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(Editors)

## **CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF VALUES**



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## Contents

<b>Foreword</b> ( <i>Anca-Diana Bibiri</i> ) .....	9
--	---

### Plenary Conference

Human Enhancement: tehnologie versus teologie. Repere pentru o evaluare interdisciplinară a valorilor și posibilităților de devenire a umanului prin cunoaștere [Human Enhancement: Technology versus Theology. Landmarks for the Interdisciplinarity Evaluation of Human Values a Potential of Becoming Through Knowledge]

<b>Pr. Andrei-Răzvan Ionescu</b> .....	21
--	----

### Philology

The Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Linguistics. Case Study: Analysis of Linguistic Phenomena in the Novel *Ion* by Liviu Rebreanu

<b>Cristina Bleorțu</b> .....	35
-------------------------------	----

Traducerea automată a literaturii. O himeră încă vie? [Automatic Translation of Literature: A Still Living Chimera?]

<b>Alexandra Ilie</b> .....	51
-----------------------------	----

Kitsch. The Control and Faking of Aesthetic Value

<b>Daniela Petroșel</b> .....	77
-------------------------------	----

Valori perene în predarea romanisticii în spațiul universitar românesc [Perennial Values in Teaching Romance Studies in Romanian Universities]

<b>Mihaela Secieru</b> .....	93
------------------------------	----

Authentic vs. Pseudo Values

<b>Paula-Andreea Onofrei</b> .....	111
------------------------------------	-----

Medical Humanities Approached Through a Feminist Lens

<b>Laura Ioana Leon</b> .....	127
-------------------------------	-----

Explorări teoretice și suprapuneri terminologice. Romanul, obiect de reflecție și prim suport al teoriei genurilor [Theoretical Explorations and Terminological Overlaps. The Novel, as Object of Reflection and the First Support of the Genre Theory]

<b>Alexandra Olteanu</b> .....	141
--------------------------------	-----

Spectrele filiațiilor literare. Portrete ale generațiilor – Mircea Ivănescu și Radu Vancu [The Specters of Literary Filiations. Portraits of Generations – Mircea Ivănescu and Radu Vancu]	
<b>Teodora Iurusiuc</b> .....	165
Memoria comunismului în <i>Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal de Ion D. Sîrbu</i> [The Memory of Communism in Ion D. Sîrbu's <i>Journal of a Journalist without a Journal</i> ]	
<b>Oana-Elena Nechita</b> .....	181
Language in the Church: Orthodox Religious Terminology in Polish and the Role of Translations in Establishing Lexical Norms	
<b>Irina-Marinela Deftu</b> .....	201
<b>History &amp; Theology</b>	
<i>Non naturalibus desiderii, sed censibus aestimentur.</i> Piața romană de legume și fructe [ <i>Non naturalibus desiderii, sed censibus aestimentur.</i> The Roman Vegetable and Fruit Market]	
<b>Iulia Dumitrache</b> .....	219
Un posibil clivaj între teoria asupra stilului și aplicarea acesteia în cazul Fericitului Augustin? Pluralitatea de stiluri în operele acestuia [A Possible Split Between the Theory of Style and Its Application in the Case of Augustine? The Plurality of Styles in Augustine's Works]	
<b>Pr. Liviu Petcu</b> .....	249
Conflicting Values during the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598): Loyalty to the King and Loyalty to God	
<b>Andrei Constantin Sălăvăstru</b> .....	261
Polemici teologice în <i>Praefatio paraenetica</i> a lui John Pearson (1613-1686) [Theological Polemics in <i>Praefatio paraenetica</i> by John Pearson (1613-1686)]	
<b>Constantin Răchită</b> .....	281
Moartea – o preocupare a vieții cotidiene în Iași veacului al XVIII-lea [Death – a Preoccupation of Everyday Life in the 18 <sup>th</sup> Century Iași]	
<b>Mihai-Bogdan Atanasiu</b> .....	301

