

Essay:

IN THE NAME OF LOVE? SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND COMMUNIST MORALITY IN THE LATE SOVIET BALTIC REPUBLICS¹

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Abstract This essay discusses the sexual education manual *Mīlestības vārdā* (In the Name of Love) (1981), written by the Latvian doctor Jānis Zālītis. A bestseller in both Latvia and the neighboring Lithuania, the book has contributed significantly to the social norms and attitudes towards gender and sexuality in late Soviet societies of the Baltic countries. This essay presents the historical context of the writing and the reception of this book, as well as provides a feminist and queer reading of some of its main ideas. Namely, the essay argues that *Mīlestības vārdā*, despite its “scandalous” reputation, was essentially a conservative book, which reproduced the predominant patriarchal and heteronormative understandings. The book entrenched the idea that hierarchical gender differences were essential to sustaining stable marriages, and that sexuality could be strictly divided into “normal”, meaning leading towards procreation, and “perverse,” meaning non-procreative and therefore morally wrong and detrimental to Soviet society.

The excerpt presented here is from the book *Mīlestības vārdā*² (In the Name of Love), which was written by the Latvian doctor oncologist Jānis Zālītis and was published in original Latvian by the state publisher *Zvaigzne* in Riga, in 1981. The book discussed sexuality with unusual openness for the period and was intended as a sexual education manual for young people and families. It was published at a print-run of 99,000 copies and sold out in a matter of a few days,³ in a country of less than two million people, making it a staple reading material about sex and intimacy at virtually every Latvian household. The second edition (75,000 copies), which contained illustrations of various sex positions by the Latvian artist Edgars Ozoliņš, was censored by the Soviet Latvian authorities and largely destroyed.⁴ This attempt at censorship, as the Latvian historian Ineta Lipša argues, did not diminish the impact of the book, and might have even contributed to its lasting influence.⁵ In 1984, *Mīlestības vārdā* was also translated to

¹ Essay zu der Quelle: Extract from Janis Zalytis: *Meilės Vardu* (Lithuanian Translation by Renata Zajančauskaitė and Visvaldas Bronušas 1984) [Scan and English Translation by Rasa Navickaitė], in: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte, 2023, URL: <<https://www.europa.clio-online.de/quelle/id/q63-78942>>.

² The book that was used for analysis here is the Lithuanian translation of the original Latvian book: Janis Zalytis, *Meilės Vardu*, trans. by Renata Zajančauskaitė and Visvaldas Bronušas, Kaunas 1984.

³ Ineta Lipša, *Silencing Sex Education in Soviet Latvia in the Early 1980s: The Case of the Destruction of the Book *Mīlestības Vārdā* by Jānis Zālītis*, in: *Acta Medico-Historica Rigensis XV* (2022), 99.

⁴ Andris Bernāts, *Padomju Laikā Par Seksu Nerunāja, Taču Lēgendārais Seksologs Jānis Zālītis Izdeva Grāmatu “Mīlestības Vārdā”* (There Was No Talk about Sex during the Soviet Times, but the Legendary Sexologist Jānis Zālītis Published a Book “In the Name of Love”), in: *Jauns. Lv*, April 8, 2019, URL: <<https://jauns.lv/raksts/sievietem/326087-padomju-laika-par-seksu-nerunaja-tacu-legendarais-seksologs-janis-zalitis-izdeva-gramatu-milestibas-varda>>.

⁵ Read more about the political background for the censorship of Zālītis’s book in Lipša, *Silencing Sex Education in Soviet Latvia*, 121.

Lithuanian and published in the neighboring Lithuanian SSR, without the aforementioned illustrations. The first publication had a print-run of 100,000 copies and it was reprinted the following year (70,000 copies), making the total print run of the book among the largest of any publication in Soviet Lithuania.⁶ Despite such an impressive print-run, by the time of the *perestroika* Zālītis's book became somewhat of a deficit, and featured at the top of the list of most wanted publications, according to a 1987 survey of book stores and libraries.⁷

