

Maria Bogucka

## MARRIAGE IN EARLY MODERN POLAND

In the 16th–18th century a woman's whole existence and her status were determined by two basic factors: gender and belonging to a given social group. The junction of those two determinants was of crucial importance — a discussion on which of them was the more significant is futile today, the more so as the result of their "mixture" depended also on a number of smaller factors, including especially the individual characteristics of the woman herself and persons from her immediate entourage (especially father, husband), as well as on the vicissitudes of life and accidental circumstances.

On the other hand the phases of a woman's existence were determined by her gender and the place in the family regardless of her social position. Hence women were perceived as maidens, wife–mothers and widows. The transition from one phase of existence to another in the whole of Europe followed a certain ritual (the so-called *rites de passage*). Each phase had its own characteristics, conferring different rights and duties, the awareness of which was deeply rooted not only in legal regulations but above all in old-Polish custom<sup>1</sup>. The most important *rite de passage* for a woman was marriage.

The inequality of the sexes manifested itself at the very moment of childbirth: everybody impatiently expected a male descendant<sup>2</sup>. Not only in royal and aristocratic families, but also among the common gentry and burghers a son ensured the continuance of the family stock and was heir to the property (in royal families — to the throne). Also among the wealthy peasants

---

<sup>1</sup>M. Bogucka, *The Lost World of "Sarmatians". Custom as the Regulator of Polish Social Life in Early Modern Times*, Warszawa 1996, p. 52 ff, 71 ff.

<sup>2</sup>"My Lord, grant it that you [my wife] bear me an heir", sighed Krzysztof Radziwiłł in 1583, cf. A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość (Old-Polish Love)*, Poznań 1981, p. 50.

a son was a guarantee of the family's perpetuation and continuance of the farm. The birth of a daughter was some kind of disappointment, which does not mean at all that they were not loved, and even very affectionately, by their parents. A father's despair after the loss of his little daughter in the second half of the 16th c. gave rise to the masterpiece of old-Polish literature, Jan Kochanowski's *Treny* (*Threnodies*). More than a hundred years later Stanisław Morsztyn of Raciborsko similarly bewailed the loss of his beloved daughter in his *Smutne Żale* (*Sad Laments*, 1698). The deep emotional ties connecting fathers with their daughters are testified by the correspondence, of which, unfortunately, only fragments remain (e.g. Halszka Tęczyńska née Radziwiłł's letters to her father, Radziwiłł Sierotka, from the turn of the 16th c.<sup>3</sup>). The presence of little girls in epitaphs, i.e. portraits commissioned by parents both among the gentry and burghers, also testifies that they were embraced with as affectionate a love as boys. In the 16th c. in Warsaw the following inscription was engraved on the tombstone: "to the worthiest, the most modest virgins Bona and Barbara Baryczka, who as soon as they received lives, lost them, and were entombed straight from their cradles and diapers. O, cruel death! Thou who piercest the parents' hearts and sweepest them all with one scythe"<sup>4</sup>. The inscription on the epitaph of Adelgunda Zappio, who died at the age of ten in Gdańsk in the 17th c., expresses the hope of the bereft, pain-stricken parents that they will meet their daughter on the Last Judgement day.

On reaching the age of about 14–20 a young girl faced a choice: marriage or cloister. A third alternative was more widespread only in the poorest circles, where e.g. the position of a servant allowed a woman to remain unmarried till old age and even to the very death. The choice, of course, was made not by the girl but by her parents and relatives<sup>5</sup>; similarly, it was the

<sup>3</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Cit. after Ł. Charewiczowa, *Kobieta w dawnej Polsce do rozbiorów* (*Woman in Old Poland Until the Partitions*), Lwów 1938, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>Some researchers think that there was more freedom in this respect in Lithuania, since the 1st Lithuanian Statute (par. 4, art. 15) provided that a noblewoman could marry whoever she wished and could not be forced in this respect. However a careful analysis of the other provisions of this Statute as well as the 2nd and the 3rd Statutes and judicial acts can lead us to the conclusion that the consent of parents and relatives was necessary for contracting a marriage, cf. I. Vaikonytė, *Lietuvos didžiosios kunigaikštystės bajorių teise laisvai ištekėti: realybe ar*

parents and relatives who decided on the marriage or a choice of religious career by a young man. Especially in the 16th and at the beginning of the 17th c. the wishes and feelings of the young people did not count for much, what determined the choice was the financial interests of the family, the prospects of gaining advantageous relationships, establishing family alliances and merging the property (among the gentry) or developing a commercial enterprise or a craftsman's workshop (among the burghers). Also among peasants the choice of a wife or a husband was determined by practical considerations or requirements of the farm.

Matches were preferred among partners of equal status and property (recommended already by Mikołaj Rej) as well as age, which did not rule out misalliances, dowry-hunting or marriages of old men to child-wives or wealthy old widows to youngsters. A nobleman Stanisław Druszkiewicz at the age of 38 married a 14 year old Elżbieta Poradowska (1659), and the reason was ...health problems: "before marriage I suffered great ailments for several years... and this led me to marriage, so that I should know who would bury me"<sup>6</sup> he admits frankly. Aleksander Franciszek Sapieha, who died a tragic death at the age of 21 in 1675, had a 13 years older wife (Joanna née Chodkiewicz)<sup>7</sup>. Historian Bartosz Paprocki had a much older wife, Jadwiga Kossobudzka. The young Paprocki was lured by the elderly widow's considerable property; the marriage, however, turned out to be hell and only his spouse's death in 1572 brought relief. Because of this unfortunate experience Paprocki remained a misogynist till the end of his life<sup>8</sup>. Unions between old men and young girls seemed to have better results, thus e.g. Lew Sapieha who in 1599 married a sixteen-year old Halszka née Radziwiłł enjoyed conjugal bliss, as the correspondence shows<sup>9</sup>. Such mismarriages, however, had sometimes tragic consequences as e.g. the death of the old hetman Stanisław Koniecpolski as a result of an overdose of aphrodisiacs after his marriage to the young Zofia née Opalińska<sup>10</sup>.

---

Jtkcĳa?, in: *Lietuvos valstybe XII–XVIII a.*, ed. Z. Kiaupa, A. Mickevičius, J. Sarčevičienė, Vilnius 1997, pp. 147–157.

<sup>6</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 346.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup>W. Dworzaczek, *Polski Słownik Biograficzny (Polish Biographical Dictionary, further on PSB)*, fasc. 104, 1980, pp. 177–180.

<sup>9</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup>Z. Kuchowicz, *Wizerunki niepospolitych niewiast staropolskich XVI–XVIII w. (Outstanding Polish Women 16th–18th C.)*, Łódź 1972, p. 202 ff.

The choice made by parents generally was not questioned by the maiden who was trained in the virtue of obedience and submissiveness from her childhood. Besides, these choices were usually reasonable and acceptable. Of course, there were outright tragic cases, as testified by the story of Halszka of Ostróg in the second half of the 16th c., who as an only child fell victim to the men who hunted her great dowry<sup>11</sup>. In the middle of the 17th c. the whole of Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was electrified by the scandal connected with the love vicissitudes of the young Katarzyna Sobieska, sister of the later King John III. Despite her “affection” for Prince Dymitr Wiśniowiecki, who was her age, a despotic mother gave her in marriage to a twenty years older widower, Duke Władysław Dominik Zasławski–Ostrogski. The young wife gave birth to a son, the fruit of an illegitimate love, barely a fortnight after her marriage! Fortunately the old husband turned out to be tolerant, and at any rate he soon died and Katarzyna could marry a man of her choice — Michał Kazimierz Radziwiłł, as soon as 1658.

Among the renowned forced and unsuccessful unions of the second half of the 17th c. was the first marriage of Anna Stanisławska. As a 15-year old heiress to an enormous fortune, she was given by her family in marriage to a degenerate, Kazimierz Warszycki<sup>12</sup>. However, it is worth emphasizing that Anna's fate turned out to be much better than that of Halszka: the times changed so much that her marriage could be annulled and Stanisławska married, this time of her own choice, two subsequent husbands and enjoyed a short but happy span of conjugal life with each<sup>13</sup>.

