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THE PATTERNS OF FEMALE BEHAVIOUR
IN THE LIGHT OF 19TH
AND EARLY 20th CENTURY MORAL CODES

The archetype of a moral code was the knightly code that arose at the close of the Middle Ages. However, it differed greatly from the later codes. The knightly code is an example of defensive codification¹, i.e. it registered the actual state of affairs. The codes written in the 16th–17th century and later on in the 19th century took into consideration mainly new situations and postulated new behaviour that was suitable for them. The early modern codes connected with the full bloom of courtly social entertainment culture, met the need to create completely new patterns of behaviour, while 19th century codes suggested to people who achieved social advancement (as they were addressed mainly to the representatives of “the middle class” and only at the beginning of the 20th c. did they start to embrace also working class representatives) how they should behave in various situations that were new to them. As a model to be imitated they presented the stereotype of a well-bred man, i.e. — in other words — the picture of a person belonging to a hitherto higher social group, made up of the qualities allegedly characteristic of this group². However, sociologists warn us that stereotypes tend to get petrified and to lag behind the social changes and therefore to falsify reality. While making use of codes as a source of information about society we must therefore exhibit far-reaching caution. In the first place we should remember that codes by their very nature present norms not accounts, and therefore do not state such or other behaviour but only contain proposals of the most desirable one — proposals which, despite their most sincere intention, could not always be accepted and realized by the addressees. This was above all dictated by the lack of financial means and inadequate

¹ Cf. M. Ossowska, *Ethos rycerski i jego odmiany (Knightly Ethos and Its Variations)*, Warszawa 1973, p. 121.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

education and also by the fact that the change of habits one absorbs in one's milieu is extremely difficult; the more difficult in proportion as the greater is the social gap that divides those who imitate from those who are imitated.

The reflection of social reality in the codes can be discussed in two ways: on the one hand the content of norms gives basis for indirect conclusions on the subject of the situation in the milieus where they arose. The norms permit one to draw conclusions about the actual behaviour of the so-called virtual readers. Continual injunctions and admonitions that one should not act in a certain way, that something should not be and is not done, could indicate the frequent occurrence of such "immoral behaviour" in the group to whom the code was addressed. On the other hand the codes informed the addressees directly as to what behaviour was considered proper and what could be the consequences of fulfilling or not fulfilling the requirements posited by particular norms. However, without prejudging that persons for whom the codes were designed would actually behave in a certain way in the given situation, or that in the case of fulfilling or not fulfilling the given norm they would suffer the consequences, the codes indeed registered in a large measure real behaviour; with the proviso that it was characteristic of the representatives of those social groups who did not have to use such guides, but provided patterns to groups placed lower in the social hierarchy³.

The fact that the codes registered mainly what had already been sanctioned, recognized and accepted, resulted in the conservative character of code norms — in new situations old, at least partly, patterns of behaviour were proposed. For example when women already performed professional work and gained some independence through it, the codes persisted in recommending the old principles of propriety (e.g. unmarried young ladies were forbidden to go out without a chaperon, and all women — to enter a public place alone⁴). The conservative character of code norms is indicated by numerous reprints, where only slight changes were introduced. Let us take for example *Zwyczajowe towarzyskie* (*Social Customs*) by Zygmunt Sarnicki, published for the first time in 1876. Barely about a dozen years later social codes contained in this guide of salon life diverged so much from

³ J. Szymczak-Hoff, *Drukowane kodeksy obyczajowe na ziemiach polskich w XIX wieku. Studium źródłoznawcze* (*Printed Moral Codes in Polish Lands in the 19th c. Source Study*), Rzeszów 1982, pp. 116–117.

