

Meet the Dinner Guests

In the opening scene of *Top Girls*, Marlene has just received a big promotion and is celebrating with her closest friends, remarkable women from history, literature and art. Here's a who's who describing these incredible women.

Isabella Bird - Isabella Bird was definitely a lady ahead of her time. Born in 1831, the eldest daughter of a minister, Bird was a frail child with many ailments, but possessed a quick mind and insatiable curiosity. Her childhood illnesses were treated by long periods of time in the open air, leading to Bird's love of nature and botany. Eventually, her zest for adventure would take her on travels around the world, including trips to Hawaii, the Rocky Mountains, Japan, China, Australia, and the Middle East. A prolific writer, Bird recorded details of her trips through journals, books, and letters (In fact, much of her dialogue in this play comes directly from her own writings.) Her final trip was to Morocco in 1903 at the age of 72. Shortly after returning to her home in Scotland, Isabella fell ill and passed away in 1904.



Lady Nijo - Lady Nijo was born in 1258 to a wealthy family that was much favored at court. She was raised from birth to be a future concubine to Emperor Go-Fukakusa of Japan. At age 14, she moved into the palace and became a concubine to the emperor, eventually bearing him a child. During her time at court, she had several secret love affairs, resulting in the birth of three additional children. Her time in the royal court was filled with turmoil, eventually leading to her expulsion from the palace. Lady Nijo's only choice after being expelled was to become a Buddhist nun. As a nun, she travelled by foot around all of Japan, cataloguing

her travels in an autobiography. She died sometime after 1307, which is when the last written account of Lady Nijo appears on record.

Pope Joan - In the 13th century, fabled rumors came to light about a female Pope who ruled from 855-857. Her name was Joan but she was known as Pope John VIII. Not much is known about Joan except that she was incredibly bright and well educated. The legend reports that she, disguised as a boy, left her home and travelled to Italy with a companion to attend school and gain religious training. She became Pope John VIII in 855 and was able to keep her identity disguised for nearly three years, thanks largely in part to the large flowing robes she wore and the discretion of her household staff. It wasn't until she gave birth during a royal procession that her true identity as a woman was revealed. Her followers were so outraged by this deception that they had her stoned to death.



Dull Gret - Also known as Mad Meg, Dull Gret was first introduced into folklore by the depiction of her in Bruegel's 1563 painting, *Dulle Griet*. The name Griet is a common disparaging name from the late 1500s given to any woman who was thought to be shrewish or ill-tempered. Dull Gret herself is believed to be the artistic representation of an old Flemish proverb- "*she could plunder in front of hell and return unscathed.*" In the painting, Gret is depicted as a woman in man's armor, fending off demons of all

sorts as she races toward the mouth of hell to plunder as many riches as possible.

Patient Griselda - Griselda is a woman of folklore and legend known for her unwavering loyalty and patience. She first appears in a story by Boccaccio in 1350, which tells of her marriage to the

Marquis of Saluzzo. In the story, the Marquis tests Griselda by ordering her to hand their children, a son and daughter, over to be put to death. Ever loyal, Griselda agrees. The Marquis doesn't have the children killed, but gives them to someone else to raise, and eventually reunites the family once again. Patient Griselda appears in many other pieces of literature including Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* and serves as the inspiration for Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.



The Winds of Political Change - Margaret Thatcher's England

During the second half of the 20th century, England found itself emerging from the brink of an economic collapse following the oil crisis in 1973, a lengthy economic depression, and the destruction of two major wars in the earlier half of the century. Before Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in 1979, England attempted to bolster the economy with programs of social welfare, nationalized industry, and close regulation of the British economy. Under this financial policy, the Labour Party and the trade unions flourished, but the economy remained sluggish.

In the late 1970s, the tide began to turn toward policies that mirrored, or previewed, American Reaganomics, favoring the individual instead of the unions. English leaders began to limit government aid to the working class and implemented capitalistic financial practices. Direct taxes were lowered, public housing was sold off, austerity measures were put in place, and public owned companies were purchased by private business. It was under these new conditions that Margaret Thatcher rose to power, becoming the first female prime minister of Great Britain. It was a period of great individual capitalistic success.

These changes in the British economy were not embraced by all though. In working class towns, like the one where Joyce and Angie live in this play, people struggled even more to get by. The labor unions went out on strike and unemployment rose. The governmental divide between parties was at a crisis point. The fact that Margaret Thatcher was a woman just added more fuel to the fire. It is at this crucial period of history that our play is set.