While by the 1980s in both Soviet Republics there circulated other sexual education books, mostly translated works by Russian and Central European authors, no book can be said to have such a strong and formative impact as *Mīlestības vārdā*. In Latvia it was the only book by a local author on the subject of sexuality.⁸ In Lithuania, which did not have an equivalent Lithuanian-language publication, it was probably perceived as culturally closer than the books written by the authors from GDR, Russia, Poland, or elsewhere. Interviews with LGBT respondents collected in both post-socialist Latvia and Lithuania have shown, for example, that for this group of people the book was often the very first source of knowledge about the existence of homosexuality, albeit a very stigmatizing one.⁹ As the historians Valdemaras Klumbys and Tomas Vaiseta show, Zālītis's book was widely discussed at the moment of its publication, and especially criticized in Catholic *samizdat* for its alleged immorality.¹⁰ In Lithuania it also became the most widely remembered book on sexuality from the Soviet period, a "synecdoche of all sexual education publications"¹¹, testifying to its continuous symbolic importance in people's minds. While the effect that the book had on people's actual behaviors in the intimate sphere remains an open question, at least some of the views expressed in *Mīlestības vārdā* must have been formative of the social attitudes towards sexuality in Latvia and Lithuania.

What was *Mīlestības vārdā* about and why did it become so popular? Similar to Polish and Czech sexologists of the socialist period¹², Zālītis gave a lot of attention to questions of sexual technique and pleasure, and in particular he focused on how to achieve woman's pleasure during intercourse. Orgasm, he believed, was important for biological and health reasons, and

⁶ Valdemaras Klumbys and Tomas Vaiseta, *Mažasis O: Seksualumo Kultūra Sovietų Lietuvoje* (The Little O: Sexual Culture in Soviet Lithuania, Vilnius 2022), 136.

⁷ Klumbys and Vaiseta, *Mažasis O*, 137.

⁸ Lipša, *Silencing Sex Education in Soviet Latvia*, 99.

⁹ Rita Ruduša, *Forced Underground. Homosexuals in Soviet Latvia*, Riga 2014; Aušrinė Skirmantė, *Marginalizuoti Ir Nematomi Lytiškumai: LGBT Žmonių Patirtys Sovietmečio Lietuvoje* (Marginalized and Invisible Sexualities: LGBT Peoples Experiences in Soviet Lithuania), Bachelor thesis, Vilnius University, 2013.

¹⁰ Klumbys and Vaiseta, *Mažasis O*, 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹² Agnieszka Kościańska, *Sex on Equal Terms? Polish Sexology on Women's Emancipation and "Good Sex" from the 1970s to the Present*, in: *Sexualities* 19, no. 1–2 (February 1, 2016): 236–256; Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989*, Cambridge 2018.

should be seen as a sort of “nature’s reward” for procreation.¹³ Contrary to the overall prudish and desexualized public sphere in Soviet Latvia and Lithuania¹⁴, Zālītis argued that sexual pleasure was a good thing, that it can be achieved without or besides penetration by oral or manual stimulation, and that it was something that people should seek with proper techniques.¹⁵ This was certainly a “revolutionary” aspect of the book, knowing that in 1977, just four years before the publication of *Mīlestības vārdā*, the Supreme Court of the Latvian SSR discussed imposing harsher sentences for “perverted” and “cynical” forms of intercourse, meaning oral and anal sex, in the instances of rape and the so-called sodomy.¹⁶ Zālītis, however, dared to claim that oral intercourse is “acceptable, if pleasurable for both partners”¹⁷ and even carefully pointed out that anus is also an erogenous zone.¹⁸ He discussed sexual intercourse in great detail, giving advice on how to achieve orgasm for women (the main role in achieving this was given to man’s proper sexual technique and the knowledge of different “types” of women) and providing general advice on how to reach satisfaction in a marital relationship. All of this led to Zālītis being somewhat mythologized in post-socialist Latvia, praised in the popular press as the pioneer of sexual education, a “legendary sexologist” and a “sex guru”,¹⁹ a catalyst of sexual liberalization and even system change in the Baltic states.²⁰

While in some ways “revolutionary”, the book however also reproduced many of the predominant Soviet ideological clichés regarding sexuality. First of all, it entrenched a moralistic notion that sexuality can only legitimately appear in the context of marriage and exalted Soviet “love”, which above all, meant the sacrifice of individual desires for the common good.²¹ A big part of the book was dedicated to the explanation of the dangers of sex before or outside marriage, which was said to irreparably damage the psyche of young people, women in particular. Secondly, Zālītis, in line with Soviet propaganda requirements, associated the dangers of “free love” with the degenerate Western capitalist world, where “the excesses of sexual revolution are raging”, allegedly resulting in “homosexuality, sadism and Venereal

¹³ Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 179.

