

The Griselda Story: The Transformation from ‘the Patient Griselda’ to ‘Gríshildur the Good’ in Icelandic Tradition

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The subject of this paper is the well-known story of the Patient Griselda and the development of the title character in the Icelandic versions. This paper presents some of the findings in my Cand.Mag. thesis from the University of Copenhagen in 2005.

The earliest known version of this story is found in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, written c. 1350 in Italian. Twenty years later, Petrarch translated and rewrote the story, and it was his version that became the basis for the story’s transmission to the rest of Europe in the following centuries.

For those readers unfamiliar with the Griselda story, I would like to give a short summary, based on the Danish Chapbook version (Griseldis, 1920), as some knowledge of the traditional story is necessary for understanding the changes that occur in the Icelandic versions.

Marquis Walter is unmarried, which worries his subjects. Therefore, they ask him to find himself a wife, and he accepts on the condition that they will respect his choice of wife. Walter then asks for the poor Griselda’s hand in marriage, on the condition that she will obey him in everything. Griselda accepts his proposal and they get married. Soon afterwards, Griselda gives birth to a daughter, and Walter decides to try his wife’s obedience; he sends the daughter away, but lets Griselda believe that she is to be exposed. Griselda respects her husband’s decision without showing any objection. Later, she gives birth to a son and the same thing happens. A few years later, Walter decides to try Griselda one last time; he tells her of his decision to divorce her in favour of a younger wife. Once again, Griselda shows her obedience and, without any objection, she leaves her beautiful dresses and jewellery, and, wearing only a simple shift, she returns to her father’s house. Later, at the arrival of the young bride, Walter sends for Griselda and asks her to serve at their wedding. With great joy, Griselda receives the young maid, who is travelling with her brother, and that finally convinces Walter of Griselda’s total obedience. Therefore, he announces that she has passed his tests, and as the young bride and her brother are in fact their children, the entire family is reunited.

In this traditional Griselda story, patience is the main trait of the title character. Every trial she endures is to assure her husband, as well as the reader, of her total obedience, and it is through her patience she gets rewarded in the end.

Halldór Hermannsson (1914) was the first scholar to study the transmission of the Griselda story to Iceland. According to his findings, the earliest Icelandic versions seem to be from the beginning of the seventeenth century and the story seems to have found its way to the country via two routes: through translations from Dutch or French and through the German and Danish chapbooks.

A quick read-through of the versions found in Halldór Hermannsson’s book shows that the story has undergone some interesting changes in the Icelandic versions, especially regarding Griselda’s reactions towards her trials. In his research, Halldór

Hermannsson found eleven versions, which he divided into five groups (Halldór, 1914, ii-xviii):

- I. The Poems on Grísillá
 1. The Rímur by Eggert Jónsson (seventeenth century)
 2. The Poem by Þorvaldur Rögnvaldsson (seventeenth century)
 3. The Rímur by Tómas Jónsson (1801)
- II. The Tale of Duke Valtari (1650-1700)
- III. The Translated Saga of Gríshildur the Patient
 1. By Jón Þorláksson (seventeenth century)
 2. By an unknown translator (seventeenth/eighteenth century)
- IV. The Saga of Gríshildur the Good
 1. Two prose recensions (c.1750 and c.1850)
 2. The Rímur by Páll Sveinsson (probably 1778)
 3. The Rímur by Magnús Jónsson (1834)
- V. The Fairytale of Gríshildur the Good (published 1860's)

Halldór Hermannsson defined the first group on the basis of the names of the main characters. There, her name is always *Grísilla* which is quite, but not conclusively, different from Petrarch's *Griseldis*, the form found in the German and Danish chapbooks. On the other hand, the name of the marquis is *Gótyr* in Þorvaldur Rögnvaldson's poem and *Góvetýr* in Tómas Jónsson's rímur, while he is anonymous in Eggert Jónsson's rímur. These variants of his name are very different from his name in most other Icelandic versions where he typically is called *Valtari*, an Icelandified variant of the Danish *Volter*. According to Halldór Hermannsson, this difference in names points to a common origin for the poems in this group, different from the other Icelandic versions, and he thought it was either the Netherlands or possibly France (Halldór, 1914, vii-viii).

In the version classified as number II, the story is similar to the tradition as it is in Boccaccio's and Petrarch's versions, and therefore Halldór Hermannsson concluded that it must have been based on the Danish chapbook, and the names *Valtari* and *Gressile/Gres(s)ilis* support that. However, the title *frú* is often used with her name, which Halldór Hermannsson thought indicated possible German or even Dutch influence. All place names have disappeared from the story, and because of these changes, Halldór Hermannsson thought that the version had been transmitted orally to Iceland in the latter half of the seventeenth century (Halldór, 1914, ix-x).

