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## Behind the Facade of Victorian Womanhood: Cultural Implications of Helena Modjeska's Coverage in the American Press, 1877–1909

*Pod maską wiktoriańskiej kobiecości. Kulturowe implikacje przedstawień  
 Heleny Modrzejewskiej w prasie amerykańskiej (1877–1909)*

### ABSTRACT

Helena Modrzejewska, professionally known also as Modjeska, a renowned Polish-American theatre actress of the second part of the 19th century, lived and performed in the USA in the years 1876–1909. She became an object of interest to the American press soon after her debut in 1877 and stayed in the media spotlight till her death. The present study in cultural and women's history examines Modjeska's abundant newspaper reports, notices,

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stories and reviews in the context of emerging American feminism. Employing content and topical analysis of randomly-selected texts published about her at three different points of time, two parallel yet contradictory femininities have been identified as parts of her mediated identity: an embodied ideal of Victorian „true womanhood” and a genuine New Woman of the fin de siècle. Although Modjeska was keeping up the conventional facade of a perfect gentlewoman for the sake of publicity, her activities were nevertheless consistently subverting the patriarchal codes authorising it. Whether she intended it or not, her media presence moved her to the forefront of feminist ferment in America.

**Key words:** Helena Modrzejewska/Modjeska, actress, Victorian „true womanhood”, „the New Woman”, feminism, penny press, media image, America

#### STRESZCZENIE

Helena Modrzejewska, wybitna polska i amerykańska aktorka, zamieszkała i występowała w USA w latach 1877–1909 pod scenicznym nazwiskiem Modjeska. Stała się obiektem zainteresowania prasy amerykańskiej wkrótce po debiucie w roku 1877. Jako gwiazda teatru i celebrytka, do śmierci pozostawała w centrum uwagi tego pierwszego amerykańskiego środka masowego przekazu. Niniejsze studium z pogranicza historii kultury i historii kobiet pokazuje wyniki badań różnego rodzaju doniesień prasy amerykańskiej dotyczących Modrzejewskiej i interpretuje je w historycznym kontekście kształtowania się wczesnego ruchu feministycznego w USA. Badanie metodą tematycznej analizy treści losowo wybranych próbek bardzo licznie zachowanych tekstów prasowych z trzech różnych lat życia aktorki pozwoliło na rozpoznanie dwu równoległe występujących, lecz przeciwstawnych wzorców kobiecej tożsamości w jej wizerunkach na łamach prasy. Pierwszy z nich, aprobowany przez Modrzejewską jako element wiodący jej prasowych kampanii promocyjnych, to ideał wiktoriańskiej kobiecości; drugi, pośrednio wyłaniający się z badanych tekstów, to autentycznie wyzwolona „Nowa Kobieta” przełomu XIX i XX w. Choć Modrzejewska do końca życia kreowała publicznie swój wizerunek strażniczki wiktoriańskich cnót kobiecych, to doniesienia o jej zawodowych poczynaniach i stylu życia przeczyły bezustannie ograniczeniom nakładanym na kobiety przez system patriarchalny. W ten sposób regularna obecność Modrzejewskiej na stronach gazet postawiła ją w awangardzie amerykańskiego feminizmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Helena Modrzejewska/Modjeska, aktorka, wiktoriański ideał kobiecości, „Nowa Kobieta”, feminizm, „prasa groszowa”, wizerunek medialny, Ameryka

„In no other field of history has there been so much productivity, innovation, and interest since the 1970s as in U.S. women’s history”. This observation, made by Linda Gordon in 1990<sup>1</sup>, has lost little of its validity in 2020, the year in which the United States celebrated the centennial of the 19th Amendment to its Constitution. Each year brings a massive volume of monographs and periodical historiography about American women

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Women’s History, w: *The New American History*, red. E. Foner, Philadelphia 1990, s. 185.

written from various theoretical perspectives, using new sources and reinterpreting already-known archival materials. Among the vast range of themes addressed by this historiography, a prominent position belongs to women's rights history, including the struggle for suffrage in the century preceding the 19th Amendment but also a number of other movements for social change which American women initiated and were prominently engaged in. New works are constantly added to the existing literature on the 19th-century women abolitionists<sup>2</sup>, suffragists<sup>3</sup>, educational reformers<sup>4</sup>, labour unionist<sup>5</sup> and the Temperance Movement activists<sup>6</sup>.

A separate place on this historiographic map belongs to the works on American women earning their living in performing arts (theatre, music and dance) as very special, though often involuntary, agents of transformation in the cultural model of femininity and social perceptions of gender roles. Focusing on individual female performers active in the show business prior to the 1920s, the authors of several studies argue that those women, thanks to their public visibility, acted parallel to their politically engaged and socially active „sisters“ in effectively questioning the established gender codes, especially in the build-up to the 19th Amendment, thus paving the way for the emergence of modern feminism. Faye Dudden, for instance, in her social history of American theatre, looks at the situation of a few American actresses in the years 1790–1870 and finds that already in the early republican period they were entering the forbidden sphere of professional employment to

<sup>2</sup> M.M.R. Kellow, *Women and Abolitionism in the United States: Recent Historiography*, „History Compass“ 2013, 11,11, s. 1008–1020.

<sup>3</sup> *Interchange: Women's Suffrage, the Nineteenth Amendment, and the Right to Vote*, „Journal of American History“ 2019, 106, 3, s. 662–694.