¹⁴ Vita Zelče, Dažas 60. Gadu (Re)Konstrukcijas (Some (Re)Constructions of the 1960s), in: Latvijas Arhīvi 3 (2003): 106–124; Dalia Marcinkevičienė, Romantinė Meilė Kaip (Sovietinė) Socialinė Politika (Romantic Love as a (Soviet) Social Policy), in: Colloquia 21 (2009): 96–113; Tomas Vaiseta, “Miegančių Šunų Žadinimas”: Ar Sovietų Lietuvoje Vyko Tylioji Seksualizacija? (“Waking the Sleeping Dogs”: Was There a Quiet Sexualisation of Culture in Soviet Lithuania?), in: Acta Academiae Artium Vilmensis 95 (2019): 229–253.

¹⁵ Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 177–179.

¹⁶ Rustam Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956–91. A Different History*, Manchester 2021, 161f.

¹⁷ Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 226.

¹⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁹ Bernāts, Padomju Laikā Par Seksu Nerunāja.

²⁰ Jonathan Bousfield, In the Name of Love: The Story behind the Erotic Latvian Self-Help Guide That Brought Sex to the USSR, in: The Calvert Journal, October 19, 2021, URL: <<https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/13203/soviet-latvia-sex-manual-jaanis-zaaliitis>>.

²¹ Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev’s Russia*, New York 2007; Klumbys and Vaiseta, Mažasis O.

diseases”.²² It was crucial therefore to prevent the influence of the Western sexual revolution among the Soviet youths, by spreading appropriate Communist sexual education. Finally, and what will be the main object of analysis in this essay, Zālītis reproduced a patriarchal and heteronormative understanding of sexuality and gender difference, insisting (despite the declarative support for the Soviet women’s emancipation) that hierarchical gender differences were of outmost importance in facilitating healthy desire and a stable marriage, and that sexuality could be strictly divided into “normal”, meaning leading towards procreation, and “perverse”.

But who was Zālītis and how did this book come into being? Born in the Brantu parish in northern Latvia in 1933, Jānis Zālītis was deported as a teenager with his family to Southwestern Siberia, Soviet Russia. There, after finishing high school, he entered the Tomsk State Medical Institute and finished medical studies, specializing in oncology. According to his own autobiographical stories, as he told them to journalists in post-socialist Latvia, while studying in Tomsk he got familiar with psychoanalysis, hypnosis, and also got interested in shamanic practices of the indigenous Siberian peoples. Zālītis returned to Latvia in 1961 and started working as a doctor oncologist in Riga.²³ He was interested in alternative treatments for cancer patients, and used hypnotherapy to treat various ailments and improve personality. Zālītis’s engagement with sexology was prompted by his oncological practice, as he started believing that the lack of satisfaction in sexual life, especially for women, might be a cause for cancer.²⁴ Eventually he became a lecturer at the Latvian SSR Knowledge Society, the local branch of the all-union propaganda and education organization “Knowledge”. He also published brochures for lecturers on topics such as alcoholism, cancer prevention, hypnosis, and, significantly, family life and sexuality (1973), which would become the background for his famous book.²⁵ The writing and eventual publication of *Mīlestības vārdā* was prompted by the increasing concern of the Soviet Latvian authorities with the spread of venereal diseases and the declining demographic situation, which, in 1980, resulted in a special decree urging the promotion and distribution of literature on marriage and family life.²⁶

²² Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 38. Curiously enough, Zālītis described a performance by the American rock singer Alice Cooper as one of the examples of the Western descend into sadism and degeneration, see p. 86f. He also included a long and phantasmatic description of the “sexual abscess“ in the center of Amsterdam, where prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, pedophilia, zoophilia, and all sorts of other degeneracies and perversions were allegedly present on every street corner: *ibid.*, 180f.

²³ Bernāts, Padomju Laikā Par Seksu Nerunāja.

²⁴ Ilze Vitola, *Mīlestības Vārdā*. *Izcilais 21. Gadsimta Cilvēks Dr. Jānis Zālītis* (In the Name of Love. The Outstanding Man of the 21st Century, Dr. Jānis Zālītis, in: *La. Lv*, May 10, 2013, URL: <<https://www.la.lv/milestibas-varda-izcilais-21-gadsimta-cilveks-dr-janis-zalitis%E2%80%A9-2>>.

²⁵ Lipša, *Silencing Sex Education in Soviet Latvia*, 107f.; Zalytis, *Meilēs Vardu*, 293.

²⁶ Lipša, *Silencing Sex Education in Soviet Latvia*, 109.