Both translations in group III follow the Danish closely, and it is in these versions that the Icelandified name *Gríshildur* is introduced in writing (Halldór, 1914, xi).

In the eighteenth century, the story was rewritten as an Icelandic *riddarasaga*, and in that version many changes have been made. Instead of Italy, the story now takes place in France; names and positions of characters have been changed, i.e. marquis Walter is now 'King Valentinus'; previously anonymous characters now have names and new characters are introduced, among them Gríshildur's mother. Some scenes have been prolonged and a whole new story added, about Emperor Johannes of Greece and his two children. According to Halldór Hermannsson, the *riddarasaga* was the most popular version of the story in Iceland, as can be seen from the number of manuscripts containing the *riddarasaga* version (Halldór, 1914, xiii).

The fairytale was collected in Dalasýsla in West-Iceland, and published in Jón Árnason's collection, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* in the 1860's. Even if the fairytale was written down as late as the nineteenth century, Halldór Hermannsson thought that the nature of the story as it is found there classified it among the oldest versions, possibly as old as the seventeenth century, and he thought as well that the Gríshildur name originated in the fairytale (Halldór, 1914, xv-xvii).

Almost a hundred years have passed since Halldór Hermannsson conducted his research, and since then, a few more Icelandic versions of the Griselda story have been located in manuscripts. Before I continue with the discussion on the textual development of the story, I need to address how those versions are related to the versions established by Halldór Hermannsson, as the results of my research are still unpublished outside the thesis.

In 1953 Margaret Schlauch introduced a prose version with the title *Eitt Æfintýr af einum Markgreifa*, preserved in two manuscripts from the seventeenth century. Schlauch concluded that this prose version was related to Group I, more specifically that it was based on Eggert Jónsson's rímur, as well as on oral transmission of the Danish chapbook (Schlauch, 1953, 363-364, 370).

Schlauch is right when pointing out the relation to the poems on Grisillá, but she is wrong in assuming that this version is based on Eggert Jónsson's rímur. There are certain places in the text which make that quite impossible. To name just one example: in Eggert Jónsson's version, the marquis is anonymous, while his name in this prose version is *Gótýr*, and that name cannot have been supplied from the Danish chapbook versions, as his name there is *Volter*. Neither did Eggert Jónsson use this prose version as the basis for his rímur, as those include many traditional elements lacking in the prose version. Therefore, these two versions must stem from the same, now lost, version, with the prose version being closer to that 'original' than Eggert Jónsson's rímur.

In 1958, a second fairytale version was printed for the first time (*Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri V*, 28-29). This fairytale is much shorter than the version Halldór Hermannsson knew of, and in most ways, seems to be a shortened version thereof. However, there are certain important aspects in which it differs from the previously published version, for example regarding the marquis (who in the fairytales has been upgraded to a king). In this shorter version he is no longer anonymous, his name is *Argus*, and his main characteristics are directly specified as 'uncertainty and undecidedness'.

In his work from 1989, *Die isländischen Übersetzungen der deutschen Volksbücher*, Hubert Seelow presented two previously unknown versions of the Griselda story: firstly, a third translation from Danish, and secondly, a short prose version about Gríshildur the patient (ÆGþ).

According to Seelow, this prose version is probably a retelling of one of the translated chapbook versions (1989, 131). Seelow is right that certain elements are in agreement with the translations, for example the names of the main characters. However, in my opinion this version is much closer to the prose version about Gótýr and Grissilla, presented by Schlauch. This version is somewhat longer and tells more than the Gótýr and Grissilla text, but there are certain places in the text where the agreement between these two versions is so decisive that they must be related. In both

versions, the marquis asks that Grissilla/Grishildur should endure *blítt eða strítt*,¹ 'gentle or hard', from him, and later, the marquis says that his subjects *læggi sjer (stórlega) á hálse*, 'blamed him (heavily)' for having chosen such a poor wife. In fact, those two versions have so much in common that they could almost be classified as two variants of the same version.

The most important place where there is agreement with the Gótyr and Grissilla text,² as well as Eggert Jónsson's³ and Tómas Jónsson's⁴ rímur, is, however, when she gives up her daughter, adding:

'ó guð gæfi að ég mætti deyja fyrir þig, mitt unga blóð' (ÆGþ).

'Oh! If only God would grant that I could die for you, my young blood.'