Throughout the period of our interest widows enjoyed considerable freedom in the choice of another spouse. Andrzej Glaber of Kobylin as early as 1535 in his *Gadki o skądności członków człowieczych* (*Tales About the Beauty of Human Limbs*) mentioned as a great oddity “a widow who was not choosy about her candidates for marriage” i.e. not fussy or wilful in her choice<sup>14</sup>. But as early as the middle of the 17th c., it seems,

---

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111 ff.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 278–297; A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, pp. 21–24.

<sup>13</sup>*Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup>Andrzej Glaber z Kobylina, *Gadki o skądności członków człowieczych* (*Tales About the Beauty of Human Limbs*), 1535, ed. J. Rostański, Kraków 1893, p. 170.

maidens started to gain more freedom in the choice of their prospective husbands. In the 1640s Zofia Opalińska, extremely difficult to please by her suitors, drove to despair her brothers, who wanted to give her away in marriage. Krzysztof Opaliński lamented that “his sister was getting on in years” and was indignant with Zofia’s refusal of the magnate Ludwik Wejher, an excellent match. She could allow herself to do that “if she could choose as among mushrooms, but altogether we deterred men with so much protraction”<sup>15</sup>. In the middle of the 17th c., the energetic Katarzyna Ottenauz was similarly choosy about her suitors and rejected those suggested to her — among others the elderly widower Gabriel Kiersnowski. She finally married according to her choice — a certain Mr. Rajski. Her guardian, Krzysztof Zwiartowski, wrote about her case “supposedly in this matter a maiden cannot be forced, she is old enough and has her own judgement”<sup>16</sup>. This opinion, acknowledging a girl’s right of choice, testifies to the changes in the custom and mentality of people in the 17th c.

The opinion of the whole Polish Commonwealth was twice outraged by Bogusław Radziwiłł’s daughter, Ludwika Karolina’s two marriages contracted against the will of her family and guardians. First, instead of the recommended Stanisław Radziwiłł, she married margrave Ludwig, Brandenburg elector’s son. Since the matter involved Radziwiłł’s enormous estates in Lithuania, the case reached the Sejm; in the Lithuanian Statutes a resolution was found that “an orphan maiden who marries against the will of her family and guardians loses her right to property and dowry”, but as it seems, at the end of the 17th c. this regulation was already a dead letter. Following Ludwig’s prompt death (1687), the resolute widow turned down the proposal of Prince Jakub Sobieski and married, wilfully again, Charles Philippe, Prince of Neuburg<sup>18</sup>. Another Radziwiłł’s (the famous *Ryberko*’s) daughter, Teofila, engaged to Józef Rzewuski, starost

<sup>15</sup>Z. Kuchowicz, *Wizerunki*, p. 204.

<sup>16</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, pp. 129–131. It is worth recalling here the humorous “Instruction given by the Maidenly Estate to their Lordships Deputies to the General Sejm in Warsaw 1641”, which said in point 6: “That a Maiden could choose her husband after her own mind, since we are more anxious about it than Our Parents”. This work was included in 17th c. *silvae*, cf. Kórnik Library MS 1195, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 133 ff.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 146–147.

(*capitaneus*) of Drohobycz, broke her engagement in the middle of the 18th c. "She declared she did not want to marry His Lordship Józef Rzewuski and although my contract was signed and confirmed in Lwów, she returned her engagement ring" — her perplexed, but helpless father recorded, while her unfortunate suitor wrote: "since it is no longer befitting that I should love this worthy lady, weeping, I shall love her anger itself"<sup>19</sup>. As a memoirist of this period, Marcin Matuszewicz, says, in 1764 the Russian army reached the Radziwiłłs' seat at Biała and its owners fled in a hurry to Olyka; taking advantage of the turmoil, recalcitrant Teofila persuaded her brother, Radziwiłł *Panie Kochanku*, to give his consent to a marriage that was a real misalliance. "All of a sudden Princess Teofila, the Prince's sister, threw herself at his feet saying she could not go on and implored him to let her marry Murawski, one of his hussars, a cornet". "The devil take you", cried the Prince in despair and drove on to Olyka, while Teofila darted away with her beloved to Lwów where they promptly got married under the pretext that she was pregnant. After a reconciliation with the Radziwiłłs the Murawskis obtained an endowment from them on the Ukrainian estates and Teofila declared "I will never complain, as I love my husband and am content with God's will" (i.e. she agreed to her lowered social status, connected with marrying a "common" cornet and subaristocrat — *subcapitaneus*)<sup>20</sup>.

The above-mentioned examples come from rich nobility or magnate circles. Here changes in customs and mentality came doubtless sooner under the influence of ideas from the West, mainly France (through the royal court and French queens Marie Louise and Marie Casimir) where "emancipation" currents gained ever wider popularity<sup>21</sup>. A more rigorous model of the family probably prevailed among the moderately wealthy and poor nobility, where parents, especially the father, exercised strong control even over adult children, and the matter of the choice of husband was decided by the head of the family. The kidnapping of maidens, so frequent in the 17th and 18th c., were a means of breaking away from control in this respect, and were most often

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 317–318.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 320–326.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. K. Targosz, *Savantki w Polsce XVII w. Aspiracje intelektualne kobiet ze środowisk dworskich (Polish 17th c. Savantes. Intellectual Aspirations of Women in Court Circles)*, Warszawa 1997, p. 190 ff.

arranged with the consent of the girl who in this way avoided an unwanted match or cloister — and married the man of her choice<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, among burghers the freedom of choice hardly existed at all; the society of Gdańsk was long stirred by the famous affair of Anna Pilemann's wilful betrothal to Mauritz Ferber at the beginning of the 16th c.<sup>23</sup> In the middle of the 17th c. the cases of betrothal without parental consent were often brought before the mayor's court in Gdańsk<sup>24</sup>. In all Polish towns the choice of the candidate for a husband among the urban patriciate and moderately-wealthy burghers was made by parents<sup>25</sup>. Only among the poor, who had no property, and whose marriage did not entail socio-financial consequences, the customs were not so rigorous. The same concerned the poor in the country.

Theoretically, the model of marriage in a patriarchal old-Polish family was based on the domination of the husband on the one hand, and the subordination and submission of the wife on the other. *Vtr est caput mulieris*, this saying recurred in noblemen's home chronicles called *silvae*, in sermons and speeches on the occasion of weddings<sup>26</sup>. "The husband is the head of his wife and she is not free in herself but should live according to his will" — we read in the records of a trial of Warsaw burghers in the 17th c.<sup>27</sup> Thus this was a model that embraced the whole of society. At the same time, however, the mutual relationship between husband and wife was to be a reflection of the relationship between Christ and Church, which ruled out any despotism. "As the Church is subject in everything to Christ, so women are

<sup>22</sup>W. Łozłński, *Życie polskie w dawnych wiekach (Polish Life in Old Times)*, Kraków 1958, pp. 161–162; A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 173.

<sup>23</sup>M. Bogucka, *Życie w dawnym Gdańsku (Life in Old Gdańsk)*, Warszawa 1997, p. 16 ff.

<sup>24</sup>State Archives in Gdańsk, 300, 1/75 pp. 262, 278.

<sup>25</sup>A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście polskim w drugiej połowie XVI i w XVII w. (Woman in the Polish Town in the Second Half of the 16th and in the 17th c.)*, Warszawa 1995, pp. 151–152.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. e.g. Jerzy Szornel's *silva* of 1638–1683, Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MS 417, p. 352, a funeral sermon: Bernardine Father Hieronim Czacki, *Sławna wysokich cnót korona, Jej Mość Pani Jadwiga z Mteszkowa Rogalińska (The Illustrious Crown of High Virtues, Her Ladyship Jadwiga Rogalińska of Mieszaków)*, Poznań 1652; "A married woman need not have her own head, her husband's head is enough. And what a monster it would be, a man with two heads, his own and his wife's" argued Father Lorenco wic SJ, *Kazania na niedziele całego roku (Sermons for Sundays of the Whole Year)*, Kalisz 1671, part III, p. 147.