⁴ Cf. H. z Russockich Wilczyńska, *Dobry ton. Przewodnik salonowy i towarzyski* (*Good Form. A Guide of Salon and Social Life*), Lwów (1878), p. 85; Spirydion (E. Lubowski), *Kodeks światowy czyli znajomość życia we wszystkich stosunkach z ludźmi* (*World Code or Knowledge of Life in All Kinds of Relations Among People*), Kraków 1886, pp. 100–102; M. Rościszewski (B. Londyński), *Księga obyczajów towarzyskich* (*The Book of Social Customs*), Lwów–Złoczów (1905), pp. 20–21, 278–279.

the actual behaviour that the book was regarded as humorous among the enlightened circles of society⁵. And yet this code was reprinted several times between 1876 and 1900 without any great changes, then at the beginning of the 20th c. — and the last time in the 1920s. The same thing happened to other codes⁶.

The publications in question that appeared in the 19th and early 20th c. regulated not only matters connected with social life but embraced almost all forms of inter-human contact (which is understandable, considering their addressees.). Therefore their content was multifarious. Nevertheless, it seems that one can isolate two basic groups of codes: the manuals of good breeding (among this group I would rank both the manuals of *savoir-vivre*, regulating various forms of social contacts as well as guides for travellers, handbooks of pleasant behaviour, handbooks of letter-writing, collections of toasts and congratulations, handbooks of parlour games, codes of honour, also some cookery books, which regulated behaviour only on one plane of social life) and pedagogical guides concerning *mores*. This division is significant in so far that the codes belonging to both these groups proposed somewhat different ways of realizing a similar personal model for women. I need not mention that this model was different from the one designed for men, which resulted from the acceptance of a different system of values that lay at their source. The most important thing for men was to achieve success in life in the broadest sense of the word. A much more modest area of reality was reserved for women — the family hearth and family life. On this point both the guides of good breeding and pedagogical guides were unanimous.

In order to enter the sphere of existence reserved for her a woman had to get a husband. Hence the personal models proposed by both groups of codes took into consideration above all those values that helped to realize the supreme one: getting married. However, there were also differences.

The handbooks of good behaviour, especially those from the first half of the 19th c. dealt mainly with moving in the world of men; as some part

⁵ Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński mentioned: "When I was a youngster (about 1890) I chanced on this book and I read it about ten times as a humorous item, so antique all these ceremonious approaches and subtleties seemed already at that time". He came across the same book, published another time without the slightest change in the 1920s. "I read it anew with delight and I burst out laughing time and again at the thought what havoc it would make in the minds of readers who sought light in it". (T. Boy-Żeleński, *Pisma (Writings)*, vol. XVI, p. 311.

⁶ Cf. list of moral codes in the work of J. Szymczak-Hoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 169–194. Also *Bibliographie des traités de savoir-vivre polonais*, établie par Jadwiga Hoff avec la collaboration de Roman Pełczar et de Waław Wierzbieniec, in: *Bibliographie des traités de savoir-vivre en Europe du Moyen Age à nos jours*, vol. 2, Clermont-Ferrand 1995, pp. 297–372.

of this world was occupied by women the guides also took into consideration the forms of behaviour designed for them. The authors, however, did not treat women as autonomous beings, but only as complements of men. For this reason a woman could not feel equal to a man. She should always remember that she was “a being inferior to man” (although angel-like)⁷ “under the present system of the world in a state of subjection to him”⁸. This was obvious also to the authors of pedagogical handbooks from the first half of the 19th c., even to those who were held to be progressive. Even Klementyna Tańska Hoffmanowa maintained that the destination of woman was “to be secondary in society, rather to help than act: more to signify through others than through herself; to fulfil more willingly the will of others than of her own, to live stronger in others than by herself”⁹. Still in the middle of the 19th c. the enlightened authoresses of pedagogical handbooks, women themselves, came out with sharp criticism of the ever more frequent emancipation slogans. Eleonora Ziemiecka claimed downright that the postulate of equal rights, the view that “both sexes should be subject to equal laws, equal justice should be for all” was “a paradox inspired by noble enthusiasm but with harmful results”¹⁰. Bishop Ludwik Łętowski went even farther by saying that any thought of the independence of woman should be treated as an insult. A woman is such a weak creature that to endow her with freedom would be to cause her downfall: “Nature herself has arranged it in such a way that a woman should pass from the yoke of her mother’s (...) under the yoke of her husband’s, not for a moment being free from obedience”¹¹.

