” joked Emma again. “We have constant scarcity, but think of the potential happiness it brings! If you get something on the black market at three times the price you’re satisfied, and if you manage to pull some strings and get it at the right price, that’s pure happiness!” (268–69). The women respond with laughter, and the verb “joked” blatantly reveals Emma’s irony, in case we had missed it the first time. The implication that a harder life makes one happier about little things has a certain truth to it, but even Irishka, at the end of the final story, and after pointing out to each of the women what they have to be happy about, concludes, “But one thing I will say: no matter how happy I’ve been, I still wish life here could be civilized. I think we women deserve to have life get a bit easier; and I don’t just mean us who have been sitting here telling each other various stories, but all the women in this country” (301–02). Irishka’s sudden final bit of social criticism, after her Pollyana-ish narrative has overflowed into her speech on the happiness in her fellow narrators’ lives, emerges unexpectedly, like Griselda’s ultimate reproach to Gualtieri, and similarly shows concern for the happiness of other women (or another woman in Griselda’s case). It has an analogy as well in the faint protest of Griselda’s final line in *Top Girls*: “I do think — I do wonder — it would have been nicer if Walter hadn’t had to.” “Civilized” suggests both the kinder behavior of individuals and the reform of a social system that makes women spend hours on line for basic purchases, that makes married couples live without privacy, and that throws good people into prison camps. The biologist, hugging Irishka, agrees with her: “You’re right. We can be happy in the life that has been given to us. But we would like life to be more civilized as well. I think we could end our *Women’s Decameron* with those words. Don’t you?” (302). All the women agree. I think that is a pretty good reflection on the story of Griselda.

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