



Grimm's  
Women

Written By  
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Grimm's women

Two Acts, approx 90 mins.

10f/6 m-doubling possible, or cast can be increased to @30, for dance, song & crowd scenes

Synopsis:

Griselda and the Swan Princess are two 'fairy tales' that served as models for female behaviour and wifely submission. Patience and obedience was expected by the Lord and Master.

If a woman had promised to obey, what tests for this obedience could be devised?

How far could they go?

A re-telling of these stories throws a revealing light on these well known and well loved characters. It answers the questions as to why these stories continue to fascinate and intrigue us, even today.

Characters:

Belinda @16yrs old

Nurse

Maidens, girls, page boys, servants

Griselda

King Walter

Catherine, sister of Belinda @ 15 yrs old

Michael, brother of Belinda @ 10 yrs old

Swan Girl (Serena)

Prince

Old Queen Matilda, the Prince's Mother

Cora (OldCrone)

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Act One Scene One

Screen or ? has words projected across it, or narrator speaks:

**This is the story of Griselda, who promised to obey her husband, and never question her husband, and was the perfect wife.**

**Griselda is written about by Chaucer, Petrarch and Bocaccio, as well as the Brothers Grimm.**

**People say : it's only a story.**

**But all the past becomes a story**

**and the women are dead**

**and cannot tell us what really happened.**

**Song of GRISELDA and tableaux/ freeze frames OR Mediaeval pictures projected on screen to accompany it**

**Words of song ( sung to tune of Highly favoured lady)**

*A maid they called Grisel-da , a maid so poor*

*She lived in filth and poverty with earthen floor*

*Yet pure and good and virtuous indeed she be*

*Most highly favoured lady Gloria ( MHFLG)*

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*The Lord in velvet garments he lived close by*

*To hawk and hunt in luxury , the hours did fly*

*His knights and lords and courtiers to him did cry*

*My Lord; 'tis time to marry....now, they'd say*

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*To them he said now vex me not and do not plead*

*I shall find myself a wife at time of need*

*A wife that questions not AND SHALL my will obey; MHFL G*

*Whilst riding by her farm he had Griselda spied*

*That maid and she alone shall be my bride*

*Fair is she- but patient too? I will assay MHFLG*

*Wilt thou be my patient wife and do as bid*

*Never question nor ever seek to know what's hid*

*Then kneel to me and be my wife and so obey MHFLG*

*He stripped her bare and she stood there in all men's sight*

*His servants dressed her body then in robes of white*

*And wed were they within the hour and all seemed right MHFLG*

*A year went by, in meekness high a babe she bore*

*Within an hour he'd taken it and sent it o'er*

*To who knows where and why he did? Let no man say MHFL G*

*She suffered all and bore it well she never cried*

*She never questioned, never asked and never sighed*

*She did not see her babes again and never knew*

*What fate to them had fallen.....Gloria*

*At last the King he sent for her as times before*

*The ending of our marriage has come, he swore*

*I'll put aside Griselda and wed again MHFL G*

*The gentle maiden meekly bowed her head*

*To me be as it pleaseth You, she said*

*My soul shall laud and magnify his Royal Name MHFL G*

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**Reprise first verse and last verse while cast enter and dance happily, at top speed, all applaud and much merriment.**

## scene 1

Lights fade up to reveal various maidens dressing another one for her wedding.

Full length mirror on a stand. The time period is indeterminate.

As maidens enter with the veil, train, hair combs and etcetera they sing eg last verse of Griselda song/ chorus again or hum to Wedding March by Mendelsohn

Bride- to- be(Belinda): Have my flowers arrived?

Maiden 1: Belinda, you look so beautiful. That dress is so exquisite, with the pearls sewn on the bodice-

Nurse: ( scottish if possible)Hours of eye strain! My fingers are all pricked and sore

I had to be so careful not to get a drop of my blood on the precious silk- such a fine lady as she is now- she'd have had me whipped like as not! And to think I brought her up, nursed her for 16 years-

Belinda: Now nursie, you'll have us all crying in a minute- and this is my special day

( sings)

'This is my lovely day; this is the day that I'll remember the day Im dying...'

Maiden 2: Oh Belinda- you mustn't speak of dying today- it's terrible bad luck .

Belinda : (SHIVERS) Yes, of course you're right- whatever made me forget that, why am I thinking such sad thoughts. Come on everyone – smile. Be happy for me!

Maiden 1 &2: We are happy for you. And envious.

Maiden 3 : The girl who is marrying the King should be happy today. And he should be even happier- you are the prettiest girl in the land after all.

Nurse: My own little Belinda- to be Queen today- it doesn't seem possible. I remember the Queen that was, I helped her dress for her wedding.....20 years since.

And now you're to have her place. Sleep in her bed. And where will she sleep, poor soul.....