The authors of pedagogical handbooks, while stating the inequality of both sexes, defined the set of social roles for which a woman should be prepared. In the first place she should be a wife making her husband happy, a good and exemplary mother and a wise manageress of a household. The whole education system should be aimed at making a girl realize her situation — so that she should understand that she is to serve the happiness

⁷ P. E. Leśniewski, *Wychowaniec dziewiętnastego wieku czyli przepisy przystojności i dobrego tonu w pożyciu towarzyskim (The 19th c. Upbringing or the Rules of Propriety and Good Form in Social Life)*, Warszawa 1843, p. 123.

⁸ J. H. Campe, *Ojcowska rada dla mojej córki (Father's Advice to His Daughter)*, Warszawa 1848, p. 21.

⁹ K. Hoffmanowa, *O moralności dla kobiet (About Morality for Women)*, Kraków 1841, p. 26.

¹⁰ E. Ziemiecka, *Myśli o wychowaniu kobiet (Thoughts on Women's Upbringing)*, Warszawa 1843, p. 31.

¹¹ (L. Łętowski), *Nauka poznawania ludzi z uwagi na dobro towarzystwa (Instructions about Getting to Know People with Good Company in Mind)*, Warszawa 1847, pp. 191–192.

of the family and not the other way round¹². On the other hand the authors of handbooks of good breeding taught a woman how she should make use of her assets to outwit the male and realize her aims. Paweł Eustachy Leśniewski wrote that a woman even if she surpassed the man by her strength of spirit and will, should hide it and on the contrary — by her very appearance “should always(...) present herself as a person created for pleasing, for loving, for seeking protection”¹³. Every woman, and especially a marriageable one, should know how to present herself to the man that she would like to marry and how to knit him to herself. The first condition of success, of drawing his attention to her, is beauty and grace, but also suitable behaviour. A woman who would like to get married should especially care for her good reputation and avoid even the slightest appearance of bad conduct — “for the world judges by appearances and does not try to sound out the inner intentions; the appearances is everything that counts and it cannot be otherwise. Strangers can judge our actions only by appearances”¹⁴.

Innocence and modesty were important assets in the game of making a good match and one should avoid anything that could jeopardize the good name of a woman. The codes of the beginning of the 20th c. devoted a lot of place to the care for proper reputation, resulting from the ability of proper behaviour in society and the choice of suitable company. The authors justified it by “the present times of progress where a woman gains an ever larger field of independent work”, in the office, in the counting house, in a private house where she has many occasions to meet unsuitable people. For such a woman reputation “becomes an untight rope, from which it is very easy to fall down”¹⁵.

A young lady should be also very cautious. The authors of codes warned i.a. against presenting any whims in society, as a woman could gain a

¹² E. Ziemięcka, *op. cit.*, pp. 276–283. Also Fenelon, *O wychowaniu młodzieży płci żeńskiej (On the Upbringing of Youth of Female Sex)*, Warszawa i Suwałki 1823; (L. z Czartoryskich Zamoyska), *Rady matki spisane dla córki w dzień ślubu (Mother's Advice Written for her Daughter on Her Wedding Day)*, (Warszawa 1825); (K. Hoffmanowa), *op. cit.*; (L. z Dzikowskich Georgeon), *Przestrogi matki dla córki wykształconej na gubernantkę (Mother's Admonitions to a Daughter Educated to be a Governess)*, Kraków 1843; J. H. Campe, *op. cit.*; (L. Cwierzakiewiczowa), *Poradnik porządku i różnych higienicznych wiadomości potrzebnych kobiecie (A Guide of Order and Various Hygienic Information Necessary to a Woman)*, Warszawa 1876.

¹³ P. E. Leśniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁴ J. Miłkowski, *Prawidła obyczajności ku zachowaniu uprzejmych w świecie stosunków (Rules of Propriety For the Sake of Maintaining Kind Relations in the World)*, Kraków 1852, pp. 28, 30. Cf. also (K.F.) Pockels, *O towarzyskości i obcowaniu z ludźmi (On Sociability and Association with People)*, Warszawa 1819, p. 64; H. z Russockich Wileżyńska, *op. cit.*, pp. 142, 205.