<sup>27</sup>Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, *Stara Warszawa* 12, fol. 256b–257b.

to their husbands". On the other hand the husbands are "to be in love with their wives just as Christ is in love with the Church" — we read in a speech delivered on the occasion of Aleksander Koniecpolski's wedding to Barbara Zamoyska; this speech so much appealed to the noblemen that they entered it in their *silvae*<sup>28</sup>. Preachers recommended mutual forbearance. "For marriage, to be good, thou Lady be blind and thou Lord be deaf. And this because: as a woman likes to talk, a husband should be deaf and not listen to her gabble, since if he contradicts her, there will be too much quarrel. A husband likes to look, thus the wife should be blind if she does not want to bear him a grudge", so Father Hiacynt Mija k o w s k i, a Dominican friar, preached in 1639<sup>29</sup>. The terms generally used to describe the spouses testify best to the relationships in marriage: "dear companion", "lifelong friend", so was the wife/husband called in the old-Polish culture. This allows one to put forward a thesis that in 16th–18th c. Poland marriage was a kind of partnership, just as in England<sup>30</sup> and Bohemia<sup>31</sup>, in contrast to Germany, where the husband's domination was strong and often brutal<sup>32</sup>. This was noticed by foreigners. At the threshold of the early modern era Konrad Celtis, a poet of the German Renaissance, criticized Polish ways which did not allow a husband to beat his own wife<sup>33</sup>. Bernard O'Connor, an Englishman, doctor to John III, wrote two hun-

<sup>28</sup> Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MS 417, p. 352.

<sup>29</sup> *Znaczna w cnotę matrona JW Pani J.M.P. Anna z Ruśca Lubomirska, Hrabina na Wiśniczu kasztelanka wojnicka, sędomska, spiska, dobczycka etc. ..., dnia 3 lutego w Krakowie u św. Trójce schowana (A matron Known for her Virtue, Her Ladyship Anna of Rustec Lubomirska, Countess of Wiśnicz, Daughter of Castellana of Wojnicz, Sędomirz, Spisz, Dobczyce etc., ... on 3 February Buried in Cracow in the Holy Trinity Church...)* by Dominican Father Jacynthy Mija k o w s k i... Anno Domini 1639 (the place of publication not indicated).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, London 1977, who defines an English marriage as a "companionate marriage". Preindustrial England was described by many contemporary authors as "the Paradise for women", cf. J. R. Brink (ed.), *Privileging Gender in Early Modern England*, Kirksville, Missouri 1993.

<sup>31</sup> J. Janaček, *Białogłowy rozważnej żywot w czasie burzliwym (The Life of a Prudent Woman in Turbulent Times)*, Warszawa 1982, writes about marriage based on "partnership", pp. 233–234.

<sup>32</sup> L. Roper, *The Holy Household, Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg*, Oxford 1989.

<sup>33</sup> *Antologia poezji polsko-lacińskiej 1470–1543 (An Anthology of Polish-Latin Poetry 1470–1543)*, ed. A. Jelicz, Szczecin 1985, p. 95, a poem about old-Polish customs.



dred years later: "Poles are always full of respect and attachment to their wives"<sup>34</sup>.

Thus harmonious marriage, based on mutual respect, was the ideal. "And if you want her to be faithful, modest, sober, moderate in everything, so do you behave towards her and make yourself an example to her, so that you do not show her any unworthy model to follow. For it is an old common saying: what to you would be unwelcome, never do such a thing to another" — thus Mikolaj Rej wrote in the 16th c.<sup>35</sup>

The position of a married woman was largely connected with the height of the dowry she brought into her husband's house as well as with the power and influence of the family she came from and to which she often resorted for help in her married years. In medieval times a woman's right to inherit landed property was not clearly formulated in Poland<sup>36</sup>. In early modern history the rights of daughters were limited to 1/4 of real estate, while the sons were to inherit 3/4. This was not strictly observed everywhere, however, generally a son or sons received the most part of the real estate, while daughters (with the exception of an only daughter) had to content themselves mainly with movables<sup>37</sup>. The nobility was against the inheriting of real estate by women, since this could lead to a rapid partition of the landed property and the decline of the whole family. Interesting information on the discussions connected with this matter can be found in source materials from Royal Prussia. In the middle of the 16th c. work was conducted here on the codification of the Chełmno law that was binding on these territories. The Chełmno law included a principle taken over from Flemish law, enjoining equal division of property between children regardless of their sex, as well as the principle of the conjugal community of property and the resultant right of the remaining spouse to 1/2 the property of the

<sup>34</sup>Cit. after K. W. Wójcicki, *Niewlasty polskie. Zarys historyczny (Polish Women. A Historical Outline)*, Warszawa 1845, p. 129.

<sup>35</sup>M. Rej, *Zwierciadło (The Mirror)*, ed. J. Czubeck, J. Łoś, Kraków 1914, vol. I, p. 117.

<sup>36</sup>J. Adamus, *O prawie dziedziczenia przez kobiety w najdawniejszym prawie polskim (On Women's Rights to Inheritance in the Earliest Polish Law)*, "Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne", vol. IV, 1959, № 1; M. Koczerska, *Rodzina szlachecka w Polsce późnego średniowiecza (The Noble Family in the Noble Estate in Late Medieval Poland)*, Warszawa 1975, p. 42 ff.

<sup>37</sup>J. Bardach, *Historia państwa i prawa Polski (The History of Polish State and Law)*, Warszawa 1966, vol. I, pp. 282, 285, 343, 491, vol. II, p. 274.

deceased one. The gentry opposed these principles violently at the Prussian dietines and Seyms in 1555 and 1558, demanding that their daughters should content themselves with dowry of movables, while immovables should fall to the sons; the widows should be given only survivorship on immovables<sup>38</sup>. Still in the 18th c. Gabriel T aszycycki in his *Rzecz o własności fortun kobiecych* (*On the Ownership of Women's Fortunes*, Kraków 1792) claimed a maximum limitation and even complete liquidation of a woman's possibility of owning landed property.

Nevertheless it seems that the situation of Polish noblewomen was better than of the females in Polish cities. Women, in principle, regardless of their age, were treated as incapable of independence and were condemned to be assisted by guardians. Nevertheless noblewomen managed their estates according to their will and appeared before the court, although in the 16th and 17th c. their liability to do so during their husbands' absence was sometimes restricted in some parts of the country. In order to sell her property the wife had to have her husband's consent; however, also the husband who sold his property most of the time wrote his wife's consent into an official document. In this way they made sure that their transaction would not be questioned in the future.

In towns the situation of women depended in a large measure on the type of civil law that was binding in the given centre. In towns ruled by the Chełmno law there was a principle of conjugal community of property; quite frequently this meant that a woman was more dependent on her husband, who generally managed the whole property. Only in the case that he wasted it did the woman have a right to choose a guardian for herself to take over its management. A wife could not dispose of her property without her husband's consent; only unmarried maidens and widows had more freedom in this respect. The inferior position of women in the Chełmno law is confirmed by the fact that they could be witnesses only in matrimonial cases; in all others they could not be witnesses, just as lunatics, mentally deficient, dumb, deaf or blind, and heretics<sup>39</sup>.

The Magdeburg Law seems more favourable to women. Especially it protected a woman's right to the property brought by

<sup>38</sup>A. Groth. *Rewizja lidzbarska prawa chełmińskiego* (*The Lidzbark Revision of the Chełmno Law*), Koszalin 1997, pp. 10, 13, 14, 15.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 226.

her into her husband's house (dowry). Thus her dowry could not be confiscated for her husband's debts, and after his death it was to return to the widow without any detriment<sup>40</sup>.

Although the legal principles were not always strictly observed, they designated general practice. Since there were limitations to women's rights to inherit immovables, the latter were generally taken over by sons, while daughters were allotted smaller or bigger dowries of movables. "Since a female head cannot inherit, she should sell her property to the male head" — wrote Stanisław Kostka Marcin Dembiński, castellan of Wojnicz, in his will in 1777<sup>41</sup>. The dowry consisted mostly of cash, but also silver, jewelry, clothes, bedclothes, furniture, sometimes of considerable value<sup>42</sup>. These principles concerned settling dowry accounts not only among the nobility and gentry, but also among the burghers and peasants. In return, so to say, for the dowry, the husband offered the wife the so-called *wiano* (counter dowry), usually in the form of *oprawa* (jointure), a legacy registered in her husband's estate. After her husband's death the widow had a right to this part of estate remaining from her late husband's property, even before the settling of other succession accounts.