The Latvian SSR did not have a strong tradition of sex research or education, unlike the socialist countries of Central Europe.²⁷ Zālītis was therefore largely a self-educated sexologist, who, besides from his experience as a physician, relied on a bibliography consisting of books of Russian scholars and educators, translated works from “friendly” socialist nations, such as the Polish Kazimierz Imieliński and the GDR author Rudolf Neubert²⁸, and the Western books available at the special libraries, which included, among others, the classic American sexological works by Alfred Kinsey, William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson.²⁹ Zālītis, however, criticized Western scholarship for ignoring morality and the question of love³⁰, and, following the ideological requirements, paid more than sufficient lip service to the canonical Communist authors, such as Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and Anton Makarenko. Over contemporary authors from other socialist countries Zālītis much preferred the Swiss sexologist, social reformist and eugenicist August Forel (1848-1913), whose book *Die sexuelle Frage. Eine naturwissenschaftliche, psychologische, hygienische und soziologische Studie für Gebildete* (1907) was published in interwar Latvia, and whom he often quoted extensively, especially on the issues of morality.³¹ All in all, with his book Zālītis aimed to establish a uniquely Soviet Latvian sexological perspective, which would reflect the local “customs, traditions, temperament, social structure, scientific worldview, etc.”³²

The particular local “Latvian” approach to sexual education that Zālītis aimed to develop resulted in an interesting and often contradictory amalgam of different perspectives to the issues of the intimate life. This can be seen, for example, in how he dealt with the question of masturbation, which had been an obsession of sexual educators in the West since the end of the 18th century.³³ On the one hand, his approach was rather similar to that of his contemporary Imieliński, as Zālītis believed that masturbation (onanism) does not cause illness and is not harmful in itself, but can be detrimental because of the guilt and various superstitions surrounding masturbation.³⁴ Nevertheless, he oscillated between contradictory claims throughout the book. First, Zālītis argued that sexual education should aim to prevent

²⁷ Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989*, Cambridge 2018; Agnieszka Kościańska, *To See a Moose: The History of Polish Sex Education*, New York/Oxford 2021; Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR*, Cambridge/New York 2011.

²⁸ Vita Zelče notes that the books from the GDR, which were chosen to be translated in the Soviet Union were from the least progressive branch of sexual education tradition, with strong moralistic undertones, see Zelče, *Dažas* 60.

²⁹ Zalytis, *Meilēs Vardu*, 293.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 212f..

³² *Ibid.*, 39.

³³ Kościańska, *To See a Moose*, 53.

³⁴ Zalytis, *Meilēs Vardu*, 102f.; see for comparison: Kazimeras Imelinskis, *Lytinio Gyvenimo Psichohigiena*, Vilnius 1983, 38–43.

onanism,³⁵ then claimed it to be harmless or even beneficial in particular circumstances,³⁶ then argued that only the guilt surrounding masturbation might be harmful (like Imieliński),³⁷ and, finally, still listed it among “sexual perversions” and warned the readers that it might lead to other deviances, such as homosexuality:

*Literature, which claims that onanism is an absolutely natural and harmless phenomenon, can sexually disorient young people. It is known that onanism is quite widely spread among young and unmarried men. <> Teenagers masturbate without even being ashamed of each other. It is not harmful to their health or future sexual potency, maybe even on the contrary. However, in this instance, a desire to help each other might arise, which might lead the young men to a situation, which might orient them towards homosexuality.*³⁸

When dealing with the question of masturbation, Zālītis dithered whether to exonerate masturbation fully, and claim it to be normal and healthy, or rather stay with the prevalent Soviet perception that it is an asocial activity, and might lead to homosexuality.³⁹ Similar indecisiveness characterizes many of his other arguments. Overall, it can be said that in *Mīlestības vārdā* Zālītis built his own contradictory and inconsistent theory of sexuality, which was on the surface compatible with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, did not diverge radically from the generally acceptable sexological views in other Eastern European countries, but also reflected the particular traditionalist gender and sexual norms of Soviet Latvian society and, at times, his own whims of creative inspiration.

Zālītis explained human sexuality from a perspective of evolutionary psychology, arguing that with the rise of private property, sexual relations became more strictly controlled and a “taboo” was enforced, which allowed for the growth of more complicated feelings and forms of sexual co-habitation. While the concept of taboo is mostly associated with the work of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis, Zālītis, in line with the official Soviet doctrine, distanced himself from Freud repeatedly.⁴⁰ Yet, as can also be seen in the attached excerpt from *Mīlestības vārdā*, he elaborated a theory of taboo, which, at its core, aimed to explain human sexuality and love in a psychoanalytic manner, as arising from conflicting and suppressed inner wishes, from a combination of prohibition and desire. While for Freud taboo is a much broader

³⁵ Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 63.