¹⁵ J. Rościszewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–5.

reputation as a selfish person who could not be satisfied in any way and then it might be difficult for her to get married¹⁶.

In the second half of the 19th c. the handbooks of good breeding presented an accent that had not been encountered before. In the first half of the century a well-bred young lady should have been innocent, modest, delicate, tactful, caring for her reputation, not daring to show any initiative in her contacts with men; coquetry was criticized severely. Fathers told their daughters that they would prefer to see them rather dead than flirtatious¹⁷. While in the second half of the 19th c. the codes include very sober advice. Julian Miłkowski in his practical handbook for women who wanted to get married, published in 1867, tried to convince his readers that “if a young lady does not like to become an old maid (he earlier stated that a position in the world can be ensured solely by a husband, hence getting married is her main thought from the moment when she learns to think)¹⁸ she should be winning and not wait until she is won”, especially if she has no dowry. She should, however, observe certain rules — above all not to impose herself directly on a man, but to try and affect all his senses without exception, mainly through “presenting her graces in the best light” and — what is very important — as it means that what really counted in contracting a marriage was not so much love as wealth, social position and importance — she should not let her heart be won by a person who was a **nobody**¹⁹.

A woman who had already got married was obliged to observe other norms of behaviour. A young lady’s world was a ball and a visit. A married woman’s world was the home where she should perform the role of the good wife and mother, of however her main concern was to care for her husband. In the handbook for married couples published in 1817 its author, Ignacy Czerniński, enumerates eleven virtues that should characterize a wife:

¹⁶ H. z Russockich Wilczyńska, *op. cit.*, p. 72; J. T. Weber, *Sztuka ożenienia się i wyjścia za mąż (The Art of Getting Married)*, Warszawa 1890, p. 87.

¹⁷ P. E. Leśniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁸ J. Miłkowski, *Sztuka wydlania się za mąż w jak najkrótszym czasie. Praktyczny i niezawodny przewodnik, dający każdej kobiecie możność zdobycia sobie takiego męża, jakiego pragnie (The Art of Getting Married as Quickly as Possible. A Practical and Reliable Guide, Giving Every Woman a Possibility of Getting a Husband She Would Like to Have)*, Warszawa 1867, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 9–29. Cf. also Język kwiatów. Zabawa towarzyska dla dorosłych osób. (*The Language of Flowers. Parlour Game for Adult Persons*) (Warszawa) 1876, p. 17; J. T. Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–49, 75–85; J. Miłkowski, *Sztuka pozyskania w krótkim czasie oblubienicy, jakiej kto sobie życzy, z posagiem albo bez posagu. Praktyczny i pewny przewodnik do zawiązania znajomości, zdobycia serca i utrzymania go (The Art of Gaining in a Short Time a Bride, Such as One Would Like to Have, With or Without Dowry. A Practical and Reliable Guide to Making an Acquaintance, Winning a Heart and Retaining It)*, Warszawa 1867; M. Rościszewski (B. Londyński), *Sekretarz miłosny. Nowy podręcznik do pisania listów dla wszelkich stanów. (The Secretary of Love. A New Handbook of Letter-Writing for All Classes)*, Warszawa 1907.

only three of them concern her relation: 1. to her children (“she should be a caring mother”); 2. to the household (“hard-working, thrifty, neat, good house-wife”) and 3. religion (“she should be pious but without fanaticism”); the remaining ones are concerned with the husband’s happiness or at least his comfort. They are as follows:

— “the wife avoids giving her husband any cause for quarrel or for frowning”;

— “the wife should try with her modesty to mitigate the bad moods of her husband, with her kindness to overcome his roughness, with her submissiveness to halt his vehemence” (here we are dealing with a common opinion about a woman as a subtle, sensitive, tender and high-minded person). Janina Kamionka-Straszakowa says that such a vision of woman was created by sentimental novels²⁰;

— “she should think only of her husband”;

— “she should not interfere in her husband’s business affairs”;

— “she should not betray her husband’s defects to the world”;

— “she should be modest, not grumbling or quarrelsome, she should not complain about her unhappy lot”.