One should not, however, think that only the size of her property and family background determined a woman's position in marriage (although a newly-married woman who entered her husband's family strange to her, doubtless was more self-asserted if she had an influential father or brothers). A lot depended on her husband's character as well as on the character, good sense and energy of the woman herself, on what position she was able to win for herself. Regardless of the general model and the generally propagated patterns, each marriage was an outcome of

<sup>40</sup>M. Sędek, *Instytucje i praktyka prawa chełmińskiego w Warszawie w XV w.* (*The Institutions and Practice of the Chełmno Law in 15th c. Warsaw*), in: *Warszawa średniowieczna*, vol. I, Warszawa 1975, pp. 227–234; Idem, *Czy uprawnienia majątkowe kobiet w Starej Warszawie odpowiadały zasadom prawa chełmińskiego? (Did Women's Property Rights in Old Warsaw Conform to the Principles of the Chełmno Law?)*, in: *Warszawa średniowieczna*, vol. I, Warszawa 1971, pp. 135–148; A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 22 ff.

<sup>41</sup>A. Gradowska, *Testamenty szlachty krakowskiej XVII–XVIII wieku. Wybór tekstów źródłowych z lat 1650–1799* (*17th–18th Century Testaments of the Cracow Nobility. A Selection of Source Texts from the Years 1650–1799*), Kraków 1997, p. 177.

<sup>42</sup>T. Zielińska, *Kosztowność jako składnik wyposażenia kobiet w XVII i XVIII w.* (*Valuables as Part of Women's Endowment in the 17th and 18th c.*), in: *Miasto-region-społeczeństwo*, Białystok 1992, pp. 295–304.

the actions, feelings and enterprise of both partners. These results differed largely; however, most couples were able to go through their lives in harmony, helping one another and caring for the common good. Mikołaj Rej himself praised the advantages coming from harmonious conjugal life. "Any mishap, any illness, any distress will be lighter than with other people, when one spouse comforts and helps another by gentle advice. It's always that double joy and double grief go together"<sup>43</sup>.

The testaments both of the gentry and burghers, although their marriages were so often contracted out of materialistic calculation, without an emotional engagement of the interested parties, testify that in the course of their union they often developed respect, attachment and concern for the spouse's future: hence mutual granting of property, legacies that were to secure the interests, especially of the future widow, warm words of thanks for the years they spent together. "All my movables... I give, and by this testament and last will of mine grant and bequeathe to my spouse [Agnieszka Morsztynowa — M.B.] for her love, everyday work and concern about my health" — we read in the testament of voivode Aleksander Morsztyn in 1660. "I bequeathed the survivorship on all my estates as well as the sums that will accrue from all my bequests to my dearest wife, whose sedate love and respect I enjoyed throughout my life, and therefore I enjoyed Lord's blessing and by our mutual endeavour I purchased this estate" — wrote Jan Miłkowski in 1662, acknowledging his wife's share in acquiring the family fortune<sup>45</sup>. Stanisław Marcinkowski from Lelów district, while thanking his wife for 19 years of conjugal life, said in 1668: "on all occasions she was not a wife but a mother. She constrained my various passions with her thoughtful love"<sup>46</sup>. In 1703 Stanisław May, castellan of Wiślica, thanked God for being given "a complaisant support, his better half, a beloved friend for a wife"<sup>47</sup>. Sometimes we come across a dramatic farewell to a wife in a testament: "So soon, soon, the term will come for me to depart from you, my heartily beloved friend... I bid you farewell with all my heart and affection,

<sup>43</sup>M. Rej, *Zwierzciadło*, vol. I, pp. 106–111.

<sup>44</sup>A. Gradowska, *Testamenty*, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 51.

saying *vale*" (count Antoni Cieński's testament of 1750)<sup>48</sup>. Women's testaments also contain expressions of respect and thanks to the husband. "Throughout my life with my benevolent lord and master I enjoyed all the love and respect in marriage, and moreover an unusual support during those turbulent times" — wrote Audercja Oskierko in 1667<sup>49</sup>. We come across similar phrases in burghers' testaments<sup>50</sup>, they can also be found in rural court books, testifying that "partnership" in marriage was also possible under a thatched roof<sup>51</sup>. One should not think, however, that testaments "embellished" conjugal life and the spouse, this was rather a moment of truth in the face of death; they also happen to contain some bitter observations about the nearest persons, sometimes children, sisters, brothers, neighbours, less frequently about a spouse<sup>52</sup>.

Testaments often entrust to the wife the custody of children and the management of property, which proves there was confidence in woman's prudence. In 1650 a nobleman Szymon Aleksander Czernicki disposes: "I leave my wife as the first manager and dispenser of my property, both movable and immovable *generaliter et universaliter*"<sup>53</sup>. Another nobleman Gabriel Bodurkiewicz appoints in 1794 his wife as the custodian of his children<sup>54</sup>. Hieronim Wielopolski, starost (*capitaneus*) of Cracow confirms in his testament of 1779 his wife's survivorship on his movable and immovable property guaranteed already in the pre-marriage *interciso*<sup>55</sup>. It seems that the custom of preparing a marriage contract, which ensured a more advantageous situation to the woman and even some kind of her financial inde-

---

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>49</sup>S. Małgorzata Borkowska OSB, *Dekret w niebieskim ferowany parlamencie. Wybór testamentów z XV-I-XVIII w.* (A Decree Passed in the Heavenly Parliament. A Selection of 17th–18th c. Last Wills), Kraków 1984, p. 67.

<sup>50</sup>A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 193; *Dzieje Warszawy 1526–1795* (A History of Warsaw 1526–1795), Warszawa 1984, p. 118; M. Bogucka, *Kultura mieszczaństwa warszawskiego w okresie renesansu i baroku* (The Culture of Warsaw Burghers During the Renaissance and Baroque Times), in: *Kultura Warszawy*, Warszawa 1979, pp. 27–54.

<sup>51</sup>M. Bogucka, *The Lost World*, p. 60.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. A. Gradowska, *Testamenty*, pp. 28, 84–86, 158 as well as S. M. Borkowska, *Dekret*, p. 59.

<sup>53</sup>A. Gradowska, *Testamenty*, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 209–211.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 182–187.

pendence, started spreading among Polish nobility and burghers in the 17th and 18th c.<sup>56</sup>

The extant correspondence between spouses also testifies to harmonious and even affectionate conjugal life. “My dearest Halżusieńka [a diminutive of Halszka]” — so does Chancellor Lew Sapieha address in the 17th c. his wife while relating to her, as if to a friend, the events of the war campaign and unfolding his concerns and troubles<sup>57</sup>. Mutual “affection” and harmonious conjugal life is also visible in the correspondence of Katarzyna née Tęczyńska with Krzysztof Mikołaj Radziwiłł. It is full of mutual care and contains the indispensable “friend” in the texts<sup>58</sup>. Helena Stadnicka née Leśniowska’s letter to her husband, who took part in the Smolensk expedition (1609–1611)<sup>59</sup>, just as the letters between the Wiśnicki couple from the beginning of the 18th c.<sup>60</sup>, are classified by scholars as “love” correspondence.