<sup>4</sup> J.K. Conway, *Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States*, „History of Education Quarterly“ 1974, 14, 1, s. 1–12; J.L. Rury, *Vocationalism for Home and Work: Women's Education in the United States, 1880–1930*, „History of Education Quarterly“ 1984, 24, 1, s. 21–44.

<sup>5</sup> *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, red. R. Milkman, Routledge, 2014 (1st ed. 1985); M.E. Triece, *Protest and Popular Culture: Women in the American Labor Movement*, New York–London 2001; A. Martens, *Working Women or Women Workers? The Women's Trade Union League and the Transformation of the American Constitutional Order*, „Studies in American Political Development“ 2009, 23, 2, s. 143–170; E. Boris, A. Orleck, *Feminism and the Labor Movement: A Century of Collaboration and Conflict*, „New Labor Forum“ 2011, 20, 1, s. 33–41.

<sup>6</sup> R. Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900*, Philadelphia 1981; B.L. Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America*, Middletown, CT 1981; J. Dannenbaum, *The Origins of Temperance Activism and Militancy among American Women*, „Journal of Social History“ 1981, 15, 2, s. 235–252; I. Tyrrell, *Temperance, Feminism, and the WCTU: New Interpretations and New Directions*, „Australasian Journal of American Studies“ 1986, 5, 2, s. 27–36.

pursue acting careers and economic independence unattainable for most females of American society<sup>7</sup>. Another history of American 19th-century actresses presents seven female theatre professionals whose price paid for not conforming to the middle-class Victorian ideal of virtuous domestic womanhood involved social stigmatisation and the label of harlots<sup>8</sup>. The thesis of a powerful impact of female performers on popular perceptions of women's nature and roles in the late 19th and early 20th century is forcefully argued by Susan Glenn<sup>9</sup>. According to her, their provocative performances, independent professional careers and celebrity allure made them the cultural avant-garde of feminism. These publications have established a conceptual framework for researching the lives of female performers in the 19th century as champions of women's cultural visibility and social independence in the times when they enjoyed so little of it in the world controlled by men. The present study in women's and cultural history applies a similar perspective to the Polish-American tragedienne Helena Modrzejewska *alias* Modjeska and her representations in the American press during her residence and stage career in the USA. Having achieved the status of a theatrical star that kept her in the American media spotlight for over thirty years, Modjeska found herself in a unique position to influence and improve the self-perception of all women and draw social attention to their versatile abilities and potential. What use did she make of that opportunity in the course of her close cooperation with the first American mass medium?

Modjeska's life story is sufficiently well known thanks to her several existing biographical monographs and essay collections<sup>10</sup>, so only the most essential points in the timeline of her life and career are summoned up here to contextualise the argument. In a nutshell, Modjeska was an actress of the second half of the 19th century who by her mid-thirties achieved stardom in Poland and – after resettlement to the USA – repeated her success in the new country, thus becoming a bi-national star. Born as

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<sup>7</sup> F.E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre Actresses and Audiences, 1790–1870*, New Haven, CT, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> C. Durst Johnson, *American Actress: Perspective on the Nineteenth Century*, Chicago 1984.

<sup>9</sup> S. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, Cambridge, MA, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> J. Szczublewski, *Helena Modrzejewska*, Warszawa 1959; T. Terlecki, *Pani Helena. Opowieść biograficzna o Modrzejewskiej*, London 1962; M.M. Coleman, *Fair Rosalind: The American Career of Helena Modjeska*, Cheshire, Conn. 1969; F. Siedlecki, *Helena Modrzejewska*, Kraków 1990 (1927); B. Holmgren, *Starring Madame Modjeska: On Tour in Poland and America*, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2012; *Helena Modrzejewska-szkice do portretu*, red. E. Orzechowski, Kraków 2015; *Helena Modrzejewska-szkice do portretu 2*, red. A. Kędziora, Kraków 2017; E. Orzechowski, *Helena Modrzejewska. Biogram*, Kraków 2017; *Helena Modrzejewska i Jej Przyjaciele*, red. A. Kędziora, E. Orzechowski, Kraków 2020.

Helena Mizel in Kraków in 1840 to a widowed mother and an unknown father, she was growing up in the territory of Poland annexed by Austria in an impoverished lower middle-class family. Despite financial difficulties, she was receiving private education in German from her mother's tenant and a great theatre-lover, actor and aspiring theatre manager Gustaw Zimajer (14 years her senior and married), who seduced young Helena, fathered her two children and persuaded her to become an actress in his itinerant theatre group under the stage name of Modrzejewska. Helena's natural acting talent and ambition allowed her to succeed in the local acting world, especially after abandoning her exploitive manager and partner. She was subsequently engaged by the municipal theatres in Lviv, Czerniowce (Chernivtsi), Kraków and finally by the Warsaw Imperial Theatres, where she enjoyed the position of prima donna for several years. During that period she met and married (1868) Karol Bodzenta Chłapowski, an impoverished Polish aristocrat presented in America as count, who earned his living as a journalist and newspaper editor<sup>11</sup>. In July 1876, the couple, accompanied by a group of friends, emigrated to California to live an idyllic life on a ranch purchased by Chłapowski. When the agricultural experiment failed and the savings dried up, Modjeska decided to resume the suspended professional activity. Despite her foreign accent and imperfect command of English, she achieved great success, obtained American citizenship and won a reputation as the leading female interpreter of Shakespeare on the American stage<sup>12</sup>. During her American period, she visited Poland seven times on guest tours, last time in 1903. Not long after the official retirement from the stage in 1905, she died of nephritis in Newport, California in 1909. Till today, the name of Helena Modjeska remains one of the most prominent on the list of notable Polish Americans, not only in show business, mentioned often in the same breath as Pulaski and Kosciuszko, because, like them, she brought fame abroad to her politically troubled country.