Maiden 1: Will you cease your prattle you old harpy- cannot you see you are upsetting Belinda?

Belinda: Don't speak to my nurse in that way- she meant no harm. It is a sad thought, after all.

My mind keeps running on her- why did he put her from him? What had she done? Maybe the day will come when he is angry with me, and he chooses another younger bride- in another 10 years.....!

And then...I think of him; what is he like? What do I know of him? He sent for me; I was told I was to marry him. I met him for the first time yesterday.

I knelt before him.

I was too frightened to look at him.

Belinda, my child, he spoke in a flat voice, no feeling in it- my child, you shall marry me tomorrow. You shall be my new Queen, and Griselda I shall put away from me.

Our marriage is annulled.

I tried to look up, to meet his eyes. I was trembling so I thought I would faint away.

Sir- I couldn't say more. Your Majesty; I wanted to say- Must I?

Maidens: (all gasp) Belinda- you mustn't say such things! Why, you're the envy of all the ladies of the court-

All sing : 'the bride who gets married in June, is a bride all her life' etc from '7 brides for 7 brothers'

Maidens: You're the luckiest girl in the Kingdom!

Belinda: Am I so? Or are they glad it was me and not them?

I have looked at him ; I watched him at the feasting yesterday, the grease in his grey beard, his eyes cold as iron, icy eyes staring at me.....he is so old! His hands were shaking as he wrenched the wing off the goose, as the wine ran down the cruel lines by his mouth-

Nurse: Now then my girl enough of this foolish talk- you've to marry him and that's all about it.Get a hold of yourself. You must do as other poor lassies have done since the world was new- you're not the first to be afeared on your wedding night, that's sure.

(Maidens all look at each other and look uneasy)

Belinda: But surely- none have been in this case- my King has commanded that I should wed him. I must obey or die, and my Queen of a few days ago still lives.....

Will my fate be any different from hers?

And what has become of her children?

Nurse: Aye- the poor woman. She has had three bairns, and a few days after each of the births the King has come and taken her babe from her.

Maiden 3: Why did he take them?

Maiden 2: No one has ever seen them.

Maiden 1: They must be dead.

(Griselda enters- they gasp and bow to her. She is serene and faintly smiling).

Griselda: You must not bow to me; I am no longer Queen here. The King has sent me to call you to the chapel.

Belinda: (unbelieving) Sent.... you ? ( all are amazed at the extreme cruelty of this)

Griselda: I am to carry your train.

All gasp & exchange looks at this.

Belinda: Please; may I speak with you before we go? I want to ask you..... I want to beg your forgiveness. Please believe this is none of my choosing- I wish I could go home ( sobs) I don't want to marry him; he is a cruel...heartless tyrant.....a monster....your children!

Griselda: Please come at once -or I shall have disobeyed his commands.

Belinda: I must speak with you- my nurse will tell him I am not yet ready- a pearl must be sewn back on- I have torn the hem..the silk is stained. Anything, I must have time.

Griselda: But this is disobedience.We must obey the King in everything. He must have all he desires, without question from us. It is so simple, so easy . There are no questions- only do his bidding.

Belinda: What about your babies?

Griselda( still unmoved- it is very chilling) What about them?

Belinda: The King took them from you.

G: Yes.

B: And what happened to them?

G: I don't know. I never saw them again.

B:Did he say why he took them?

G shakes her head slowly, looking at B all the time.

G: You must come now. You will be Queen. And you will obey as I have done. Without question.

B: No! Please no- don't make me. Havn mercy- you must hate me-

G: I don't hate you.

B: But surely- you were Queen, and now ; where will you go? What is to become of you?

G: The King will decide .

B: Do you love him? Did you love him?Was he a kind husband? ( thinking of herself)

G: Kind? ( puzzled) He is my King and my Lord. He was my husband.

(thinking) Belinda- I will help you, if I can. You must listen to me, and I will save you.

B: Oh thank you, thank you- ( slumps down to her knees in gratitude)

G: Here is my secret. ( pause) Obey.

B: (shocked) Obey?

*(Kate's final speech from Taming of the Shrew)*

G: ( quoting)Thy husband shalt be thy lord, thy life, thy keeper and thy head.

He craves no other tribute but love, fair looks and true obedience. Too little payment for so great a debt.

I am ashamed that women are so foolish as to offer war where they should sue for peace.

Why are our bodies soft and weak and smooth, but that our soft conditions and our hearts should well agree with our external parts?

Then veil your rancour- for it is a bitter root.

And place your hand beneath your husband's boot

By which token, if he please: ' my hand is ready; may it do him ease'.

B: But- what good has it done you?

G: No more questions now –come. Already we have kept him waiting-

(King enters.)

K: Yes ; I have been made to wait. Why? Answer! How dare a mere girl of 16 keep the King waiting!