Naturally, one should realise that in some concrete cases things might look differently. Some wives were tormented by their brutal and sadistic husbands, too weak to resist such treatment. One of the more drastic examples was the fate of Mikołaj Ossoliński’s, the starost of Nowy Targ’s wives and especially his second wife, Katarzyna née Starołęska. Since the day of her marriage contracted in 1649, for a dozen-odd years, she was treated as a slave, frequently beaten and kicked, kept in seclusion and humiliated. Anyway, this marriage ended in tragedy — Katarzyna arranged a plot and her husband was assassinated<sup>61</sup>. Some wives also happened to be the scourge of their husband’s lives, (Paprocki fled from his wife), termagants and drunken sots, with whom it was not easy to live in harmony. The famous hetman, Jan Karol Chodkiewicz, as his correspondence shows, tried to be almost invisible in the presence of his hysterical wife, Zofia,

<sup>56</sup>I. Krasiecki criticized the custom of drawing up a marriage contract in his satire *Żona modna (A Wife of Fashion)*, cf. on this subject J. St. Bystróż, *Dzieje obyczajów w dawnej Polsce (The History of Old-Polish Customs and Manners)*, vol. II, Warszawa 1976, p. 144. On the drawing up of marriage contracts among the burghers cf. A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 152 ff.

<sup>57</sup>H. Malewska, *Listy staropolskie z epoki Wazów (Old-Polish Letters of the Vasa Reign)*, Warszawa 1959, p. 127.

<sup>58</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 32 ff.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 281 ff.

<sup>61</sup>W. Łozicki, *Prawem i lewem (By Hook and By Crook)*, Kraków 1957, vol. I, p. 220 ff. A few cases of killing husbands by their wives are also cited.

a woman with a fitful temper<sup>62</sup>. In one of the 17th c. *silvae* we read:

My wife's picture in this frame  
Is perfect, without any blame.  
I can find just one small fault:  
Here she's sober, while in fact a sot<sup>63</sup>.

Thus quite frequently, as Bernardine Friar Hieronim Czacki in his sermon of 1652 was sad to find, there were couples "who show *dentes* to each other for any cipher, for any cause they grit and whet their *dentes*"<sup>64</sup>.

From about the middle of the 17th c. onwards wives ever more frequently rebelled against their despotic husbands, simply by deserting them and finding shelter most often in convents. Such separation, naturally, happened most often in the circles of aristocracy and wealthy nobility. The convents found it difficult to refuse shelter to the rich ladies, frequently their patronesses. Separation entailed endeavours to obtain a "divorce", that is an annulment of marriage. Thus e.g. Teofila Lubomirska née Zasławska, John III's niece, tired of her husband's, Józef Karol Lubomirski's nymphomaniacal excesses and constant quarrels, obtained a separation and started endeavours to get a divorce, in which she was supported by her husband's brothers, Hieronim and Stanisław Lubomirski<sup>65</sup>. Such support of the family, one's own or one's husband's, was of course very important.

A clinical example of the disintegration of marriage because of the husband's despotism and wish to dominate was the union of Magdalena Czapska with Hieronim Florian Radziwiłł, a psychopathic and cruel character (this deviation may be explained by Radziwiłł's long-time dependence on his peremptory mother, Anna Katarzyna née Sanguszko, with whom he did not break relations until he was thirty). Hieronim, after a divorce from his first wife (née Sapięha), married Magdalena and at the beginning their marriage was idyllic. "I've found, I can say, an angel, and it's just as if I were in heaven" — wrote Magdalena<sup>66</sup>. The correspondence of this couple from the years 1745 and 1746 is

<sup>62</sup>M. Borkowska, *Dekret*, p. 89.

<sup>63</sup>Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MS 1657, p. 288.

<sup>64</sup>X. Hieronim Czacki, *Sławna wysokich cnót korona, Jej Mość Pani Jadwiga z Mieszkowa Rogalińska*, a funeral sermon, see footnote 26.

<sup>65</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 193 ff.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 271 ff.

full of tender declarations of love. However, soon misunderstandings evolved; the wife turned out to be “recalcitrant”, she often left home, prolonging her stays with her mother, and Radziwiłł was in deadly fear of gaining a reputation of a hen-pecked husband. Complaints started: “as a good wife... you have to be obedient, for all those quarrels between us were caused just by the bad wives’ persuasions not to show to the world that your husband did not like something, as if he had no power to demand anything of his wife; since I do have something to demand, I wish not to suffer, since this is my idea of a good husband, someone who knows he is a head not a tail... Obey me, please, so that I do not give evidence that I want to be obeyed and will be; you declare with your lips and expressions that you obey me, while in fact you play tricks in secret, showing to the world that you don’t care and trying to continue acting as you did”<sup>67</sup> — wrote the husband, certain that “because of the divine rights given to the male sex” he was entitled to have full control over his wife and her actions. “Not to be led by her Ladyship by the nose like a turkey... since in another case such husbands by submitting to their wives change themselves into four letter things that they *possident* in their wives” — he recorded furiously on another occasion<sup>68</sup>. Escalation of complaints continued and his programme of subduing his wife was to involve the servants in controlling her. “I have never been and will never be a buffoon of a husband and master” — wrote Hieronim — “you will have to go where it is my wish not yours, since the coachman and people will not obey your ladyship”<sup>69</sup>. While forbidding his wife to go to her mother’s and refusing to take her on his own journeys connected with public affairs (according to the principle “a wife shouldn’t be exposed to the public, or any rallies”), i.e. wishing to shut her in at home, Hieronim at the same time did not deny himself entertainment and even had affairs on the side (Magdalena suspected him of having an affair with a certain Morawska). After many violent scenes, (in one the wife threatened to shoot her husband), Czapska fled Biała Książęca in 1750, hid in the Holy Sacrament

---

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 276–277.



Nuns' convent in Warsaw, and sued for a divorce<sup>70</sup>. The whole affair shows how difficult it was in the 18th c. to put into practice the model of a marriage dominated by the husband, based on patriarchal principles, when an energetic woman refused to play the role of a victim.

Of course, not in all social groups were separation and divorce (or rather annulment of marriage) accessible to a woman. Among moderately wealthy and poor gentry bad, discordant marriages lasted years and only the death of a spouse could break the thread of misery. The situation was similar among the burghers<sup>71</sup>. Only the poor could more freely leave their spouses<sup>72</sup>, since this did not involve major financial complications and social control was weaker in these circles.

Did love exist in early modern Poland and what did it look like? Though it was studied by many historians — among others Z. Kuchowicz, M. Misiorny, A. Sajkowski<sup>73</sup> — in fact we don't know much about it. One thing is certain — in Poland there was no troubadour or courtly love tradition which had left deep traces in the culture and mentality of Western Europe, ranging from the legend of Tristram and Isolde to Petrarch's love for Laura and Dante's for Beatrice. In vain would one seek examples of such feelings in 16th c. Poland, except for the great love of King Sigismund Augustus for Barbara Radziwiłł; precisely because this feeling was completely alien to the Polish society of the 16th c., his affection met with universal incomprehension and condemnation<sup>74</sup>. We find its reflection in these two lovers' letters — truly romantic ones (with an exchange of rings, pro-

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 278; Hieronim's third wife, Aniela née Miaczyńska was delivered of marriage after five years by death, cf. T. Zielińska, *Poczet polskich rodów arystokratycznych (Polish Aristocratic Families)*, Warszawa 1997, p. 322. Hieronim was no exception. U. Augustyniak while studying the situation in Krzysztof II Radziwiłł's 17th c. court arrives at the conclusion that in Lithuania there was a custom to keep a tight rein on wives and to have them supervised by servants, cf. U. Augustyniak, *Dwór i klientela Krzysztofa II Radziwiłła (Krzysztof II Radziwiłł's Court and Clientele)*, "Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce", vol. XXXVIII, 1994, pp. 71–72.

<sup>71</sup>A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 202.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.* Cf. also M. Bogucka, *Życie w dawnym Gdańsku*, p. 134 ff. State Archives in Gdańsk 300, 1/70 pp. 146–147; 75 p. 65ab; *Dzieje Warszawy*, p. 118.

<sup>73</sup>Z. Kuchowicz, *Miłość staropolska (Old-Polish Love)*, Łódź 1972; M. Misiorny, *Listy miłosne dawnych Polaków (Love Letters of Old Poles)*, Kraków 1971; A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, Poznań 1981.