The present study neither re-examines nor presents newly discovered facts of the personal and artistic life story of Helena Modjeska widely researched by her Polish and American biographers. Instead, it focuses on her dual image as a woman emerging from hundreds of items about her that appeared in the American press throughout her long stage career in the US. An attempt is made at explaining in cultural terms the paradoxical coexistence of two incompatible facets of the image. One is that of a perfect

<sup>11</sup> M. Haiman, *Chłapowski, Karol Bodzenta (1840–1914)*, w: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, t. 3, Kraków 1937, s. 304.

<sup>12</sup> *Szeksplor Modrzejewskiej/Modjeska's Shakespeare*, red. A. Kędziora, Kraków 2015.

Victorian lady, the term used in the literature for the established Anglo-American 19th-century ideal of true womanhood involving piety, purity, submissiveness, domesticity and centrality of marriage and motherhood<sup>13</sup>. The other reveals a gifted and hard-working professional with remarkable career self-management skills. The ultimate goal is to obtain new insights into the assumed cultural identity of an exceptional woman amid the ferment of budding American feminism and women's demands for equal treatment.

The archival newspaper material for the study was obtained by searching the database *Chronicling America* (ISSN 2475-2703): *Historic American Newspapers*. It contains select digitised newspaper pages produced by the National Digital Newspaper Program and consists of about 100,000 newspaper pages for each state, from 1690 to the present, representing that state's history, geography and events of note. All newspapers published in the United States more than 95 years ago are in the public domain with no copyright restrictions<sup>14</sup>. The employed methods were keyword search combined with close reading and thematic content analysis. Searching the database with the keyword „Modjeska” in the period 1877–1909 yielded 13,904 results, i.e. separate newspaper pages on which the name of Helena Modjeska appeared at least once. To obtain a manageable study sample, a two-step selection procedure was performed. First, the database was probed at three points of time: the years 1877–78 (the first full year of Modjeska's acting career in the U.S.) – 334 items found; her mid-career year 1883 in which she obtained American citizenship – 470 items found; the year 1905 (Modjeska's last year of stage work) – 538 results. After discarding the pages containing theatre announcements only, the sample was further narrowed by randomly selecting thirty texts in each period, trying to maintain proportions between opinion, news and feature pieces, insofar as such generic distinctions apply to the historic press. The items were subsequently read closely for story topics.

The American newspapers of the last quarter of the 19th century constitute an important and rich source for cultural history. The penny press, that appeared across the country in the 1830s, was already a well-established network of mass-produced inexpensive titles. They extended the influence of the newspaper media to the poorer classes due to the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. B. Welter, *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860*, „*American Quarterly*” 1966, 18, 2, Part 1, s. 151–174; C. Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, New York 1985; F.B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*, Athens, GA 1989; A. Gromkowska-Melosik, *Kobieta epoki wiktoriańskiej. Tożsamość, ciało i medykalizacja*, Kraków 2013.

<sup>14</sup> <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> [dostęp: 10 X 2021].



changed journalistic content and style as the editors realised that the information suitable for the wealthy did not necessarily interest the penny-paying public<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the tabloid-style papers dominating the American print media market during the 32 years of Modjeska's artistic activity in the USA offered news and information with mass-market appeal, both in form and content. In addition to local and national political and business news, it was scandal and sensation spiced with delicious detail and fake material, if necessary, that worked best<sup>16</sup>. An important novelty was the appearance of women as a productive topic of the news. The elite press and upscale journalism (with its respect for facts, intellectual discussion and seriousness of tone) did not completely disappear yet no longer played a major role in American journalism and felt the pressure to include more popular content such as sports reports and society pages. The developments and characteristics of America's first mass medium explain the variety of forms, places and journalistic genres in which the name of Helena Modjeska appeared in the newspapers of the time: front and inside pages, national and international news reports, human interest stories, local gossip, respectable social chronicle sections and competent theatre reviews. Most news and commentaries about her have been located in newspaper sections of two kinds. The first type are columns informing about the local forms and places of entertainment, variously entitled: *The Coming Shows, Amusements, The Stage, The Dramatic Week* and the like. This is where one finds texts related to Modjeska's performances: short and long reviews, from good to enthusiastic; occasional negative comments about her foreign accent; detailed descriptions of her stage costumes, and comparisons with other actresses. The other type of places often containing Modjeska news are those reserved for gossip and sensation – *On the Curbstone, Footlight Fancies, For the Ladies, Humorous, City Chatter and Chips* – where the readers could find thrilling personal tidbits about „divine Modjeska“.

Three other factors further support the validity of studying Modjeska's newspaper coverage as a channel through which the rigid gender ideology prescribed for women was perpetuated and subverted at the same time. One is the sheer frequency and regularity with which Modjeska was reported by the American press; another is the wide reach and national

<sup>15</sup> J. Folkerts, *American Journalism History: A Bibliographic Essay*, „American Studies International“ 1991, 29, 2, s. 4–27.