## Economics

The Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Business as a Value-Creating Tool: Analysis on the Case of SMEs in Romania <b>Valentina Diana Rusu &amp; Angela Roman</b> .....	317
Evaluation of Hospital Financing in Romania: A Comparative Analysis pre- and post-Pandemic COVID-19 <b>Mihai-Vasile Pruteanu &amp; Alina Moroşanu</b> .....	337
Green Jobs, Green Skills and Green Human Resource Management. An Analysis of Current Trends <b>Silvia-Maria Carp &amp; Ana-Maria Bercu</b> .....	367
Is Security a Timeless Value? An Insight from International Relations <b>Andreea-Cosmina Foca &amp; Oana-Maria Cozma</b> .....	381

# Medical Humanities Approached Through a Feminist Lens

LAURA IOANA LEON\*

**Abstract:** *Medical Humanities is still an insufficiently explored territory in our country. Medical schools in Romania do not offer a comprehensive program of study for medical students that would enable them to become familiarized with the most effective techniques that are meant to endow them with some interdisciplinary skills nowadays regarded as mandatory when working in healthcare settings. Studies have shown that medical students who study topics related to Medical Humanities are likely to develop better communication skills with their future patients, become better observers and ultimately be more empathetic towards their patients. Studies that have been carried out throughout the years, at all prestigious medical schools around the world, have shown the importance of introducing such topics in the academic curricula. At the “Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy” Iași such attempts to discuss topics related to Medical Humanities are no longer that new. Our medical students already have some knowledge of medicine and literature (the power of storytelling) and understand the importance of cultural training as part of their foreign language classes. A more recent experiment had in view the presentation of feminist theories and how they were applied to some literary works, movies and even women’s magazines. Such an experiment enabled our students to understand the roots of discrimination and what it is like to live at the margin, constantly being the unheard voice. Likewise, being able to detect a feminist narrative showed them how to represent, understand and interpret the patriarchal principles that have challenged women for such a long time. Though most of the time feminist theories are discussed in medical schools about the unprivileged position a female health career may have in the system, our approach mainly has in view to draw our students’ attention towards how literature and cultural constructs may reflect gender inequality in our society.*

**Keywords:** *Medical Humanities; Foreign language teaching; Feminism; Medical students; Medicine and literature.*

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It is very hard to talk about the subject of medical humanities as a topic to study at Romanian medical schools as this discipline has not been officially introduced in the academic curricula of Romanian universities. Some attempts have taken place in this respect, but we are far from having a coherent approach to this topic that has proven its effectiveness throughout the six decades since the first courses on medicine and literature were delivered. Nevertheless, at least during the last two decades, Romanian medical schools have become more open to the idea of studying interdisciplinary topics, realising that the medical profession is more than pure medical knowledge, and the doctor-patient relationship, in an era when chronic diseases are more prevalent (understanding here that patients need to develop strong relationships with their doctors, as a chronic disease would imply frequent contact, advice and therapy). In an attempt to explore the benefits of Medical Humanities in medical students' training, Jane Macnaughton stated: *It is important to clarify the context—that of medical education which aims at producing the “good doctor”. What are the attributes of a good doctor? It is clear that doctors need to understand their patients through scientific knowledge of how the body works and to appreciate how scientific research can help them to make decisions about the best treatment for their patients. However, this scientific approach needs to be modified in the clinical situation when dealing with the individual patient. A “humane” doctor is required, with the understanding, assisted by interpretative ability and insight, and governed by ethical sensitivity, to apply this scientific evidence and skills to the individual patient. The good doctor must also develop a sensitivity in her dealings with patients which is based on a knowledge of herself and her values and imaginative insight into the problems and contexts of patients' lives. Doctors need then to be able to assimilate the scientific knowledge of disease and treatments with the understanding of the individual patient and to exercise good clinical judgment as to what might be of benefit to this patient with this particular problem at this point in his life<sup>1</sup>. Thus, during the last two decades, we have witnessed a greater emphasis on the need to develop students' communication skills, and the necessity to see the patient as a unique individuality that needs to be seen in*

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<sup>1</sup> J. Macnaughton, “The humanities in medical education: context, outcomes and structures”, *J Med Ethics: Medical Humanities*, 26, 2000, pp. 23-30.