<sup>74</sup>M. Bogucka, *Barbara Radziwiłłówna*, in: *Życiorysy historyczne, literackie i legendarne*, ed. by Z. Stefanowska and J. Tazbir, vol. I, Warszawa 1980, pp. 67–88.

mises of tender faithfulness and constancy, mutual trust that is quite touching: “If Your Highness my Lord is with me, then who is against me?” — writes Barbara, and at the same time full of sweet humility calls herself “a slave for ever” of King Sigismund, or perhaps of her great affection?<sup>75</sup> The whole style of these letters differs completely from the frivolous character of Jan Kochanowski’s *Fraszki (Trifles)* written at the same time and is certainly much closer to the slightly later love poetry of Sęp-Szarzyński<sup>76</sup>, which also went ahead of its era. But these were exceptional phenomena in Poland. It seems that there were two models of love in early modern Poland: 1. a model of relationship based not so much on eroticism as on mutual interest and respect, and even friendship — hence a spouse, especially a wife, was often called a friend; 2. a model with the preponderance of an erotic element, pervaded with healthy, often naive sensuality. In practice these two models frequently represented a mixture. We find examples of these feelings in correspondence, preserved in fragments, nevertheless testifying to the emotional life of people in those times. Here some Anusia corresponds with her husband who left for Italy (end of the 16th, beginning of the 17th c.); he inquires “do you miss me?”, she says that her love is so great, that “though in far-off lands, yet it reaches you”<sup>77</sup>. Jan Zamoyski’s correspondence with his wife Krystyna and Krzysztof Radziwiłł’s with his wife Katarzyna are full of subtle, gentle emotions<sup>78</sup>. These letters reflect a sedate marital love, full of consideration and tenderness. Mrs. Zamoyska sends her husband “groats and cherries”, sometimes even oranges, her husband calls her “my sweetest heart”, seeks her sympathy, complaining about pains in his leg, and at the same time inquires with care about the health of his pregnant wife<sup>79</sup>. Radziwiłł sends medicines and recommends doctors to his “dearest soul”, and plans a reunion, home-sick after a long separation<sup>80</sup>.

<sup>75</sup>Cf. M. Baliński, *Pisma Historyczne (Historical Writings)*, vol. I, Warszawa 1643, esp. p. 67 ff.

<sup>76</sup>“It is hard not to love, and to love is poor comfort” — wrote Szarzyński, expressing a dilemma typical of a 19th c. lover, cf. Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński, *Rytmy oraz anonimowe pieśni i listy miłosne z wieku XVI (Rhythms and 16th c Anonymous Love Songs and Letters)*, ed. T. Sínko, Kraków 1928, pp. 10–11.

<sup>77</sup>M. Miśiorny, *Listy miłosne*, pp. 52–55.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60. Cf. also A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>79</sup>M. Miśiorny, *Listy miłosne*, pp. 60–62.

<sup>80</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, pp. 44–50.

The conventional style of an anonymous suitor's letters to a young girl called Anusia from the middle of the 17th c. disappoints us<sup>81</sup>. Nevertheless, we should not be misled; following conventional patterns need not signify a lack of deep feelings, it may just mean that the author wasn't skilful enough at expressing them. Precisely in the middle of the 17th c. we enter a new era of Polish love correspondence. Under the influence of French (*Astrea*) and Polish (*The Pretty Paskwałina*) romances, read in court and magnate circles, and also by some groups of the gentry connected with courts, old Polish love gained livelier colours, it stopped being homespun, became more refined and at the same time erotically more open<sup>82</sup>. From John III and Marie Casimir Sobieski's letters there is only one step to the sanguine love poems of J. A. Morsztyn, that reveal the most intimate experiences, the biology of love.

Despite its eroticism, this love is winged by the admiration of the beloved woman. Sobieski calls his "Marysieńka", "the Queen of his heart", "the most beautiful Astrea", "the loveliest Aurora", and organizes a secret romantic wedding to her in the Warsaw Carmelite church still during the lifetime of her first husband, Zamoyski, and when this husband dies, without waiting for the mourning to pass, promptly marries the widow on the quiet. "He went with her directly, without any banquet, to bed" — said cynically Bogusław Radziwiłł<sup>83</sup>. The Sobieskis' correspondence testifies to the great intensity of feelings; they are wrapped in a courtly-literary form and draw on the patterns, images and qualifications of French novels, but underneath this attire there is healthy sex and an enormous tenderness showing up. The expressions of homesickness and complaints about separation are mixed with grudges; friendly confidences and advice (there is a thread concerned with politics and war in those letters) with intimate reproaches. In this turbulent union, full of outbursts of emotion and jealousy, no domination of any party is visible, and

---

<sup>81</sup>M. Miślony, *Listy miłosne*, pp.67–78.

<sup>82</sup>The letters include a growing number of allusions to Venus, to bed and sex. This met with indignation in many circles, e.g. 17th c. diarist J. Ch. Pasek quotes a letter to a certain lady, whose sender kisses her "little details" — and finds it shocking. J. Ch. Pasek, *Pamiętniki (Memoirs)*, ed. W. Zapliński, Wrocław 1968, pp. 338–339.

<sup>83</sup>M. Komaszynski, *Piękna królowa Maria Kazimiera d'Arquien-Sobieska (The Beautiful Queen Maria Casimira d'Arquien-Sobieska)*, Kraków 1995, p. 75.

at any rate the conqueror from Vienna does not turn out a victor in his marriage, but a tender lover.

Certainly, the Sobieskis' marriage relationship cannot be considered typical of Poland at the close of the 17th c. However, it seems to testify to a certain extent to the atmosphere that started to surround the man-woman relationship in magnate circles, and perhaps also among the wealthy nobility that was close to the courts. Although Teresa Sapieha's exaggerated manifestations of feelings for general Mokronowski<sup>84</sup> were termed by Matuszewicz as "craziness", great love slowly ceased to be surprising and was more openly and more frequently expressed. Jan Kazimierz Biegański, enamoured of a certain maiden, in his memoirs of a journey of 1714–15 writes mainly about the state of his heart and about the dreams of his beloved. A scholar researching old Polish mentality calls these memoirs those "of a man in love" and their author — a prototype of *chevalier de Saint-Preux* in an old-Polish dress<sup>85</sup>.

At the same time letters of "ordinary" people, women and men, since the end of the 17th c. become unbearably sentimental; diminutives and terms of endearment led to the infantilization of emotional expression, which because of that may now be suspected of insincerity. Yet this was only their style! "My soul-beloved Petruleńko and my only Benefactor" — writes Konstancja Czapska to her husband. And she finishes: "I kiss you, the only heart of mine... my Benefactor on your dearest eyes, lovely mouth, hands, feet, each toe and finger and each nail on your dearest feet and hands, not once, but a million times" (1735)<sup>86</sup>. A noblewoman from Lublin, Teresa Straszycówna, calls "Kaziulek" [diminutive of Casimir] Wiśniecki, her fiancé and soon a husband, her only Comfort, only Heart, her little trinket, honey and even "Lovely Maiden"<sup>87</sup> (which may testify to the fact that in intimate relations "leadership" was taken over by the woman, and to the feminization of the male partner)<sup>88</sup>. "Kaziulek" in his letters

<sup>84</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 269.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 349–357.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 264–265.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.* — "My dear Maiden", also Elżbieta Sieniąwska addresses her husband in her letters in this way at the end of the 17th c., cf. B. Popiołek, *Królowa bez korony. Studium z życia i działalności Elżbiety z Lubomirskich Sieniąwskiej, ok. 1669–1729 (A Queen without a Crown. The Life and Work of Elżbieta Sieniąwska née Lubomirska, ca 1669–1729)*, Kraków 1996, p. 30.

produces even more babyish babbling. Only from time to time among this infantile chirrup do we find a more sincere, simple and meaningful sentence. Franciszka née Wiśniowiecka in her letter to her husband Radziwiłł “Ryberiko” admits simply: “nobody can love more than I do”; “Oh, dear Kaziulek, I wish to live and love!” — Straszycówna as if echoes her lines. “I am not able and cannot describe, how much I love you” — the homesick “Kaziulek” answers<sup>89</sup>.