<sup>16</sup> J. Mussel, *Elemental forms: The newspaper as popular genre in the nineteenth century*, „Media History“ 2014, 20, 1, s. 4–20; M.R. Ember, E. Emery, N.L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, 9th edition, London–New York 1999, chap. 6.

circulation of her news due to such innovations as the telegraph, content syndication and constantly improved techniques of rapid newspaper delivery<sup>17</sup>. Thirdly, as the position of the press in the last quarter of the 19th century was not yet challenged by the broadcasting mass media, newspapers held monopoly in communicating information and opinion that mass audiences embraced and engaged with. It is impossible to prove the actual influence of Modjeska's news on people's thinking about women in the decades of struggle for women's rights; we can at best reconstruct the model of femininity her star persona projected to the American mass reading public for over three decades. The assumption about the actual penetration of this model is made here by analogy to the cultivation theory proposed in 1976 by Gerbner and Gross for studying the influence of television on viewers. According to it, when frequently exposed to certain constructs of reality on the TV screen, people come to adopt similar attitudes and expectations, among them those concerning gender role beliefs<sup>18</sup>. The frequent and systematic presence of Helena Modjeska on the American newspaper pages proved by the database search leaves no doubt as to the ample exposure of the reading public to her public and private developments. Many years of fruitful symbiosis between Modjeska and the press was bound to affect the elite and ordinary Americans one way or the other.

When Modjeska arrived in the USA in July 1876, various important steps of women's rights movement had already happened: 28 years earlier, in 1848, the first Women's Rights Convention had taken place in Seneca Falls, California, where Modjeska first settled and always considered her American home, had extended property rights to women in the state constitution in 1849. In 1866, the American Equal Rights Association had been formed dedicated to the goal of suffrage for all regardless of gender or race. In 1874, two years before Modjeska set foot on the American continent, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union had been founded, and soon became an important proponent in the fight for woman suffrage. In 1888, when Modjeska was already a celebrated actress, the National Council of Women was established to promote the advancement of women in society. Thus, her American career was developing in the context of and parallel to those and other advancements and failures of the women's rights movement. One

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<sup>17</sup> M. Blondheim, *News over the Wire: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844–1897*, Cambridge, MA 1994.

<sup>18</sup> G. Gerbner, L. Gross, *Living with television*, „Journal of Communication” 1976, 26, s. 172–179; L.A. Tucker, *Television's role regarding alcohol use in adolescents*, „Adolescence” 1985, 20, s. 593–598; S.D. Witt, *The influence of television on children's gender role socialization*, „Childhood Education” 2000, 76, s. 322–324.



might expect that as an immigrant woman, coming from a partitioned and politically oppressed European country and knowing gender oppression first-hand in her young years, she would be naturally sympathetic to the struggle of her American „sisters“. She may have been, as demonstrated by Holmgren on the basis of epistolary and secondary sources<sup>19</sup>, but there is scanty evidence for that in the studied newspaper material. Reports of her public actions concerning women narrowly focus on the honorable artistic mission of actresses as a part of her general critique of the American theatre’s low professional standards and other deficiencies<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, the distinct first impression is that she was managing her American career and media image as if totally oblivious of the social and cultural ferment around women and their rights in her new motherland.

First and foremost, Modjeska comes across from her newspaper depictions as an embodiment of the Victorian „true womanhood“ in many crucial respects rather than an involved activist using her celebrity position to help advance the women’s struggle for the vote. This observation results from the identification of a few topics regularly appearing in her narratives. One of them is her respectable marital status together with the ennobling aristocratic title of countess routinely underlined by phrases such as: „countess Bozenta“; „a Polish lady of noble birth“; „countess Modjeska“. Her moral respectability was confirmed by a number of fake biographical notes in which her Polish cohabitant Gustaw Zimajer is presented as the first deceased husband, Mr. Modjeska, the father of her only son Rudolph, in fact born as an illegitimate child<sup>21</sup>. In countless reports across the study period Modjeska’s other conventional ladylike qualities are reported and praised, among them her impeccable manners and sweet temper observed in various situations, for instance:

[...] she is a modest little lady without the slightest affectation, plain in dress, manners and face, and always womanly and natural. She has a rare faculty of knowing how to treat everybody with real politeness [...] All this simply shows that she is a born lady and not the manufactured one<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> B. Holmgren, *op. cit.*, s. 242–252.

<sup>20</sup> *To the stage struck woman*, „The Daily Independent“ 24 V 1893, s. 4; *Four Noted Actresses Discourse to the Women*, „Rock Island Daily“ 18 V 1893, s. 1; *The Woman’s Congress*, „Portland Daily Press“ 26 V 1893, s. 4; *At the World’s Fair*, „Little Falls Transcript“ 19 V 1893, s. 2; *Women’s Congress*, „The Salt Lake Herald“ 18 V 1893, s. 2; *Woman’s Congress*, „The Watchman and Southron“ 24 V 1893, s. 3; *Shall she go on the stage?*, „The Morning Call“ 19 V 1893, s. 6; *Modjeska spoke. Before the Congress of Women*, „The Morning Call“ 5 V 1894, s. 3; A. Stevens, *Managers, authors, plays and critics*, „The San Francisco Call“ 6 III 1898, s. 27.

<sup>21</sup> „The Wheeling Sunday Register“ 11 III 1883, s. 5; 3 VII 1883, s. 4.

<sup>22</sup> „Morning Appeal“ 2 VI 1880, s. 2.

In a short account of her conversation with an aspiring fellow actress, she was complemented for revealing „her sweet and generous womanhood – that perfect courtesy which forbade her to put any but the best interpretation on the manner of her [rude – I.W.] guest”<sup>23</sup>. In a report about her receiving a haberdasher of Polish origin and the son of the US President Chester Arthur, both of whom came to pay her respects after a performance in Washington D.C., she was praised for treating them alike and being „equally great in everything she undertakes, [...] the simplist (sic!) and most unpretending lady in the world, [...] and as complete a woman as she is an artist”<sup>24</sup>. The topics of Modjeska’s ladylike performance of wealth and gentlelady manners often come together with comments about her sophisticated dress style concerning both the stage costumes, mostly designed and owned by herself, and private outfits. A good illustrative fragment comes from the article *Costly Toilets of Stage Celebrities* in a provincial Michigan paper.