This quote, which is not in the traditional Grissilla story but does appear in all of these four versions, can be seen as a conclusive proof that these versions must have common roots. On the other hand, the different names of the main characters can be explained by the late transmission of the ÆGþ-version. Therefore, that version must belong to Group I, which I have chosen to call 'My young blood' / Grísillá versions'.

This means that before I started studying the matter, fifteen versions of the Grissilla story had been established in Icelandic. Since then I have found three versions that were previously unknown within Grissilla research.

The first of those is a metric version, rímur on Duke Valtir/Waltari and Grissilla, composed in 1816 by Jón Hjaltalín. A close look at the text confirms that Jón Hjaltalín has used the 'Tale of Duke Valtari' (Group II) as basis for his rímur.

The second version is in prose: *Sagan af Grishildi góðu*, most likely written by Jóhannes Jónsson at Smyrlahólar in 1859 and based on a rímur version. A reading of the text shows that the rímur drawn upon must be those by Magnús Jónsson (Group IV).

The third version is three rímur about Grishildur the Good, composed by Andrés Hákonarson at Höll in Önundarfjörður in 1890. A look at the text suggests that Andrés Hákonarson must have based his rímur on the longer fairytale. He follows the story closely, even if he adds a few details, but he doesn't make any direct changes to the storyline itself as it is in the longer fairytale version.

Finnur Sigmundsson mentions in *Rímnatal I* that Gunnar Ólafsson had composed six rímur about Grishildur (Finnur, 1966, 177), but so far those have not been found. This means that eighteen Icelandic versions of the Grissilla story have been established:

I. 'My Young Blood'- / Grísillá-versions

1. 'Eitt Æfintýr af einum Markgreifa' (prose, seventeenth century)
2. The rímur by Eggert Jónsson (seventeenth century)
3. The poem by Þorvaldur Rögnvaldsson (seventeenth century)

¹ In this version, it says: '... "Huort ég Býd þier blýtt | edur strýtt"' (ÆGþ 1744), whereas the Gótyr-text has: '... hvort hann væri blífur eða strífur' (EÆM 1953:368).

² 'Hún kysti sitt barn, og það Guð að gíeffa að hún mætti deya fyrir það sitt hiartans wnga blóð (EÆM 1953:368 with variants).

³ "gíæ;fe það mjer Sem ædstur er", hun Ansadj so;ddann hætte, "mitt Vnga blod", kuad agíæ;tt flíod, "að eg deijia mætte" (Eggert, 1st ríma, stanza 56).

⁴ 'dóttur kisti | hid fagra flíod, fól og þanninn mælti, "gíæfi christur mords eg | mód, mætti gista úngt fyrir blóð". (Tómas, 2nd ríma, stanza 42)

4. The prose about Gríshildur the patient (eighteenth century)
 5. The rímur by Tómas Jónsson (1801)
- II. Story about Duke Valtari
1. The Tale of Duke Valtari (prose, 1650-1700)
 2. The rímur by Jón Hjaltalín (1816)
- III. Translations of the Danish Chapbooks
1. By Jón Þorláksson (seventeenth century)
 2. By an unknown translator (seventeenth/eighteenth century)
 3. By an unknown translator (eighteenth/nineteenth century)
- IV. The riddarasaga of Gríshildur the Good
1. The 'original' prose version (c. 1750)
 2. The rímur by Páll Sveinsson (probably 1778)
 3. The rímur by Magnús Jónsson (1834)
 4. The prose by Jóhannes Jónsson (1859)
 5. The Saga of Queen Gríshildur (prose, c. 1850)
- V. Fairytale about Gríshildur the Good
1. The longer version (published 1860's)
 2. The rímur by Andrés Hákonarson (1890)
 3. The shorter version (published in 1958)

It is interesting to note that Halldór Hermannsson's groups still work: all seven works he did not know of fit into his five-group division, though I have made the criteria for Group I more storyline specific.

Now that the Icelandic versions of the Griselda story have been introduced, it is time to look at the main topic of this paper; the development of the Griselda character in those versions. As already stated, Griselda's patience has traditionally been regarded as her main characteristic, as is perhaps most obvious from her being called 'The Patient Griselda' in most translations and versions during the story's period of European popularity. This patience is mainly manifested in Griselda's utter obedience to her husband; according to the tradition, she will never show any sign of discomfort or grief regarding her husband's decisions, let alone mention any negative feelings towards him. However, it seems to me that with time, the narrators, e.g. in the Danish chapbooks, seem to become more judgemental of the marquis, and statements about Griselda's emotions, even if unexpressed, become more common. A possible reason for this change could be that the religious connotations of Petrarch's story diminish with time, and the narrator feels the need to express that her character isn't just cold-hearted.