Besides love there is also a thread of jealousy appearing in these letters. Wives suspect husbands of infidelity, and vice versa. Did extramarital love exist, and if so, to what extent? This question is also hard to answer, it is difficult to establish any statistics. Nevertheless there can be no doubt that sex life existed besides that sanctified by the holy matrimony. In the old moral code a woman was bound to be absolutely faithful (this rigidity resulted from a wish to ensure the legitimacy of the offspring) while customs regarding men were more indulgent. In Poland there was no penalization of prostitution, which was the case in Western Europe, e.g. in many parts of Germany. Hence this trade was widespread in towns where it had legalized forms<sup>90</sup>. All the gentry rallies inclusive of the Seyms were serviced by women who practiced paid love, and the gentry freely took advantage of this form of entertainment. Similarly, a burgher visited town brothels, especially if he was young and unmarried. In the country, where social control over an individual was strong because of the small number of inhabitants and close neighbourhood, professional prostitution, in the strict sense of the word, was rather rare. Of course, court books include mentions that girls with loose morals were punished, or even banished from the village, but such cases were rare. What was more often punished was the “sin” of cohabitation, which cannot be classified as professional prostitution. Young people, who for financial reasons got married late, surrendered to the call of nature; this most often happened among labourers and hired maids, who frequently slept in one room. It also happened that a farmer took advantage of his maid-servant, or an old farmer’s wife deceived him, making love to a young labourer. Discovered adulterers were punished with flogging (20–30 lashes), a fine, sometimes they had to give wax

<sup>89</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, pp. 243, 296, 305.

<sup>90</sup>A. Karpíński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 333 ff.

for church candles; during a confession priests imposed on them a penance of additional fasting on Wednesdays or Tuesdays. Some extramarital relationships lasted, however, for years. Only when the sin of adultery was combined with other transgressions (e.g. infanticide, a suspicion of wishing to kill the legal spouse, incest), the punishment was not confined to flogging and a small fine, but went as far as beheading or burning<sup>91</sup>.

A lot more cases of unfaithfulness to one's spouse and sexual freedom could be noticed in towns, where — because of the denser population than in the countryside, life was more anonymous and there was less possibility of social control. Nevertheless such control existed (inquisitive neighbours!) and sexual transgressions were often prosecuted in the municipal courts of justice<sup>92</sup>.

Extramarital intercourse also occurred among the nobility, here, however, they encountered more obstacles because of the developed social control of behaviour. In magnate courts it might happen that a young courtier could become too intimate with a maid-of-honour (Stanisław Albrzycht Radziwiłł mentions such a couple in his memoirs: "Having promised to marry one another, in the hope of a future union they anticipated frequently the wedding ceremony")<sup>93</sup>, although it was difficult to conceal it for a long time. In the manors of moderately wealthy gentry the young girls were guarded too well for a seduction without elopement to be possible. Married noblewomen also, of necessity, guarded their chastity well, although certainly some cases of unfaithfulness in marriage could occur; they are mentioned for instance by W. Łoziński, on the basis of records of case proceedings he knew. Many old-Polish *facetiae* have cuckolds as a topic, which seems to testify to the considerable sensitiveness of the gentry on this point; it was a big blot on one's reputation if one's wife's morals were loose. Hence, an unfaithful wife was liable to suffer her husband's cruel revenge, which was fully approved by society still in the 17th c., as the fate of Mrs. Falbowska, with great gusto mentioned by Pasek confirms<sup>94</sup>.

<sup>91</sup>M. Bogucka, *The Lost World*, p. 61.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 71; M. Bogucka, *Życie w dawnym Gdańsku*, p. 134 ff.; A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 351 ff.

<sup>93</sup>A. S. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętnik o dziejach w Polsce (Memoirs of the Events in Poland)*, trans. and ed. A. Przyboś, R. Żelewski, Warszawa 1980, vol. II, p. 451.

<sup>94</sup>J. Ch. Pasek, *Pamiętniki*, p. 304.

However, in the 17th and the 18th c. some changes took place also in this respect, especially in magnate circles. In his recently published book *Jan Seredyka* presents the history of a typical triangle at the beginning of the 17th c. — an affair of Zofia Drohostajska née Radziwiłł with Stanisław Tymiński, who belonged to the petty nobility<sup>95</sup>. The examples of Zofia's infidelity to her first husband, Jerzy Chodkiewicz, and also those of Krzysztof Drohostajski's first wife, also Zofia's, to him, and of the loose morals of other ladies from the Radziwiłł family might lead one to think that this type of behaviour was frequent and treated with much tolerance, although naturally, endeavours were made to conceal it from public opinion. Drohostajski's behaviour after the disclosure of the affair — his restraint towards Tymiński and reluctance to sue him for adultery — was also significant; finally Tymiński was accused of the theft of jewels and money, not of seducing the wife of his principal. Was such behaviour caused by a fear of the powerful Radziwiłł brothers-in-law or perhaps a fear of laying himself open to ridicule in the whole of Polish Commonwealth by public avowal of a loss of "face" because of his wife's infidelity? As a result Zofia suffered the greatest punishment, because her husband imposed on her a "penance" of imprisonment in Gdańsk and later in the village of Brzostowica, subjecting her to the supervision of servants entitled to correct her, cutting short her contacts with women of her own standing (here we clearly have to deal with Drohostajski's misogyny, perhaps understandable because of his impotence).

About a hundred years later the situation changed considerably. It can be seen from the vicissitudes of Elżbieta Sieniawska née Lubomirska's marriage. This union contracted in 1687 abounded in conflicts and tensions of financial nature (Elżbieta protected her property and income from her husband's interference, she wanted to be financially independent) and also because of Sieniawska's permanent residence in Warsaw, instead of in her husband's palace in the country. In Warsaw Mrs. Sieniawska was in her element, here she conducted an extensive political activity as well as personal intrigues, and entered renowned, scandalous liaisons, first with Jan Stanisław Jabłonowski, the hetman's son, and later with Prince Aleksander Sobieski,

<sup>95</sup>J. Seredyka, *Księżniczka i chudopacholek. Zofia z Radziwiłłów Drohostajska — Stanisław Tymiński (A Princess and a Yeoman. Zofia Drohostajska née Radziwiłł — Stanisław Tymiński)*, Opole 1996.

the King's son. Her husband condoned these extravagances and did not go beyond weak protests<sup>96</sup>. It seems that in magnate circles in the 18th c. women enjoyed considerable sexual freedom; the moderately wealthy gentry, burghers and peasants were still in the grasp of the earlier rigours in this respect.

Thus a woman's position in marriage certainly depended also on her social status as well as on the affection she could arouse in her husband and the sexual matching of both mates. The birth of children was a very important element in any marriage. A woman who became a mother was placed as if on a pedestal, and was surrounded with respect and reverence. In an old-Polish family it was the mother who mainly took care of the upbringing of the children, not only daughters but also sons, a fact which endowed her with a special influence and opened some special possibilities for her. "A good Mother will earn herself a Salvation by the good training of her children" — so preached in the 17th c. Father Aleksander Lorencowic SJ<sup>97</sup>. Marek Sobieski's letters to his mother Teofila née Danilowicz show best what was her role in Sobieski house<sup>98</sup>. The bond between mother and son often lasted throughout her life, she was a confidant, the closest adviser and the highest authority<sup>99</sup>. Husbands handed over the upbringing of children to their wives with full confidence. Zuzanna Czarnecka wrote thus to her husband Jan Czarnecki from Koźlenice in Volhynia at the beginning of the 18th c.: "The boys are always under my supervision, they play several times all the instruments and please do not worry yourself about them". Also to their daughter Kasia "I give suitable education"<sup>100</sup>. In the hands of a woman were such things as management of the house, supervision of servants and even — very frequently — the management of the whole property. Thus her role in the old-Polish family was enormous.

However, even the best marriage had its shady, grim side. Contraception, it seems, was very little developed, hence young women spent most of their lives in a state of pregnancy, and miscarriages and births because of the low standard of medicine

<sup>96</sup>B. Popiołek, *Królowa bez korony*, see note 88.

<sup>97</sup>X. A. Lorencowic SJ, *Kazania*, part II, p. 240.

<sup>98</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, pp. 358–359.