³⁶ Ibid., 102f.

³⁷ Ibid., 104.

³⁸ Ibid., 84.

³⁹ Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia*, 59.

⁴⁰ Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 60, 74. Curiously enough, while renouncing Freud, Zālītis managed to put the word “taboo” in Lenin’s mouth, and claimed that in the famous “water glass theory” conversation with Klara Cetkin Lenin was emphasizing the importance of sexual taboos in enhancing the true freedom in love, see Zalytis, 41.

concept, which might explain certain seemingly irrational behaviors or obsessive thoughts,⁴¹ for Zālītis taboo became merely a synonym for the restriction of sexual desire enforced by society. The main such taboo in a communist society, he proposed, is (or should be) the prohibition to have sexual intercourse without love. He blamed Freudian psychoanalysis for seeing libido as a force that cannot be contained and therefore for “justifying early, free (animalistic) sexual relations, even perversions”.⁴² For Zālītis, the Soviet morality dictated that if sexual desire appears outside the framework of marital love, it should be sublimated in art, sport, science and work – otherwise it might result in excesses and deviances. Sublimation and taboo might help to achieve a higher stage of love by strengthening, as he explained in a biological language, following the work of the Russian- Soviet scientist Alexei Ukhtomsky, the “dominant of love” in the persons’ brain.⁴³

In *Mīlestības vārdā* Zālītis combined his pseudo-psychoanalytic theory of taboo with a purely biological model of sexual desire. Desire for him was closely aligned with instinct, which, in turn, was deemed purely heterosexual, produced by the natural attraction of the human male to the human female. For Zālītis, desire was the direct result, in a biological sense, of what he called “relishers”.⁴⁴ The term “relisher” was used by Zālītis to refer to a wide range of various chemical, visual, audible and other signals, as well as certain behaviors, etc., which are exhibited by animals during mating in order to attract a mate of the opposite sex. Zālītis believed that among the human species, only human *females* have what he called “relishers”. In the human species, he proposed, the only biological “relisher” is the “swollen, red, wet female genitals with their specific smell”,⁴⁵ but the female breasts can also act as a “relisher”.⁴⁶ All of this implied that human females have a special task to rouse, enhance, and also control and tame the sexual desires of the human male – the very essence of femininity for Zālītis was women’s special talent to both “seduce and prohibit”.⁴⁷

Naturally, women had to take proper care of their body – their “relishers” – and always appear pretty, clean, and neat around men. If necessary, women might even have to alter their bodies, Zālītis argued, in order to please their husbands:

One couple was not able to reach a complete satisfaction during the sexual intercourse. Because of that, the husband risked impotence. It appeared later, that the reason was the breasts of the wife, which were very unimpressive. This underdeveloped relisher was fixed by the scholar V. Kalnbērzs – in our Republic such surgeries are accessible

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, London/New York 2001.

⁴² Zalytis, *Meilēs Vardu*, 111.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁴ The term is explained as derived from the English word “relish” with no other reference, *ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

to any woman at the Institute for Orthopedics and Traumatology as well as other clinics. Afterwards, the man became very active in sexual life; even at the doctor's office he was praising the beautiful breasts of his wife and claimed to have dropped any thought of other women, as before he had started unconsciously longing for what his wife was missing.⁴⁸

While on the one hand it fell on women's shoulders to ensure that men stay attracted to them, especially in marriage, on the other hand it was also their responsibility to control the untamed sexual desires in men, especially before the marriage. By staying chaste, proud, and refusing men's sexual advances (a young woman has to stay proud "like a queen" Zālītis argued repeatedly), women could cultivate men, draw out more tender feelings from them, thus paving the way for the proper Soviet love to arise.