The most thoroughly dressed woman on any stage was probably the Polish actress, Mme. Modjeska. She had a real genius for clothes. [...] She dressed exquisitely in public and in private. Even during the disagreeables (sic!) of a rough ocean voyage, she was always marvelously costumed<sup>25</sup>.

Another topic regularly appearing in newspaper texts about Modjeska relates to her being a loving mother and a family woman, the roles valued in Victorian America as the most essential of all women’s duties. The readers learned about her maternal affection from news items like this: „Mme. Modjeska wears a ring, a large diamond, but with a flat face and rising with a spring. Under it is a portrait of her son. She calls the ornament her two jewels”<sup>26</sup>. Her motherly devotion is stressed by the correspondent of „The Omaha Daily Bee”, who congratulates her on becoming a grandmother „in the view of the intense motherly feeling she is known to possess for both her son and daughter [-in-law]”<sup>27</sup>. One learns that Modjeska remained in close contact with her son from various bits of information, for instance the one of 1892 that „she intends to take up her residence in Chicago, where her son, Ralph Modjeska, expects to practice his profession”<sup>28</sup>, or of 1896 about her resting in his Chicago

<sup>23</sup> „The Rock Island Argus” 30 XI 1881, s. 3.

<sup>24</sup> „Lancaster Daily Intelligencer” 11 XII 1882, s. 2.

<sup>25</sup> „The True Northerner” 31 III 1882, s. 3.

<sup>26</sup> „The Rock Island Argus” 21 VI 1882, s. 4.

<sup>27</sup> „The Omaha Daily Bee” 7 VIII 1887, s. 5.

<sup>28</sup> „Evening Capital Journal” 19 VIII 1892, s. 1.

home when taken ill during her tour<sup>29</sup>. The news about her son, a highly valued bridge engineer (yet invariably „son of the well-known actress“ to the journalists), and his family frequently appeared in the press. The reading public across the country was informed that Modjeska’s son was to marry<sup>30</sup>; that „[a]t the wedding of Ralph Modjeska [...] Mme. Modjeska also accompanied her son“<sup>31</sup>, that „Mrs. Ralph Modjeska recently made Mme. Modjeska grandmother to a fine boy“<sup>32</sup>; that „Madame Modjeska is accompanied on her tour by her daughter-in-law Mrs. Ralph Modjeska and her pretty little grandchild“<sup>33</sup>, and that „two attempts have been made to kidnap the 4-year-old grand-daughter of Mme. Modjeska“ in March 1896<sup>34</sup>. Although the real nature of Modjeska’s relationships with Ralph and his wife verged on tyranny mixed with indulgence and eventually led to the couple’s separation and divorce<sup>35</sup>, none of this found its way to the popular press that continued to report her as a doting mother.

Modjeska’s piety is yet another aspect of her personality occurring in her newspaper coverage, albeit not as frequent. The author of a long article about her in a provincial 1887 newspaper reports that „[s]he is a woman of strong religious belief“, a Catholic, „a firm observer of the Sunday services of the church“, and that „[a] crucifix of gold and ivory on her dressing case is her constant travelling companion“<sup>36</sup>. In a minor report of a human-interest episode involving Modjeska, the journalist refers to her as „the most genuinely religious woman“ and „the truest kind of a Christian of singularly gentle disposition“<sup>37</sup>. Elsewhere, in a short article entitled *A Catholic Actress*, one reads about Modjeska’s „deep religious spirit“ and her devout Catholicism<sup>38</sup>. Interestingly, in 1905, her picture appeared in the tableau of fifteen prominent Los Angeles Catholics, all male but her, in charge of the National Convention of the Knights of Columbus, a fraternal organisation for practicing Catholic men founded in 1882<sup>39</sup>.

A different identified topic of Modjeska’s news was her charitable activities and gestures. Like a truly benevolent lady of high moral

<sup>29</sup> „The Anaconda Standard“ 22 III 1896, s. 13.

<sup>30</sup> „Salt Lake Evening Democrat“ 23 XII 1885, s. 1.

<sup>31</sup> „The Indianapolis Journal“ 3 I 1886, s. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 14 VIII 1887, s. 10.

<sup>33</sup> „The Portland Daily Press“ 30 I 1892, s. 5.

<sup>34</sup> „The Herald“ (Los Angeles) 29 III 1896, s. 2.

<sup>35</sup> B. Holmgren, *op. cit.*, s. 273–277.

<sup>36</sup> *Helena Modjeska in Omaha*, „The Omaha Daily Bee“ 14 VIII 1887, s. 8.

<sup>37</sup> „Waco Evening News“ 2 V 1889, s. 2, rpt. w: „New Ulm Weekly Review“ 13 XI 1889, s. 8; „The Great West“ 15 XI 1889, s. 6; „Middlebury Register“ 9 VIII 1889, s. 3.

<sup>38</sup> „Kentucky Irish American“ 25 III 1899, s. 3.