<sup>99</sup>Cf. Jakub Dunin's letters to his mother from the years 1713–1716, A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, p. 359.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.* p. 313.



at that time were a real nightmare. Studies of the fertility of the old-Polish family concern mainly the burghers<sup>101</sup>, and besides, contribute little to the subject of our interest since they deal with data concerning the children who were included in the statistics, that is those who survived the first, most dangerous period of life. The problem of miscarriages, still births and deaths in labour has not been practically analysed, thus we can judge the dimensions of the problem only on the basis of mentions in *silvae*, in letters, and memoirs. The biographies of many young women are simply revolting descriptions of pregnancies and births — and a constant fear of death, which indeed came in their wake very often. Tekla Anna née Wollowicz's short life may be an example of such a sad story. Born about 1610, married barely at 16 to Aleksander Ludwik Radziwiłł (1626), she gave birth to her first son in July 1627. Each following year brought a dangerous childbirth and Tekla doubted if she would live long. In her letter of May 16, 1633 she asked her husband to return home "for I doubt it very much if I would be alive" and at the end of 1636 she wrote, before another delivery, her testament<sup>102</sup>. Indeed she died on March 21, 1637, barely in the tenth year of her marriage, after the birth of her eighth child, in her twenties.

Such deaths were considered the normal fate of women, and husbands as a rule reconciled themselves to them without protest. It is true that Bogusław Radziwiłł in one of his letters to his young fiancée (and his niece in one) declared that he would rather not have any children at all than lose his "dear friend", nevertheless after his wedding he endeavoured very intensely to produce an offspring, despite his wife's poor health. During barely 15 months of their married life Anna had two miscarriages and gave birth to one child, after which she died soon. Elżbieta Druszkiewicz (wedding in 1659) during 17 years of married life gave birth to 11 children, five of whom survived; the first one came to this world when his mother was barely 17, the last when she was 34. Her husband's notebook contains records of her several labours, each lasting several days, and terrible agonies she went through<sup>103</sup>. "The beautiful queen" Marie Casimir during her short marriage with Zamoyski bore him three children within the years

<sup>101</sup>S. Waszak, *Dzielnosc rodziny mieszczańskiej (The Fertility of the Urban Family)*, p. 343 ff. Cf. also A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 146 ff.

<sup>102</sup>A biography by T. Wasilewski in *PSB*, fasc. 126, 1987, pp. 413–414.

<sup>103</sup>A. Sajkowski, *Staropolska miłość*, pp. 127, 346–347.

1660–1664<sup>104</sup>. To John III Sobieski she bore a son, Louis Henry Jacob (in Paris) in 1667, in 1669 stillborn twins, in 1670 a daughter who soon died, in 1672 again a daughter who lived barely a few years, in 1673 another daughter who died at the end of 1675, in 1676 a daughter, Therese Cunegund, in 1677 a son, Alexander Benedict (during her stay in Gdańsk). In May 1678 Marie Casimir again bore a son, Constantin Ladislas, and at the end of the same year she was pregnant again (a miscarriage? stillbirth?). A new pregnancy and the birth of a son, John, took place between 1682 and 1685<sup>105</sup>. In this respect the fate of a queen, a woman from magnate circles or common gentlewoman as well as a burgher's or peasant's wife was similar<sup>106</sup>. Of course, Maria Casimira could go for delivery to Paris, she was surrounded with luxury at the most difficult moments, just like the above-mentioned Tekla Anna Radziwiłł née Wollowicz. But all this luxury and care even of the best physicians of the era did not diminish the discomfort of pregnancy and the terrible agony of childbirth, which affected to the same extent great ladies and common gentlewomen, as well as wives of burghers and peasants.

The high rate of deaths in labour accounts in a large measure for the fact that marriage was on the average very short-lived and almost in all social groups did not surpass a few years. Husbands, too, often died prematurely as a result of illness or loss of life in war expeditions. There were many widows and widowers in the society, many people reached that status several times during their lives, since generally after a spouse's death a new marriage was soon contracted<sup>107</sup>. As regards women, among burghers this was partly due to the pressure of municipal authorities and guilds, which were unfavourably disposed towards single women

<sup>104</sup>M. Komaszynski, *Piękna królowa*, p. 43.

<sup>105</sup>A. Kersten, a biography in *PSB*, fasc. 83, 1974, pp. 637–644.

<sup>106</sup>The memoirs of a nobleman, Wawrzyniec Rakowski (d. 1729), married in the middle of 1701, recount how his first three children were born one year after the other, the fourth a year and nine months later, the fifth two and a half years later; here the memoirs break off. The chronicle of a burgher, Stanisław Nakielski, a councillor of Kontecpole, records that from August 2, 1582 till March 6, 1605 that is over 21 years and 7 months 10 children came to the world, three of whom died in babyhood, and one when it was three or four. Five sons and one daughter survived. The latter married and in the years 1616–1624 bore to Nakielski eight grandchildren, according to the folk saying, "the annual baby and a never empty cradle". See I. Głysztorowa, *Rodzina staropolska w badaniach demograficznych* (*The Old-Polish Family in Demographic Studies*) in: *Spoleczeństwo staropolskie* vol. II, Warszawa 1979, pp. 172–173.

<sup>107</sup>Cf. M. Bogucka, *The Lost World*, pp. 60–61.

(although there were many of them in bigger cities). Widows were generally appointed terms, e.g. two or three years, for a free run of the workshop, later they had either to get married, or to wind up the shop<sup>108</sup>. In the country it turned out to be very difficult, if not outright impossible, to run a farm single-handed. However, it seems that no external pressure existed in gentry circles, hence frequent second and successive marriages of widows may testify to the relatively good, and improving situation of wives in the period under discussion.

Naturally, a widow enjoyed the most freedom, and not only because she could freely choose her partner; she was the mistress of her life. Some women deliberately persisted in widowhood, energetically rejecting all marriage proposals, as e.g. Elżbieta Sieniawska née Gostomska, who at the turn of the 16th c. deterred unfortunate suitors with the help of a harquebus and armed servants<sup>109</sup>. Widows could freely dispose of their property, thus as a rule they developed intensive activity. In towns they engaged in business, made credit transactions, ran production and service firms, engaged in commerce<sup>110</sup>. In the countryside they developed the rural economy, extended their property by buying new land, ran water-mills, set up ponds (nurseries), lent money, engaged in law-suits against their neighbours and frequently their own family, appeared before the courts of justice. Quite often they had higher aspirations and became patronesses of culture by funding works of art and supporting artists, or more frequently, they surrendered to bigotry — then they gave generous offerings to religious institutions, endowed numerous churches and convents. Also only after the loss of their husbands did women start to develop their writing activity. If marriage acknowledged that a woman was a mature person and generally gave her a strong position in the family, by becoming a widow she gained vast opportunities for activity outside the family and in almost all domains of life.

The phases of a woman's life connected with her age and civil status as well as advantages and possibilities connected with them are best presented in a poem included in a 17th c. *silva*:

<sup>108</sup>A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 48 ff., p. 206 ff.

<sup>109</sup>Z. Kuchowicz, *Wizerunki niewiast niepospolitych*, p. 177.

<sup>110</sup>A. Karpiński, *Kobieta w mieście*, p. 47 ff.

Bread to maidens, wastel–bread to wives, marzipan to widows  
and crusts to old women;  
Cheese to maidens, milk to wives, cream to widows and whey to  
old women;  
Apples to maidens, pears to wives, oranges to widows, forest  
apples to old women;  
Mead to maidens, wine to wives, malmsey to widows and slops to  
old women;  
A cart to maidens, a chariot to wives, a carriage to widows,  
a barrow to old women;  
The world to maidens, Paradise to wives, Heaven to widows and  
hell to old women<sup>111</sup>.

Apart from emphasizing the advantages connected with youth, which gives a woman beauty and by this embellishes her fate (miserable “crumbs” from the table of life fall to the lot of old women), this poem clearly underlines the enviable situation of a widow, much better than that of a maiden or wife — it is the widow who consumes the oranges of life and drinks the sweet malmsey of freedom.

*(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)*

---

<sup>111</sup>Czartoryski Library in Cracow, MS 1657 p. 146.