In insisting that only women's bodies have "relishers", *Mīlestības vārdā* followed the long tradition of representing women as closer to nature than men. As the anthropologist Sherry Ortner has famously argued, due to their reproductive and child-rearing functions women historically have been seen across different cultures as more animalistic, more bound to the "species life" of humans, less civilized than men.⁴⁹ Due to this alleged rootedness in nature, women were also given the symbolic role of a mediator, a converter from nature to culture, from raw to cooked, argued Ortner, as in the case of cooking food and socializing children. We can see the same patriarchal logic, which relegates women to an inferior – less civilized – position, play out in Zālītis's argumentation. While women are somehow more animalistic in his theory, with their bodies having the natural (biological, chemical?) power of arousing sexual desire, they are also portrayed as, seemingly paradoxically, more moral and chaste than men, and therefore as having the obligation to enforce the "taboo". It is a woman's task to control man's natural desires and create the conditions for a stable and long-lasting marriage, as if converting the primitive male urges to the realm of culture.⁵⁰

Interestingly, while women were seen in *Mīlestības vārdā* as a biological source of sexual desire, they were not seen as agents of desire. Zālītis emphasized throughout the book that women have much lower levels of libido than men and do not experience their sexuality "consciously". "Conscious sexuality is characteristic to very few girls and it is only related to curiosity", he argued.⁵¹ Unlike boys, who very consciously experience sexual urges, pubescent girls do not have a period of enhanced sexuality, he explained, their sexual needs are experienced only on an unconscious level and are always already "as if covered by a veil of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁹ Sherry B. Ortner, *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?*, in: *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1972): 5–31.

⁵⁰ Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 34–36.

⁵¹ Ibid., 175.

emotion”.⁵² He promoted an idea that male and female sexual make-up is so different that for “normal” girls sex is not very interesting or important:

*Conscious and high sexuality in girls only appears in the instances of perversion, especially, when sex life is started very early. Sometimes it might cause nymphomania or other psychological disease.*⁵³

The same could also be said about adult women:

*A normal woman, even as an adult, does not have a phase of openly enhanced sexuality. Even during the period of “hormonal storms” her sexuality is covered with emotion, and therefore hidden, unconscious. <> A healthy woman does not feel sexuality without love. Therefore, a hand of a stranger (gynecologist, unloved man, etc.) cannot excite the woman even when it touches the most intimate erogenous zones, while only a thought about the touch of her lovers’ hands might provoke a very pleasant exhilaration.*⁵⁴

A normal and healthy woman was therefore only able to experience sexual feelings in the context of romantic love, while desire, disconnected from love, was a clear sign of perversion.

In contrast, Zālītis believed that high sexual urges in men, independently from any romantic feelings, were completely normal due to their different hormonal make up.⁵⁵ In fact, men were subject to such strong desires, that even forcing a woman to have an intercourse against her will should be seen as “natural and corresponding to the heightened sexuality phase”.⁵⁶ Only strong-willed individuals were able to stop themselves from raping a woman, sometimes even at the cost of their health, if the situation suggested that she might be open to his advances:

*Every girl should know what might happen, if late at night she would drive back home with a man and would stay alone with him. This has always been, and will always be, as long as humanity exists. In such circumstances (however weirdly it might sound) only a man in love might be able to control himself, even if his attraction to his lover is many times stronger. If such situations occur often, a man in love might even get sick (inflammation of the prostate gland, neurosis, etc.). <> The man, described by the young woman above, is a criminal in the actual sense of this word. But what about the young woman herself?*⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid., 26.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁵ For a critique of the notion of the clean differentiation between female and male hormones, and the socially constructed nature of the science of gendering the human body, see Nelly Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archaeology of Sex Hormones*, London 1994.

⁵⁶ Zalytis, Meilès Vardu, 133.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Zālītis suggested that the responsibility to avoid rape falls, at least partially, in the hands of a woman, who should be careful not to “provoke” a man.⁵⁸ While rape was seen as immoral and criminal for men too, it was still the natural role of the female sex to enforce the social norm, the “taboo”, and control man’s desire – the woman should always know better and avoid situations and behaviors, which might lead to her being raped.

Different levels of sexual desire and the ability to feel sexuality “consciously”, were just one part of the fundamental difference between women and men for Zālītis. In fact, the conceptualization and elaboration of the opposition between femininity and masculinity permeated the whole book, since Zālītis believed that psychological and behavioral differences between women and men are key to sexual attraction and satisfaction, healthy marital life, and psychologically stable children. He argued that an essential part of sexual education is teaching children how to stick to the rules of behavior appropriate to their sex – how to be proper boys and girls.⁵⁹ While he could not completely avoid the programmatic and brief praise of the gender equality and women’s emancipation achieved by the Soviet Union, Zālītis spent much more time elaborating on the dangers of what he called the “vulgarization of women’s emancipation”⁶⁰, which resulted in “masculinization” of women and “feminization” of men.⁶¹ Zālītis warned:

Without denying the good aspects of emancipation, it seems worrying that a woman, whose true call is to bring the new generation to this world, should sit at the wheel of a tractor, that is, that she gains a specialization, which is harmful to the normal course of pregnancy, not to speak of professions, which are absolutely incompatible with raising children (differently from a father, a mother is indispensable here). <> It is worrying also that a woman, due to her desire to “catch up” with a man, takes over also his weaknesses and vices (in the last ten years the number of female chronic alcoholic has increased five-fold, not to speak of smoking women). Women’s behavior, clothing and everything related to fashion (the exterior form), got masculinized around the mid-twentieth century. <> But the content reflects the form, and the form influences the content!⁶²

Zālītis worried, that the “masculinization” of women, that is, the loss of what he understood as specifically feminine traits – modesty, pride, elegance – will result in weakening sexual desire between the sexes, because desire is “the attraction between the opposite poles”.⁶³ Woman’s “masculinization” would further lead also to the “feminization” of men, and obstruct the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁹ The book is filled with different versions of this argument, but for the most concise example see *ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 69–73.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 72.

development of a sexual relationship based on true love. Furthermore, it could lead to sexual perversions, argued Zālītis, because “as the research shows, a rude and hostile woman always also has sexual deviances, and one influences the other.”⁶⁴ Women’s alleged loss of femininity under socialism therefore came to stand in *Mīlestības vārdā* as one of the core problems of contemporary marriages, and quite a fundamental social problem in general, which needed an urgent intervention of sexual educators like himself, who could teach girls and women how to be feminine again.

While such discourse might seem contradictory to the official Communist proclamations of gender equality, *Mīlestības vārdā* is a rather representative example of the rise of the sexual complementarity paradigm in socialist Eastern European countries starting with the 1970s. As Agnieszka Kościańska has shown, the two widely read and respected Polish sexologists of this period, Michalina Wislocka and Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz, promoted very similar views as to what leads to successful marriages and satisfying sex life. “Proper” gender roles were seen as contributing to marital harmony, while women’s emancipation, their achievement of positions of independence, power, and influence, were seen as threatening the social order and harming individual happiness.⁶⁵ Zālītis took the critique of “masculinization” one step further yet, arguing that the “reversal of psychological roles”⁶⁶ in the family, namely when the wife takes up the dominating position while the husband is weak and submissive, results not only in the lack of sexual satisfaction of such a couple, but also in abnormal sexual behavior of children of such families.⁶⁷ In short, the divergence from the strictly defined gender roles results in social chaos and unhappiness and also damages the future generations.

Sexual desire for Zālītis was simultaneously very straightforwardly derived from biological impulses, yet also a creation of cultural taboos and a matter of socialization and education. Similarly, strictly defined gender roles – proper femininity and masculinity – for him were simultaneously natural, organic, yet also requiring a lot of will-power and proper “sexual orienting” by parents and teachers. This conceptual confusion over the questions of gender and sexuality in a broader sense was especially clear in Zālītis’s discussion of homosexuality. In line with his Pavlovian behaviorist argumentation, he argued that since homosexuality “does not exist among animals” it must be a purely human problem, related to upbringing and education, and therefore, must certainly be mutable – it could be “healed”, for example, with hypnosis.⁶⁸ Among the reasons for the development of homosexual attraction, he listed seduction by an older “pederast”, growing up in an incomplete family and therefore lacking a proper same-sex role-model, and finally, masturbation, which might lead to situations of same-

⁶⁴ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁵ Kościańska, *Sex on Equal Terms*, 244–247.

⁶⁶ Zalytis, *Meilēs Vardu*, 89.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 33f..

⁶⁸ Ibid., 82.

sex intimacy.⁶⁹ Next to the reasons connected to bad socialization, Zālītis added that sometimes homosexuality might be inborn, or “constitutive”⁷⁰, in which case it appears with some signs of gender inversion:

Sometimes such people quite openly hold themselves to be of the opposite sex, they wear the clothes and do the jobs of the opposite sex. Such men like to bake and cook, take care of children, they choose feminine professions. Usually they grow long hair, even their clothing is feminine. Lesbians, on the other hand, like to dress in an overtly masculine way, cut their hair short, pick masculine professions, etc. <> We would not have to mention any of this, if these phenomena did not hide the weakening feelings of love: a feminized man (which is similar to latent homosexuality) could never feel such a passionate attraction to a woman as a normal man. The same can be said about women. Therefore, let us not insist that a man should take care of the household. Of course, a woman might need some masculine help at home, but it is crucial to avoid such activities, which might instigate homosexual tendencies. A man can cook a dinner once in a while, but he should also be able to fix a broken sink.⁷¹

As it is clear from the excerpt above, while Zālītis thought that “constitutive” homosexuals exhibit the appearance and behaviors characteristic of the opposite sex, it was also crucial to avoid the socio-cultural “feminization” of men and “masculinization” of women, which might, in turn, lead to homosexuality. His discussion of the dangers of homosexuality also shows just how deeply entwined was his notion of sexual “normality” with the notion of gendered “normality”.