<sup>39</sup> „Los Angeles Herald“ 21 V 1905, s. 7.

standards, „Mme. Modjeska has given \$100 to the widow and children of Henry Clarke, and the like sum to the daughter of John Lee, sufferers by the Park Theatre fire in New York”<sup>40</sup>. On another occasion, an entire column was taken by the article entitled *Modjeska's Little Guests* about a Christmas dinner she held for 40 New York City children at the Clarendon Hotel<sup>41</sup>. Although the invited children were not exactly poor, the event depicted Modjeska as generous, hospitable, loving children and respecting Christmas traditions. Another local paper depicted gracious Modjeska as „the kind-hearted lady” who, when approached for \$35 by a poor young woman in New York, wanted to let her have the money even when informed that the woman was a professional swindler<sup>42</sup>. A one-sentence syndicated piece of news that „Mme. Modjeska supports at her own expense a school for Polish children in New York” was run by several newspapers across the country in spring 1884, reinforcing her image of a generous philanthropist<sup>43</sup>.

However, parallel to the representations of Modjeska as a paragon of Victorian womanhood, the contemporary American press was projecting a completely different image of the actress, remarkably close to what would be called a full-blooded feminist, had she lived in the later part of the twentieth century. First of all, she was shown as a hard-working and well-earning professional. Holmgren estimated that between October 1882 to March 1907 Modjeska „was booked on twenty-four tours in the United States”, to which five trips to Europe (including Poland) must be added<sup>44</sup>. Nobody as yet has counted how many individual matinee and evening performances that involved altogether. Some idea of her incredible workload can be formed from the article *Modjeska's seasons* summarising her touring schedule between October 1882 and June 1883. It is worth quoting *in extenso* to illustrate the sheer physical effort involved in pursuing and maintaining the reputation of a star-actress:

Modjeska commenced her present American tour in Boston, Massachusetts, at the Globe Theatre, Monday, October 2, 1882. Since this, up to the Friday she plays here, she will have performed 245 times. She has played in fifty-one different cities. Her repertory has consisted of eight pieces, and she has played each piece the following number of times: „Odette”, twenty-five times; „As You Like It”, sixty-seven times; „Twelfth Night”, twenty-

<sup>40</sup> „Daily Globe” 17 XI 1882, s. 9.

<sup>41</sup> „The Sun” (NYC) 25 XII 1882, s. 1.

<sup>42</sup> „The Benton Weekly Record” 12 III 1880, s. 1.

<sup>43</sup> „The Highland Weekly News” 9 IV 1884, s. 5; „The Republican” 12 IV 1884, s. 2; „The Grenada Sentinel” 12 IV 1884, s. 6; „The Bossier Banner” 8 V 1884, s. 1.

<sup>44</sup> B. Holmgren, *op. cit.*, s. 185–186.

one times; „Frou Frou“, forty-six times; „Camille“, forty-five times; „Adrienne“, twenty-four times; „Marie Stuart“, eight times; „Romeo and Juliet“, four times<sup>45</sup>.

Another message about Modjeska emanating from practically every single newspaper item was her disregard for the ideal of feminine modesty and for the bourgeois cult of domesticity demonstrated by putting herself daily in public view. The particularly sensitive aspect of her public display was the use of the body on stage. Although well understood today as an essential feature of theatre, professional use of the body by female performers in the 19th century infringed on the contemporary notions of women's decency and inspired a number of sensational and piquant reports<sup>46</sup>. This attitude echoes in an irreverent article under the title *Legs That Are Legs*, whose author claims that „Modjeska has limbs. They are attenuated and undulating, but they are not the Raberg pattern. If they were, all the leaves in the Forest of Arden would blush a deep autumn red at the sight of them“<sup>47</sup>. Ignoring cultural taboos surrounding sexuality, a local Memphis paper reprinted a frivolous article from the „Buffalo Telegraph“ evaluating the way of performing stage kisses by the best-known actresses of the day. It characterizes Modjeska's kissing style as „stately iciness“<sup>48</sup>. Her body and physical appearance off-stage seem to have been of public interest, too. In the syndicated article of March 27, 1898, *How to Succeed as an Actress*, the then 58-year-old Modjeska is described as „[t]all and lithe, with the figure of a girl of 18, slender but not thin, made up of delicious curves“<sup>49</sup>. While many female readers of her age would not have minded looking like her, most would have objected to be publicly discussed in such indecorous terms.

Not only did the Americans read about Modjeska as a hard-working professional, but also about her high earnings, unattainable by any contemporary working woman and by most working men. The article quoted above informs that „Modjeska's earnings this season will amount to over \$ 72,000“, and in another one a sarcastic remark is made on her financial demands: „Modjeska is getting modest. She wants \$100.000 for one hundred nights in this country“<sup>50</sup>. Even at the end of her stage career, it was reported that „[s]he earned \$25,000 in 1905 and will keep on acting for several years to

<sup>45</sup> „The Salt Lake Herald“ 7 VI 1883, s. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. T.C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, London–New York 1991, s. 105–136.

<sup>47</sup> „St. Paul Daily Globe“ 24 I 1886, s. 3.

<sup>48</sup> „Public Ledger“ 19 V 1881, s. 2.

<sup>49</sup> „The Salt Lake Herald“, s. 18; „The San Francisco Call“, s. 21; „The News and Observer“, s. 11; „The Seattle Post-Intelligencer“, s. 27.

<sup>50</sup> „Public Ledger“ 5 IV 1881, s. 4.

come<sup>51</sup>. After her death, „The Detroit Times” and many other papers across the country informed the public that in her will „Modjeska leaves her estate, valued at \$120,000, to her immediate relatives”<sup>52</sup>.