their context. Understanding the idea of context meant that medical students had to be able to realize the importance of *culture* in a broader sense, as all our health choices are culturally dictated. In the absence of an academic curriculum that would include a coherent plan that would approach the topic of Medical Humanities, foreign language teachers soon came to realize that part of this plan could be achieved by them. My paper will refer to my own experience as an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teacher working with medical students in their first two years of academic training. The case of the English language is by far different from that of the other foreign languages (French and German) that are usually taught in a medical school. Today most of the medical students who choose to study English at the academic level have a high level of proficiency in the English language (unlike those who choose to study German or French – often they choose beginners' groups which try to reach the A1-A2 level), these allowing teachers to deal with more complex things than the mere study of specialized vocabulary. Most of the time this remains the preoccupation of a teacher in charge of the English seminars where students may learn more about the particularities of the medical and academic vocabulary. This paper aims to show how the English courses at the "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iași, have become more oriented towards interdisciplinary topics meant to broaden medical students' horizons. This topic is going to address the problem of dealing with notions related to feminism and feminist theories, as part of a larger training approach to the topic of Medical Humanities. As I am going to show how these feminist elements are going to be dealt with, I will also try to explain how they are integrated into more complex discussions on the relationship between language and culture, as culture is part of foreign language teaching and learning.

I should also state from the very beginning that feminism as such, as it is dealt with at other US or Western medical schools, as part of students' training in Medical Schools, may be very different from our approach which is still very new in our context, and, as expected, tends to have significance only if it applies to our context that may be very different from what they have in the US or Western Europe. In the US medical system, for instance, much of the emphasis on feminism as part of the training in Medical Humanities deals with the male dominance in leading positions in the

healthcare system, and female doctors being overlooked by the system. I doubt this applies to the Romanian system and I do believe that by the time we get to discuss such topics, we have to become familiarized with more basic notions that would allow our students to understand what the feminist movement is about. There are no such pre-graduate courses that would explain such things to our students, therefore, at the academic level, we can try to deal with such topics that would probably be better perceived, considering a student's level of understanding in college. In 2018, *A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* published a special issue devoted to *Feminism and Medical Humanities*, inviting several scholars, from different disciplines and countries to describe the relationship between Feminism and Medical Humanities. The idea is the same, depending upon the context, Feminism is endowed with other particularities: *as editors of this special issue, we encouraged authors to articulate a wide range of responses to these debates. Since we are located on two different continents (Foster in the US and Funke in the UK), we are well aware that developments in the medical humanities have taken different shapes across the Atlantic: in the US, programmes are based largely on medical education, while in the UK there has been a move towards a more expansive vision of the field, as we shall explore. Given the international remit of the journal, Feminist Encounters, we were interested in seeing how international contributors would engage with these developments. When working with the authors, who are located in Canada, Finland, the UK, and South Africa, we stressed that we were not looking for a specific definition of the medical humanities. We did, however, ask them to discuss how their feminist scholarship resonated with current debates in and about the field. This Introduction identifies some of the key ways in which the authors of the first seven articles in this issue articulate their feminist encounters with the medical humanities*<sup>2</sup>. Judith Butler's book, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* emphasized the same idea in 1999, the political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination. The notion of universal patriarchy has been widely criticized in recent years for its failure to

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<sup>2</sup> S. L. Foster and J. Funke, "Feminist Encounters with the Medical Humanities. Feminist Encounters", *A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 2(2), 2018, p. 14.

*account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists*<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, I believe it is important to make our students aware of the general ideas related to the feminist movement and women's oppression and, once they understand the basic notions, they may seek various contexts and interpretations that should always be judged in their contexts.