Moreover the wife in her own interest “should try to introduce variety into the signs of her attachment, as monotony may be irritating, she should not be a constant shadow of her husband, not to follow him step by step and finally — she should always treat her husband as a lover”²¹.

This set of virtues, only with slight modifications, continued until the beginning of the 20th century. As late as in 1878 Helena Wilczyńska instructed the fiancé that they should not accustom young ladies to some “unnatural adoration, which would have to cease after marriage and would immediately make the young bride despair that she is no longer loved as much as before”²². A young lady should know from the beginning that her temporary dominion will end after marriage; that her husband will be her lord and the woman’s concerns should be to behave so as to please him. A great number of codes include the advice: “let us not shine in society, but rather let us dress beautifully at home. Let us live and dress up for the man

²⁰ J. Kamionka-Straszakowa, *Nasz naród jak lawa. Studia z literatury i obyczaju doby romantyzmu (Our Nation is Like Lava. Studies in Literature and Customs in the Days of Romanticism)*, Warszawa 1974, pp. 81–82.

²¹ I. Lubicz-Czerwiński, *Sposób szczęśliwego pożycia między mężem i żoną, czyli cnoty istotne, które ich do tego celu doprowadzić powinny (The Method of a Happy Conjugal Life, That Is Essential Virtues That Should Lead to This Goal)*, Przemysł 1817, pp. 23–28, 65–68.

²² H. z Russockich Wilczyńska, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–123.

for whose delight we should care and whose happiness we should fulfil”²³. Only in this one case coquetry was considered a virtue, otherwise the married woman should conduct herself so as not to jeopardize the name of her husband. It is true that in the codes of the late 19th c. we encounter an uncertain acceptance of women’s emancipation, however it would be better — according to the authors of handbooks of salon life — to avoid most carefully anything that could draw attention to a woman²⁴. A good wife should apart from that be marked by: merry, graceful behaviour, inclination to forgiving, lack of rancour, patience, mindfulness of her duties, elegance of manner, delicacy, tenderness, ability to work hard and to run the household. In the codes of the second half of the 19th c. one often encounters a statement that a woman should also know how to cook (although she need not, of course, be a cook). However a knowledge of cooking, ability to run the household accounts, knowledge of dealing with various practical situations at home, ability to furnish the house correctly, all help to preserve the appearances of wealth even when the financial means are lacking, and in the same way increase the confidence of the world in the husband of such a woman²⁵. Finally the thoughtful share of a woman in her husband’s aspirations was underlined. Let us draw attention to the word “thoughtful”. A woman should not interfere in the thing that are no concern of hers, that is in her husband’s professional work, but she could help him by her whole behaviour, by convincing her entourage that her husband made a good choice by marrying her, and so in other matters he was also reliable.

Summing up — all the moral codes propagated actually one personal model of woman: the wife and mother (rather a wife), a priestess of the family hearth who did not work outside her home. Sometimes, incidentally, the authors of codes, especially at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c., underline the significance of marriage as the most important event in a woman’s life where she stakes her all on a chance (given the Catholic indissolubility of marriage “she has nowhere to hide, to flee the

²³ E. F. de Celnart, *Manualik damski czyli sposób odbywania paryskiej gotowalni, obejmujący najpewniejsze a nieszkodzące sposoby zachowania piękności, naprawienia wad natury bez nadwyżęzania zdrowia, sztukę ubierania się przyzwoicie we wszelkich okolicznościach i sposób podobania się* (*A Lady’s Manual That is the Method of Making Paris Toilet, Embracing the Most Reliable and Harmless Methods of Preserving Your Beauty, Correcting the Flaws of Nature Without Impairing Your Health, The Art of Dressing Properly for All Occasions and Staying Attractive*), Wrocław 1848, pp. 1–3; also H. z Russockich Wileczyńska, *op. cit.*, pp. 130, 155, 175; M. Rościszewski, *Księga obyczajów*, pp. 86–88 ff.