It is interesting to note that already in the oldest Icelandic versions changes to this portrayal have taken place. As already mentioned, every version but one in the first group includes Griselda's 'Young Blood' utterance. By making Griselda utter rather than just think those words, the narrators have changed her position in the story; at least, her 'patience' as portrayed in the traditional story must be affected.

Therefore, it is helpful to take a look at the positions of the narrators in the Icelandic Griselda versions, and it is quite clear that there are certain differences in the roles and positions of the narrators in those versions.

As in all prose versions, the story in both prose versions of Group I is told by implicit narrators, but here they seem particularly distant. Mostly, they just tell the

story and neither comment on characters nor events, although they sometimes hint at certain opinions through the characters, as in the case of the 'Young Blood' utterance. The only place where the narrator in version I.1 directly comments on the story is near the end where he discusses Griselda's steadfastness and how it is a beautiful example for wives of how to treat their husbands (EÆM 1953:370), a statement in accordance with the traditional presentation of the story.

The narrators in the translations from the Danish are in some ways quite visible within the story, especially as regards how it should be understood as an exemplary tale for women. On the other hand, they still tend to criticise the marquis's decisions and seem to be more sympathetic towards Griselda.

The story in the prose tales about Duke Valtari (II.1) is quite close to the traditional story, but not in all respects. Here the narrator has an unusually positive attitude towards the events of the story and both main characters. This means that certain changes must be made. For instance, some of the chieftains in this version are not content with the marquis' choice of bride, which means that the marquis's words about the subjects' discontent have some basis in the narrative, and can therefore be seen as an explanation for his behaviour.

The *riddarasaga* prose versions (IV.1 and IV.4) are heavily influenced by saga style; the narrators narrate and comment on what happens, but refrain from describing thoughts and emotions: when anything is mentioned about emotions and feelings, this is because those feelings are explicitly shown to other characters.

The king in the *riddarasögur* is portrayed as a rather complex character, with both positive and negative sides. His main characteristic is cleverness, and, in fact, his treatment of his queen is presented as an aspect of this cleverness. In the *riddarasaga* versions, many of the king's men are actually very unhappy with his marrying the poor Griselda, and therefore, he does not try Griselda in order to assure himself of her obedience, but to convince his subjects of her perfection.

In the fairytale collections, the publishers have placed the fairytale versions among stories about evil relatives. The reason for this placing is obvious from the positions the narrators take in those versions. Sympathy lies entirely with Griselda, and the king (marquis) is described as a decidedly evil and temperamental man, who in the end regrets his doings and begs his wife for forgiveness.

Because of the specific nature of the rímur-genre, all the rímur-narrators form a separate group. Through the *mansöngvar* (traditionally the opening verses of the rímur) the poets become explicit narrators within the narrative: they directly step out and comment on characters and events, making them very visible in the narrative. And here, they tend to be on Griselda's side, praising her while criticising the marquis's decisions. There are, however, some exceptions to this. Þorvaldur Rögnvaldsson portrays the marquis in an unusually positive fashion and uses far more positive words to describe the marquis than Griselda. This positive portrayal of the marquis is also found in Tómas Jónsson's rímur.

Regarding Griselda herself, in most versions she is portrayed as an especially positive character, with Þorvaldur Rögnvaldsson's poem, as mentioned, being the only example of her having fewer positive qualities than the marquis.

As already mentioned several times, all versions in Group I, except I.3, contain Griselda's 'Young Blood' utterance. In versions I.3, I.4 and I.5, Griselda also cries

bitterly when giving up her children. And it is worth mentioning that in version I.4, Griselda even criticises her husband's decision to expose their daughter by saying that she wishes God would change his mind.⁵

The Griselda portrayed in both Groups II and III is a woman of many virtues: she is the perfect daughter who keeps her poor father's home as neat as possible, and she is the perfect maidservant as well. And she is the perfect wife who, like the traditional character, never shows any signs of emotion during her trials and tribulations.

In the *riddarasögur*, the portrayal of Griselda as a woman with the instincts of a leader continues and evolves: Griselda participates in the political world, and therewith receives both popularity and discontent among the subjects. At the same time, the narrator allows her to express her own opinions and be somewhat critical of the king's decisions:

Því kóngur hefði makt til að gera, sem hann vildi, og þó ilt væri og órétt; mundi hann sjálfur sinna verka gjalda, en aðrir ei (Sagan af Grishildi góðu, 1914, 33).

'because the king had the power to do as he pleased, even if it was evil and unjust; he himself would suffer for his deeds, but not others.'