Thus, regardless of the academic environment, it has become increasingly important to have students become familiarized with some of the main concepts of feminism. By historically tracing those aspects, young people may automatically begin to notice how ideas of the past still hold relevance today and have persistently shaped lines of thought in time. Feminist criticism provides countless significant names, but for students whose fields of interest lie outside the philological/literary/cultural area, in particular, it can prove enough to address some of the key figures that established principal directions. Such examples would be Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter, all three originating from different cultural contexts, namely the British, French and American ones, respectively. Admittedly, nowadays, people are aware of the political side of feminism, having access to it either first-hand or through social media. Under these circumstances, university classes supply the theoretical backdrop and may have students realizing that theory and activism should often work side by side. It can often be the case when feminist campaigners join the movement while still lacking historical knowledge. For the general public, it may easily sound intimidating to pair up activism with academia and theoretical concepts, when, in reality, it is rather a matter of people being aware of the origins and the evolution of feminist thinking. Returning to the above-mentioned feminist critics, their proposed ideas ended up capturing the essence either of their contemporary times or injustices throughout history. Starting with Virginia Woolf, the British author pinpointed the typical marginalization of women through the title of one of her most famous works, the essay entitled *A Room of One's Own* (1929). It's a marginalization that works at different levels, but Woolf takes the literary canon into account, bringing forward a hypothetical *sister of Shakespeare*.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York and London, 1999, p. 14.

Woolf addresses the question of *why a sister of Shakespeare would not likely have been able to write anything, let alone a play. She would have had none of the material resources – breadth of human experience, money, time – to do so. She would have been discouraged by everyone*<sup>4</sup>. This metaphor is supposed to suggest that a female counterpart of Shakespeare, equally gifted, still wouldn't have had the same path as the playwright, purely because of her societal marginalization that wouldn't have allowed her to have her voice heard alongside the *central man*. Through the expression of *a room of one's own*, Woolf emphasizes that there had been a prominent issue of women not only lacking a place (be it literal or symbolic), where they could develop themselves, but also missing a properly defined, self-standing identity. As a result, the main reason society didn't have a female equivalent of Shakespeare was because women were not granted financial or social independence, in the first place. If the situation had been otherwise earlier on, women would have implicitly had the time and space to create and showcase their own merits and skills.

Further on, Simone de Beauvoir advanced ideas that would suitably build on Woolf's. With her well-known work called *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir announced, from the title alone, her interest in the peripheral position of women, up to the point where they would be othered. Despite this, the French philosopher managed to detect a paradoxical, yet legitimate, benefit to a position as such, viewed in metaphysical terms. The condition of an outsider may allow that particular individual to actually have valuable insight regarding society, since some aspects may only be better perceived specifically from an external perspective. Additionally, Beauvoir would sustain the idea that women found themselves situated between what is perceptible and invisible, the latter referring to a transcendental side of one's existence, *she is doomed to immanence, and through her passivity she bestows peace and harmony – but if she declines this role, she is seen forthwith as a praying mantis, an ogress. In any case, she appears as the privileged Other, through whom the subject fulfils himself: one of the measures of man, his counterbalance, his salvation, his adventure, his happiness*<sup>5</sup>. This is to be understood as a gateway

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<sup>4</sup> V. Woolf, "A Room of One's Own", in H. Adams (ed.), *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, New York, 1992, p. 817.

<sup>5</sup> S. de Beauvoir, "The Second Sex", in H. Adams (ed.), *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, New York, 1992, p. 1000.

to introspection anticipating women's accentuated need to *write themselves* and have their identity established through a certain medium.

As the last point of reference, Elaine Showalter laid out a three-stage development of the female identity, in her article entitled *Toward a Feminist Poetics* (1979). The first stage is the feminine one, initially emerging after the beginning of industrialization in Europe, and it presupposed women recognizing their marginality and attempting to prevail over it by mirroring the male culture. This would be achieved at a surface level, with female writers inventing male pseudonyms for their published works, for instance, and ensuring a smoother transition from the margin to the center of society. In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the feminist phase would develop and entail a far more rebellious force, with women imposing themselves and, in some cases, trying to eradicate the patriarchal order. However, in the second half of the same century, this stage would be followed by a more tempered one, namely the female one, wherein women would be more focused on structuring and building their own symbolic, autonomous universe to evolve in: *Fern recommended that women write as therapy, as a release from the stifling silence of the drawing room, and as a rebellion against the indifference and insensitivity of the men closest to them: 'Look around, and see innumerable women, to whose barren and loveless lives this would be improvement and solace, and I say to them, write! Write! It will be a safe outlet for thoughts and feelings that maybe the nearest friend you have has never dreamed had a place in your heart and brain... It is not safe for the women of 1867 to shut down so much that cries out for sympathy and expression because life is such a maelstrom of business or folly or both that those to whom they have found themselves, body and soul, recognize only the needs of the former'*<sup>6</sup>. This ultimately harks back to the concept of having *a room of one's own* and incorporating it into a world that cannot be entirely removed, but rather just transformed gradually.