In addition to being a highly-paid professional in the occupation of dubious respectability, Modjeska comes across from the analysed texts as a pampered celebrity with an inclination for a sumptuous lifestyle. She was often reported spending lavishly on clothes, hotels and deluxe travelling. Her touring baggage allegedly consisted of twenty-eight trunks already at the beginning of her American career<sup>53</sup>. The newspapers publicised fake news supplied by Modjeska’s manager Harry Sargent about the theft of her valuable diamond racket allegedly presented to her by the Russian czar<sup>54</sup>. A quintessence of many similar sensational, often partly fabricated, revelations about her lifestyle appeared in a local Virginia newspaper:

Whether or not her engagement pans out well, her expenses are of the same colossal character. She boards at the best hotels, has her servant retinue and is never known to touch the plebeian sidewalk with her dainty satin-clad foot. This is the way she travels on her starring tours: Madame Modjeska, tragedienne, has just „taken the road” in a drawing-room car [...] which costs \$50 a day for its use, alone, and has been especially refurnished at an outlay of \$5,000. A porter, a French cook and four other servants accompany the lady – all under pay<sup>55</sup>.

Another gossipy piece of news contained information about Modjeska’s photographic session, for which „she brought with her four large trunks, two maids, her dog and her husband. Two of the trunks contained costumes, one cosmetics and toilette arrangements, and the other, which was iron bound and padlocked, her jewelry”<sup>56</sup>. The readers, presumably female, interested in more details about Modjeska’s private and stage dresses, were regularly supplied with their detailed descriptions, like the one in the *Fashion fancies* section of the National Republican of her toilette in *Hearts Ease*, which „consisted of a pale-blue petticoat, with a thick garland of pansies of every color heading the flounce, over this a bodice and long-trained skirt of dark pansy-colored velvet, the whole garnished

<sup>51</sup> „The Marion Daily Mirror” 14 I 1909, s. 6.

<sup>52</sup> 10 IV 1909, s. 1. An average weekly wage for a working American woman in 1900 was \$ 7.96, cf. C.E. Persons, *Women’s Work and Wages in the United States*, „The Quarterly Journal of Economics” 1915, 29, 2, s. 201–234 (table on s. 221).

<sup>53</sup> „Chicago Daily Tribune” 2 II 1879, s. 12.

<sup>54</sup> „Barbour County Index” 17 X 1884, s. 1.

<sup>55</sup> „Virginia Free Press” 9 XII 1882, s. 1; for similar reports see *Modjeska’s palace car*, „The New North-west” 6 XII 1878, s. 1; *Stars in cars*, „Evening Star” 23 XI 1882, s. 2; *Palace-car chat*, „The Sedalia Weekly Bazaar” 9 X 1883, s. 2.

<sup>56</sup> „Daily Globe” 25 XII 1882, s. 5.



with exquisite lace, fastened with thick clusters of pansies at the shoulder, the waist, and on the train"<sup>57</sup>. Descriptions like that stressed Modjeska's vanity and narcissism rather than quiet elegance.

Yet all those narratives of Modjeska's wealth, vanity, extravagance and self indulgence pale in comparison with a wealth of opinions and reviews of Modjeska's acting style and skills. The amateur ones write about „divine Modjeska”, „the great Modjeska”, „a distinguished artist”, „the celebrated emotional actress”, or an actress with „a certain irresistible charm that captivates everybody”. The more professional ones elaborate on her „dramatic instinct and a rare dramatic intelligence”, „artistic fitness of gesture and intonation”, „exquisite tenderness and grace”, „rare genius and talent” and many other artistic achievements that „form part of the contemporaneous history of the drama”.

Modjeska's business and managerial activities can be glimpsed from scattered information concerning her conflicts with tour managers and fellow actors, negotiations of royalties, selection of the supporting troupe members, the ideas of costumes and scenography<sup>58</sup>. Her name appeared very often in classified, often illustrated, advertisements. The research for this study corroborated the findings of Michalina Lubaszewska<sup>59</sup>, who analysed the form and content of newspaper illustrations advertising products endorsed by Modjeska, that the actress allowed her image and name to be used not only by cosmetics and fashion companies, but also jewelry, sweets and china manufacturers. „Bernhardt shoes and Modjeska slippers, latest styles for ladies at 'Big' Heymans”, and „Ladies' Seal Plush Modjeskas and tight-fitting wraps from 10,00 up”<sup>60</sup> are only two randomly selected advertisements of products bearing her name. As a celebrity endorser of Recamier toilet preparations for women, Modjeska appeared in the company's advertorial at least 49 times in the newspapers of Virginia, Georgia, California and Minnesota in the last quarter of 1895, next to a few other star actresses of the day. Even if lending her name to commercial campaigns did not bring much financial profit in those times, the practice shows Modjeska's understanding of free publicity opportunities.

A few interrelated conclusions can be formulated from the presented evidence. One concerns Helena Modjeska as an individual. With her

<sup>57</sup> „National Republican” 16 IV 1881, s. 2; See also: *Modjeska*, „Chicago Daily Tribune” 3 III 1878, s. 12.

<sup>58</sup> „The Princeton Union” 25 XI 1880, s. 7; *The time is out of joint*, „Evening Journal” 11 XI 1889, s. 1. See also: B. Holmgren, *op. cit.*, s. 186–197.

<sup>59</sup> *Modrzejewska i świat reklamy*, „Kultura i Historia” 2014, 25, [www.kulturaihistoria.umcs.lublin.pl/archives/5255](http://www.kulturaihistoria.umcs.lublin.pl/archives/5255) [dostęp: 10 X 2021].