A completely different picture is painted of Griselda in the fairytale versions. There, Griselda is a victim, who in spite of how badly she is treated, loves her king and experiences great sorrow when she is sent home to her father's house.

Regarding the portrayal of the Griselda character and her reactions to her trials in the Icelandic versions, it is, in my opinion, possible to divide the Icelandic versions into two main groups:

- A) the traditional Griselda
- B) the emotional Griselda

It is quite clear that Groups II and III belong to Group A, as Griselda never shows any sign of emotions in those versions. What is more difficult is where to place versions I.1 and I.2. In my Cand.Mag thesis, I decided to place them in Group A as they only contain the much-mentioned 'Young Blood' utterance, but no crying or other physical signs of emotions. Working on this paper has, however, raised some questions about this decision, and I now feel it is more appropriate to place those two versions in Group B.

That means that Groups I, IV and V belong to Group B, and as those versions vary significantly, it is in my opinion, helpful to divide Group B into two sub-groups:

- B) the sad Griselda
- C) the independent Griselda

In the former of these, Griselda is a victim who shows her sadness in some ways, for instance by mentioning it (I.1, I.2, I.4 and I.5) and crying bitterly when her husband tries her obedience (I.3, I.4, I.5, V.1, V.2 and V.3).

On the other hand, the Griselda we meet in the *riddarasögur* (Group IV) is an independent woman, a political figure even, who on several occasions criticises her husband's decisions. Version I.4 could also possibly fit in Group C, as Griselda there tries to get her husband to change his mind about exposing their daughter.

⁵ 'Enn Sagdist Þó Til Vona að Guð | mundi Giefa Honum annað Sinne (ÆGþ 1744).'

It is interesting to note that none of these changes to the Griselda character and her reactions to her trials alters the narrators' portrayal of her patience. In all versions, the narrators let her pass the tests.

In my study of how Griselda is portrayed in the Icelandic versions, I found that, along the way, a certain shift occurs, regarding Griselda's main characteristics. In the oldest versions her main quality is patience (*Grishildur þolinmóða*), but as she little by little expresses more of her emotions, kindness seems to take over as her main attribute (*Grishildur góða*), as expressed in the titles of most later stories.

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'Ævintýri af Grishildi.' (eighteenth-nineteenth century). In *Lbs 2317 4to*, ff. 18v-24v.

The Icelandic versions of the Griselda story according to Halldór Hermannsson (1914, ii-xviii):

I. The Poems on Grísillá

1. The Rímur by Eggert Jónsson (seventeenth century)
2. The Poem by Þorvaldur Rögnvaldsson (seventeenth century)
3. The Rímur by Tómas Jónsson (1801)

II. The Tale of Duke Valtari (1650-1700)

III. The Translated Saga of Grishildur the Patient

1. By Jón Þorláksson (seventeenth century)
2. By an unknown translator (seventeenth/eighteenth century)

IV. The Saga of Grishildur the Good

1. Two prose recensions (c.1750 and c.1850)
2. The Rímur by Páll Sveinsson (probably 1778)
3. The Rímur by Magnús Jónsson (1834)

V. The Fairytale of Grishildur the Good (published 1860's)

A revised overview of Icelandic versions:

I. 'My Young Blood' - / Grísillá-versions

1. 'Eitt Æfintýr af einum Markgreifa' (prose, seventeenth century) - Schlauch
2. The Rímur by Eggert Jónsson (seventeenth century)
3. The Poem by Þorvaldur Rögnvaldsson (seventeenth century)
4. The Prose about Grishildur the patient (eighteenth century) - Seelow
5. The Rímur by Tómas Jónsson (1801)

II. Story about Duke Valtari

1. The Tale of Duke Valtari (prose, 1650-1700)
2. The Rímur by Jón Hjaltalín (1816) - RÐE

III. Translations of the Danish Chapbooks

1. By Jón Þorláksson (seventeenth century)
2. By an unknown translator (seventeenth/eighteenth century)
3. By an unknown translator (eighteenth/nineteenth century) - Seelow

IV. The Riddarasaga of Grishildur the Good

1. The 'Original' Prose Version (c. 1750)
2. The Rímur by Páll Sveinsson (probably 1778)
3. The Rímur by Magnús Jónsson (1834)
4. The Prose by Jóhannes Jónsson (1859) - RÐE
5. The Saga of Queen Grishildur (prose, c. 1850)

V. Fairytale about Grishildur the Good

1. The Longer Version (published 1860's)
2. The Rímur by Andrés Hákonarson (1890) - RÐE
3. The Shorter Version (published in 1958).