As the anthropologist Gayle Rubin has argued, most of the discourses regulating sex, despite their ideological, political or religious leaning, tend to establish a hierarchy between “good” and “bad” sexuality and delimit only a small area of sexual leanings and behaviors as safe, healthy, moral, politically desirable, etc.⁷² This tendency is often accompanied by what she called a “domino theory of sexual peril”, namely, the perception that once one of the boundaries delimiting the area of the “good” sex is broken, the deviances will lead to other deviances, eventually descending to the chaos of unspeakable perversions. This “domino model” is characteristic to Zālītis’s discussion of various sexual perversions (in line with the predominant trend in Soviet sexology, he paid a lot of attention to the “pathological” aspects of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 82–84.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 82.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Gayle Rubin, *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*, in: *Lesbian & Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, New York 1993, 3–44. Rubin’s article was originally published in 1984, as a reaction to what she perceived as a conservative turn in the U.S. culture and politics.

human sexuality).⁷³ He explicitly connected his warning against “masculinization” and “feminization” of women and men, respectively, with the threat of homosexuality, without clarifying the causal relationship between the two. Similar proximity and confusing causality connected also other deviances – onanism might lead to homosexuality, bisexuality was connected with sadism, onanism might also lead to exhibitionism, excessive sexuality (especially in women) leads to erotomania, which then leads to indiscriminate choice of objects for sexual satisfaction, which then leads to zoophilia, fetishism, obsessive thoughts, and other sexual deviances.⁷⁴ Interestingly, the domino theory extended also to other transgressions of the rules of Soviet morality – alcoholism, smoking and the use of drugs was often indicated by Zālītis as important reasons of sexual deviance, as was listening to pop or rock music, rhythmic dancing, and even visiting Church.⁷⁵

Mīlestības vārdā certainly contributed to a more open conversation regarding sexual pleasure in marriage in late Soviet Latvia and Lithuania, and carved a space for itself in people’s memories of the period.⁷⁶ The book, however, also created a true obstacle race for those wishing to still live “morally” while enjoying their intimate lives, and very strictly defined the limits of “normal” sexual and gendered behavior. Zālītis discussed at length the techniques which a married couple might employ to help a woman to achieve orgasm, yet he did not forget to emphasize the constant presence of various dangers to the physical and psychological wellbeing and moral purity, which lurk in the proximity of any sexual act. A slight departure from the prescribed rules of appropriate gender role, a failure to contain sexual desire, or a mistaken choice of the object of affection could easily lead, according to Zālītis, to trauma, psychiatric disease, moral degradation, suicide, even societal collapse. While the book was supposed to make sex more enjoyable by presenting it in the objective light of scientific discoveries and removing the superstitions and taboos, which cover it in religious and bourgeois contexts, it securely maintained and entrenched the image of sexuality as a potentially disruptive and dark force, which must be tamed by Communist morality, experienced only by appropriately gendered individuals, and strictly be confined to a loving marriage. Today *Mīlestības vārdā* can be read as a reflection of the patriarchal and heteronormative sexual culture of the late Soviet Baltic societies, covered by a thin layer of the socialist gender equality discourse and scientific pretenses. Due to its ongoing cultural importance, however, it is also a text that needs a critical and creative rereading, in order to better understand the contemporary post-socialist views on sexuality and gender.

⁷³ Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago 2001, 240.

⁷⁴ Zalytis, Meilēs Vardu, 84–99.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷⁶ Klumbys and Vaiseta, *Mažasis O*, 217.

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Extract from Janis Zalytis: *Meilės Vardu* (Lithuanian Translation by Renata Zajančauskaitė and Visvaldas Bronušas 1984) [Scan and English Translation by Rasa Navickaitė], in: *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte*, 2023, URL: <https://www.europa.clio-online.de/quelle/id/q63-78942>.