<sup>60</sup> „The Louisiana Democrat” 20 IV 1881, s. 3; „Wichita Eagle” 22 X 1889, s. 1.

experience of unclear parentage, disreputable youth and bohemian itinerant lifestyle before arriving in America, she hardly fitted the white middle- and upper-class ideal of womanliness based on piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. She must have realised that emigration to a distant continent was a unique opportunity to leave behind the Old World scandals and theatrical intrigues and reinvent herself as a virtuous lady with an established European stage personality. That such strategy could help in building an acting career in America was demonstrated by Susan Anthony in her study of two mediocre English actresses who rose to fame in the USA in the generation preceding Modjeska's<sup>61</sup>. It explains the absence or misrepresentation of the actress' discreditable biographical facts from her Polish past in her newspaper coverage.

Another conclusion pertains to the behind-the-scenes mechanisms of American show business of the time. As demonstrated by other authors, carefully arranged press releases about performing artists constituted an important part of their promotional campaigns arranged by tour managers for their stars. The cooperation between the sensationalist press and publicity-seeking individuals profited both sides, provided the supplied information was newsworthy. Eileen Curley traced such a symbiotic relationship in a case study of an amateur-turned-professional American actress of lesser artistic stature and popularity than Modjeska<sup>62</sup>. Harry Sargent, Modjeska's first American stage manager, as well as John Stetson, Daniel Frohman and husband-impresario Karol Chłapowski after him, certainly understood that crucial aspect of managing an actress on the American road. They cooperated with the press by supplying information and arranging lifestyle interviews with her for reporters. Yet no matter what information about Modjeska found its way to the press, it never overtly undermined her espoused image of a well-bred respectable gentlewoman with a noble artistic mission. Whether she truly identified with the image or merely played along with it for commercial reasons is a question outside the limits of this study, although some valid insights have been offered elsewhere on the basis of different archival sources<sup>63</sup>. Perhaps she liked to perform a respectable middle-class persona beyond any moral suspicion as an expression of her own American Dream: social advancement, fame and material success achieved through hard work and perseverance.

<sup>61</sup> Not a „Whorish Actress“: *Celebrity and the Early American Stage*, „Journal of American Culture“ 2015, 38, 4, s. 401–412.

<sup>62</sup> *Mutual Profiteering: Sensational Journalism, Society Columns, and Mrs James Brown Potter's Theatrical Debuts*, „Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film“ 2019, 46, 1, s. 73–98.

<sup>63</sup> B. Holmgren, *op. cit.*, s. 242–245.

The finding that Modjeska and her „public relations“ people clung so tenaciously to her „true womanhood“ media portrayal throughout her American career supports a more general cultural conclusion. As the 19th century was drawing to a close, more and more American women were openly rejecting the constraining gendered expectations in their struggle for education, professional status, sexual freedom and political rights<sup>64</sup>. Meanwhile, Modjeska, a genuine „New Woman“ who transgressed most of the established gender norms for her sex, refused to step out from behind the Victorian facade she constructed for herself. If that type of mediated identity served her well all her American life, it seems that the code of true womanhood continued to keep a firm hold in the gendered cultural system of the Americans despite the changing patterns of patriarchal authority and diminishing subservience of women across the class spectrum at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, Modjeska’s assumed public identity was gradually becoming an empty cultural shell. In this sense, she and the mass American consumers of the penny press embodied the Bourdieusian habitus, the internalisation of certain „durable dispositions“ that prevent adequate response to cultural change even though those old concepts are already anachronistic<sup>65</sup>.

However, no matter how hard Modjeska tried to perpetuate her perfect Victorian womanhood publicly, fake or genuine, a different image was constantly showing through the facade. First of all, her overall newspaper portrait was that of a self-made career woman. Misinforming the press about her humble background and scandalous youth, she mixed freely with the American and European elites and aristocracy. She systematically developed and strengthened her position in the national theatrical marketplace, and skillfully capitalised on the demand for the English and French classical plays by incorporating them in her repertory. Although always accompanied by her impoverished husband, whose aristocratic title she used, she was the breadwinner of the family, earning enough to support him and pay for her own needs and whims. Despite her delicate frame, she demonstrated remarkable endurance going on physically and emotionally exhausting tours for many years. Her long-lasting stardom resulted from her acting gift

<sup>64</sup> See, for instance, R. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism*, New Haven, Conn. 1982; S.M. Cruea, *Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement*, „General Studies Writing Faculty Publications“ 2005, 1, [https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw\\_pub/1](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw_pub/1) [dostęp: 10 X 2021].

<sup>65</sup> D.L. Swartz, *The Sociology of Habit: The Perspective of Pierre Bourdieu*, „OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health“ 2002, 22, 1\_suppl, s. 61S–69S; K. Huppertz, *Why Use Bourdieusian Theory to Study Gender, Class and Work? The Case for ‘Gender Capital’*, w: *Gender Capital at Work*, London 2012, s. 8–31.

combined with artistic creativity and intelligence. Thus, she denied all the conventional middle-class assumptions about women's fragility, submission, need of male protection, intellectual inferiority and the entire separate spheres ideology. What American male and female newspaper readers were exposed to in Modjeska's news almost every day was a systematic guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes. Without being directly involved in any form of feminist activism, this exceptional woman and celebrated artist was nevertheless paving the way not only for the success of the 19th Amendment, but also for the transformation of the entire set of cultural norms circumscribing women's lives in contemporary America.

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