Have I not said you shall marry me within the hour?

B: Pardon me, your Majesty..but.....I am not ready.

K: What? Not ready?

B: Sir- may it please the King-

K: It does not please the King.

B: You have a wife already. ( amazed at her own boldness).

(King turns and looks for the first time at G)

K: Did I not tell you- bring this girl to me and carry her train, and witness the marriage of this girl to me, your King?

G: ( SHE BOWS LOW and speaks softly) I shall obey you in this, as in all things.

K:In all things?

G: ( BOWS AGAIN) In all, your Majesty.

K: And how shall you obey me.....humbly?( she nods) devotedly?( she nods) with love?

( she hesitates) or with fear? Are you afraid that if you do not obey- the same fate will befall you as your children?

(HE MOVES CLOSER, almost hissing) Your children.....what did happen to them, Griselda? Why did you never ask about them? Why did I take them away?

( she is completely expressionless)

Did you never miss them? Did you never love them?

B:Your Majesty-

K: ( ENRAGED)Be silent, Miss! Your turn will come. It will come soon enough.

( hideous smile) Indeed , for a pretty little thing you have given me more trouble than this one. I shall keep this one close at hand, and you shall learn from her. You shall learn obedience. My last Queen shall instruct my new one. Griselda: do you hear? You must teach this girl how to please me. And if she does not please me then you shall know of it.( turns to look at Griselda slowly and hideously softly)You shall know of it.

( watches her narrowly)( walks behind B AND STROKES HER HAIR- SHE does not react)

K:And when she is brought to bed with my child you shall nurse that babe.

(STILL watching G for reaction)

K: Well Griselda? What do you say to that?

G;( LONG BREATH) Your Majesty- you have been my husband King for 20 years. I have done your bidding faithfully and never questioned you. You took my babies from me and I never questioned you. You told me you would wed this girl and I said nothing. You have told me I shall groom her for you, and be nurse to her children.

(Pause- their eyes are locked together) Sir- I shall obey. ( she is triumphing over him- he can get no reaction from her).

K( DEFEATED- turns to B: ) Leave us. ( she looks amazed, but rushes out)

( now speaks to G): Griselda- have you ever loved me at all?

She does not answer. She turns and leaves him standing there.

Lights fade.

## Scene 2 The next week

In the 'turret ' room; a window seat and a stone window with shutters

Belinda and her younger brother and sister Catherine are together in the same room; Belinda is having her hair brushed by her sister, and the boy( Michael) is staring out of the 'window.'

Catherine is singing as she brushes, a traditional song eg a frog he would a wooing go, greensleeves, coventry carol, or johnny's so long at the fair, or EARLY ONE MORNING JUST AS THE SUN WAS RISING, I SAW A YOUNG MAIDEN IN THE VALLEY BELOW, OH NEVER LEAVE ME, DO NOT DECEIVE ME, HOW COULD YOU USE A YOUNG MAIDEN SO.

C: What do you look at ,Michael?

M: The soldiers are drilling- they have been out there for two and a half hours now, with the RSM yelling at them like a madman.

C: I still can't get used to seeing so many people- can you?

B: Let me brush your hair now Catherine- I 've had my 100 haven't I?

C: Oh- I lost count, sorry. It must be at least that though.

( they change places)

B: Your hair is longer than mine now, I'm sure. How can that be, when I'm older than you- I've never cut mine.....

C: Well of course it's because I'm going to be the beauty of this family. ( they both laugh)Now promise you won't be jealous.

M: I'm bored- there's nothing to do. I've read all the books, and we can't even go for a walk without one of them with us. I expect in a minute they will come and open the door and tell me to go and play.

I would n't mind having a look in some of those rooms in the West Wing- but someone always pops up and ' Now then young sir, you're a long way from your rooms here aren't you, have you lost your way, let me escort you....' May as well lock us up in the dungeons and be done with it.

B: Have you really read all the books?There's hundreds here- and none are the same as we had.

C: Funny how we were never bored at home-

M: Nurse kept us at it- we had to dig the garden and feed the animals- and everything!

Do you remember just before we left, the piglets were almost weaned, and we were deciding whether to plant peas or beans this year, the carrots had all been blackened by the frost and-

B: I hope the cow and the pigs and chickens are being looked after.....we came away in such a rush.

M: How long have we been here now? It feels like years.

B: It's nearly a week.

M: Are you sure? It must be more! Let's run away- let's go home! You don't like it here do you?( C jumps up and goes to M, WHISPERS to him downstage from B)

C: Michael- stop making a fuss. It's not so bad for us two.... Think of Belinda- and stop moaning.

M: All the more reason to run away then-

C: And how are we going to do that? You said yourself we're virtually prisoners, the doors are locked at night, the courtyard is guarded.....

(M breaks free of her and goes back to window)