This information is useful for medical students to be able to detect those instances when such controversies or issues may be found, even in contexts when we focus on, apparently, some other topics. Foreign language classes are not so many, therefore we should carefully explore all the opportunities to discuss relevant things. We may have only one course

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<sup>6</sup> E. Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics" in H. Adams (ed.), *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, New York, 1992, pp. 1231-1232.

devoted to feminism as such, but there may be other instances when feminist issues might come along and our students should be already aware of them as we proceed to their analysis. The very course devoted to feminism focuses on the use of literature as a tool to discover feminist theories and views. The course invites students to familiarize themselves with two pieces of American fiction, Neil Simon's *Plaza Suite* (1960) and the more recent novel written by a female writer, Taffy Brodesser-Ackner's *Fleishman is in trouble* (2019). No matter how they choose to cope with the texts, it is recommended that the fragments presented in class be carefully chosen to reveal the most important ideas. Based on the above-mentioned theories, students are likely to discover the way women are perceived at a 50-year distance, progressing from a narration filtered by a male voice towards one that is provided by a female writer. The two literary pieces are very offering – if students are not able to read the entire texts, the foreign language teacher may indicate at least the first act of Neil Simon's play and the TV adaptation of Brodesser-Ackner's novel, with the same title, *Fleishman is in trouble*. For the years when Neil Simon wrote his play, at the beginning of feminist theories, the author proved himself to be quite progressive as he managed to reveal women as marginal characters, who, most of the time are either defined through their partners, always hesitant and not able to have an opinion. This is the case of Karen Nash, the female protagonist of Act 1 in Neil Simon's play, who is made to believe that she can no longer remember things (her age, her wedding anniversary, or the number of the room where she spent her honeymoon). As she orders through room service, she introduces herself with her husband's name: *Hello, room service? Listen, room service, this is Mrs. Sam Nash*<sup>7</sup>. But, even so, later on in the act, we can see her not being able to decide on her own (where the waiter should put the table) and also that she was not heard on the phone as she is brought *anchovies*, though she specifically mentioned when she had ordered, that there should be *no anchovies*. Nonetheless, Neil Simon manages to depict the Nashes' marriage with a skillful twist. As the woman regains her voice, towards the end of the play, Karen Nash reveals herself as a capable woman, able to decipher the codes her husband's mistress uses to meet him. Ironically, numbers (that she was not able to

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<sup>7</sup> N. Simon, *The Collected Plays of Neil Simon*, Penguin Group, New York, 1970, p. 481.

master) will become the clues to reveal her husband's affair. Her husband's secretary's description, *didn't show up on the 1400, but I rechecked it with my files and made the correction on the 640* (Simon 538) are not such a mystery for Karen, *You know as well as I do that the code for 'I'll meet you at the Piccadilly Hotel*<sup>8</sup> (Simon 546). Neil Simon's play manages to capture instances of marriages as they used to be back in the 1960s, the other two acts, *A Visitor from Hollywood* and *A Visitor from Forest Hills*, both adding to the woman's silenced unhappiness.

