

# Helena Modjeska: Literary Figure and Cultural Phenomenon

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PhD Program "Austrian Galicia" (2010-2013)



Helena Modjeska (b. 12 October 1840, Cracow, d. 8 April 1909, Newport Beach, California) was the most distinguished „Shakespearean“ actress in Galicia, Poland and the USA in the second half of the 19th century. Diverse biographical works comprehensively describe a multidimensional image of the Polish-American actress.

This research project analyzes the image and myth of Modjeska in theatrical plays, writings and visual materials related to her artistic career in the Austrian, Russian and Prussian sectors of partitioned Poland and also in the USA. In this context, the research project includes the socio-cultural influences of the „Modjeska phenomena“ in society and public space in Galicia, Poland and during the gilded era in the USA.

Evaluating the visual representations of the Modjeska phenomenon in diverse plays, including photographs, posters, postcards and drawings in newspapers, and writings such as letters, reviews, articles, interviews, memoirs and novels, provides an understanding of the impact these venues had on shaping the perceptions and activities of the actress in society. This project analyzes and interprets Modjeska's visual and written representations during her theatrical tours which contributed to her „cult“ status as an international artist and works after her death.



To understand the cultural phenomenon of Modjeska and her international popularity, this research project includes analysis of how the actress viewed herself, how audiences viewed the popular advertising and marketing of this artist, how she was accepted as a woman, artist and an immigrant in society, and how she contributed to the changing role of women with respect to emancipation.

How did Modjeska's representation of female characters create a model for women, and how was this model reflected in Polish and American literature and theatre? In what way did her portrayal of female characters, particularly from playwrights such as Shakespeare, Dumas Jr., Scribe, Sardou, Schiller, Hugo, Sudermann, Ibsen, Korzeniowski and Słowacki influence culture in the late 19th century? How was Modjeska's „cult“ of personality influential in the changing perception of actresses?



A further focus of the research project is on the Galician heritage of the actress and the development of theatre in Galicia in the second half of the 19th century, especially regarding theatrical tendencies between popular and „high“ culture. Special attention is directed to the social transformation of the role of the actress in society, her emancipation and her role as a cultural phenomenon and literary figure who influenced literary, cultural and social ideas in Galicia, Poland and the USA.

Images: Centre for Documentation of Helena Modjeska's Life and Art, Cracow.