²⁴ H. z Russockich Wileczyńska, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 130; Spirydon (E. Lubowski), *op. cit.*, pp. 98–99, 102; *Przewodnik życia światowego* (*The Guide of Wordly Life*), Warszawa 1900, pp. 125–147; M. Rościszewski, *Księga obyczajów*, pp. 73, 76, 82.

²⁵ Cf. M. Rościszewski, *Księga obyczajów*, p. 32; H. z Russockich Wileczyńska, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

bad husband”) and add that it is better to become an old maid than the wife of a bad man²⁶. However these were only loose remarks of no consequence. The codes did not concern themselves with old maids: they did not present to them any proposals of organizing a life without a husband.

Already in the middle of the 19th c. in some moral codes there appear mentions about the emergence, together with emancipation movement of “a type of woman unknown before” — woman—“lioness” — with bachelor’s tastes and likings: these women exhibit man—like energy and insubmissiveness and therefore they lose the qualities characteristic of their sex. The authors of moral codes had the worst possible opinion of those women and mentioned them only in order to warn the young ladies and their mothers against behaviour that would lead as a result to spinsterhood, as men prefer to see women “as doves and sheep rich in the fleece of religious and domestic virtues, than as lionesses”²⁷.

Thus the emancipated, independent, working women remained outside the scope of interest of those codes. I found only three handbook for working women, among them *Skarbiec dla rodzin w mieście i na wsi* (*A Treasury for Families in Town and Country*, 1888–1889), where the author writes that “the time has passed when the home was the only sphere of a woman’s activity and woman’s productive work was something exceptional” and therefore women should be advised about the choice of work, after which he proceeds consistently to give such advice²⁸. In the remaining ones we encounter admittedly declarations that work is the law of nature, work is the core of everything, neither social position, neither wealth, neither sex can absolve us from work and no girl should blush because of performing useful work (underlined by J.H.), however while reading the moral codes we encounter remarks that such or other instructions and pieces of advice do not concern, of course, the girls who are forced to work for their living. Let me repeat that the moral codes did not relate to them. Their norms were destined for middle class women who did not have to earn their living. The pattern presented to females for realization was an epitome of “middle class” virtues, although we seldom come across a direct praise of the “middle class” in the moral codes²⁹.

²⁶ E.g. E. Ziemięcka, *op. cit.*, pp. 36–100; M. Rościszewski, *Księga obyczajów*, p. 172.

²⁷ J. Miłkowski, *Prawidła obyczajowości* (*Rules of Propriety*), pp. 172–173; M. Rościszewski, *Księga obyczajów*, p. 20–22.

²⁸ *Skarbiec dla rodzin w mieście i na wsi* (*A Treasury for Families in Town and Country*), vol. I, Warszawa (1888), vol. II, Warszawa (1889).

²⁹ J. H. Campe, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–73.

At any rate we are concerned here with a certain contradiction observable especially in the first half of the 19th c.: on the one hand there was a middle class pattern that glorified modesty, piety, hard work, thriftiness, etc., qualities that were to counterbalance a lack of wealth and good birth, on the other — there was admiration for the aristocratic tradition, which is visible in the motivation of the moral codes (so does the respectable or elegant minority behave) and derisive attacks against the *nouveau-riches* and upstarts who have “scrambled out of... deuce knows what” but greedily strived for social advancement, trying, most often awkwardly, to imitate the manners of the high society. Only in the second half of the 19th c. the changing motivation of the authors who propagated various norms and rules (often: so only the members of “the leisured sphere” behave, this is the remnant of the “recent gentry arrogance”, such behaviour can be met only in the drawing-rooms of the “dotty aristocracy”, etc.) does allow to think that the aristocratic pattern started to lose attractiveness and the middle class stopped being associated only with upstarts, *nouveau-riches* and parvenus, but hand in hand with the objective economic and social changes it started slowly to advance in social consciousness.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)