However feminism would still have to reject the idea of male authors presenting (filtering, diverting) women's lives, therefore we need those female writers capable of expressing their feelings and thoughts. Fifty years later, in 2019, we have Taffy Brodesser-Ackner who comes as a female writer to give an account of a marriage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in New York. Taffy Brodesser-Ackner is a skillful writer who understands that a novel is not so much about the plot as it is about literary theory as well. The novel contains a witty twist meant to show how much things have progressed in women's favor. The novel is about the disintegration of a marriage in today's New York (to be more precise, 2016, as the novel contains a direct reference to Hillary Clinton's campaign for the presidency in 2016). Dr Toby Fleisman is married to Rachel Fleishman, and they have two kids together. One day Doctor Fleishman realizes that he can no longer cope with Rachel's lifestyle, being too overwhelmed with the problems of her office as a theatre agent. He decides he wants to get a divorce and, as his therapist advises him to get in touch with people he had long forgotten in his youth, he starts meeting his two colleagues in college, Libby Epstein and Seth Morris. For more than 75% of the novel we listen to Toby's story of his unhappy marriage to Rachel – we listen to Libby, as she narrates the story, though she is just a go-between between the reader and Toby. The reader may be very satisfied with the fact that we have a female voice as a narrator and, as we listen to the story, we are inclined to see this representation of reality in which Rachel is a degenerated mom who prefers to neglect her children in search of a successful career. We might even detect a sense of *hybris* here as Rachel tries to overcome some barriers imposed by her own becoming a daughter who had never really enjoyed the warmth of a real family. One

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 546.

day Rachel disappears, first she is thought to be going on a relaxing weekend to a spa, but she never returns from it and though there seem to be many weeks passing, nobody especially Toby, her ex-husband seems to care about that. Moreover, Toby insists that this is how Rachel is, never thinking about the others or her kids. As Libby, the narrator of the story is a witness to the dissolution of Toby's marriage, she starts to question her own life, becoming more aware of her own marriage's issues. By doing so, Libby has a sort of a revelation when she realizes (based on some analogies with her former job as a journalist at a man's magazine, where everything she did was to listen to some stories told by men) that nobody has checked Toby's story by going to talk to Rachel, to listen to her side of the story.

As Libby accidentally meets Rachel one day, in Central Park, we become witnesses to a total overturning of the situation. Rachel is in a very dark place, we soon come to realize that she was not able to cope with the idea of the divorce and she suffered a nervous breakdown. During all this time that she has missed, she slept in Central Park, and no longer went to her office, obviously losing many of her partners. She was very lonely, and nobody inquired about her. Libby is the one to take Rachel home, trying to help Toby's wife (though she thought Rachel never liked her – Rachel had the same feeling, that she was not liked by Libby). The most interesting thing about this last part of the novel is to watch the former representation that we have had, of their marriage, turning upside down. Rachel is not able to tell her story coherently from the very beginning (it takes another woman, i.e. Libby to put the pieces of the puzzle together, to decipher the hidden meanings of Rachel's story, all these being nothing else but symbols of the woman's unheard voice). As Libby turns Toby's story upside down, we get to realize that women are not yet privileged, no matter how successful they may be from a professional point of view. Rachel's constant struggle to be part of these *selective* groups of people who have money and the best access to their children's education is nothing but a useless struggle of a woman who cannot see herself as independent, no matter how successful she comes to be. There is another symbolic episode in the book, which is probably even better depicted in the TV series, when Rachel, caught in an affair with one of the fathers of one of her children's colleagues, finds herself abandoned at that relaxation center. She goes to get a massage but the health carer, seeing how tense she is, recommends to her



a screaming class therapy meant to liberate one of all their stress. In the beginning, Rachel *breathed up and down her body, and her breath caught practically everywhere. At first, she just yelped, but then she screamed. And then she screamed more. At first, her screams were high-pitched and thin, but then, as the guy moved his hands around to indicate that her screams should originate beyond her throat in her sternum and solar plexus, she reached deeper and began making big, disgusting guttural sounds. One of the screams was for Toby. One of them was for Hannah, who had caught her desire for love and acceptance. One for Solly, who thought he was allowed to be himself in the world. One, the biggest one, was for herself, for all that she had been made to endure in life – how she'd never stood a chance, how she'd never even really been loved, Yes, that was it. She'd never really been loved. Not by her parents, not by her grandmother, not by Toby, not really*<sup>9</sup>. The same episode is slightly different in the TV series, and I would say with even a greater impact in the impeccable interpretation of Clare Danes as Rachel, *one of her screams was for Hannah who had Rachel's disease of the desire for love and acceptance. One of them was for Solly, who thought he was allowed to be himself in his world and didn't realize there would be consequences to it, no matter what Mr. Rogers said. She screamed for her mother who was, perhaps, her last chance at being a normal person. She screamed for Toby who promised that he would never leave and spend their years together, threatening to leave her and then finally did. She screamed for the family she worked her whole life to get, but then only had so briefly*<sup>10</sup>. The conclusion here is simple. Women's position in society has not changed so much, a male's narrative is always more coherent and therefore more credible. Women are likely to remain those unheard voices who have to *scream* to stand out from the crowd.

These are probably the most significant feminist cases that could be studied in class, but, as I have already said, once students have become familiar with feminist principles, they will be able to detect feminist issues in other contexts as well. Thus, when I try to illustrate the connection between language and culture and take movies to exemplify it, I usually come with the example of *Wonder Boys* (2000) and *The Chair* (2021). These two examples are meant to teach students how we can extract cultural

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<sup>9</sup> T. Brodesser-Ackner, *Fleishman is in Trouble*, Headline Publishing Group, London, 2019, p. 372.

<sup>10</sup> S. Berman, *Fleishman is in Trouble*, AcknerCorp, Ep. 7, 24', 2022.

information from movies, but they can also show how the American campus has changed throughout 20 years. Conclusions are easy to draw, times have changed but not necessarily in women's favor. As compared to how things were 20 years ago when central positions were held by men, women are now called to replace them, but in difficult times, when there is no peace and time for creative things. *The Chair* presents exactly these ideas, how women are supposed to restore equilibrium in an unstable world when academic life no longer means delivering amazing lectures, but rather discussions about cutting budgets and asking older professors to retire. Women have to struggle in unstable positions (the suggestive moment when Sandra Oh's character, Professor Kim, falls from her chair in her new office, sitting there for the very first time) and still have to be disregarded as they try to get tenure (Yaz McKay's case, who is by far more popular with her updated courses than her older colleague who seems to be lost in the system, not being able to understand why students no longer enrol in his class). Likewise, in the same attempt to discuss culture as it is displayed in women's magazine, *Elle*, analyzing various issues in Europe and North America, besides the relevant cultural content, we will discover the image of the *modern woman* who presents herself in an emancipated version, being happy to leave her children with babysitters to go to work, who embrace old age having no problem to talk about a topic that once was considered tabu, to enjoy independence and a sort of a re-birth in the aftermath of a divorce. All these are things we can immediately see as we leave through the magazines. Nonetheless, we wonder if this is not a shallow perspective, because if we go deeper in our analysis we are likely to discover that, no matter how empowering old age may be, they will still sell you products to maintain a younger look, young skinny women will always be in commercials, frequently neglecting beauty norms that other cultures may have (see, for instance, *Elle* issues in Brazil, which still promote European standards of beauty, though they may have a different representation of a woman's beauty). Nonetheless, this exercise is by far more challenging if we try to have both perspectives, i.e. the cultural and the feminist one. They are linked to each other, and they will show different specificities of various contexts that are studied together.

Feminism, as part of a more complex training in the field of Medical Humanities, has its importance and relevance. Future doctors are made

aware of some things that they should never overlook in their interaction with patients, especially with female patients who may come from contexts that may make it more difficult for them to have access to healthcare, to tell their stories and eventually to be treated by taking into account exactly those things that are not similar between genders. By dealing with the examples that have been mentioned throughout the paper, medical students are likely to discover better ways to cope with their patients, by becoming better listeners and interpreters of their narratives and, ultimately, to be able to make better diagnoses. By learning how to better communicate with their patients, doctors will increase patients' compliance with the treatment and eventually better outcomes. Medical Humanities is still an insufficiently explored territory in the Romanian context but we gradually come to realize its effectiveness and we will soon discover its endless possibilities to deal with topics that will increase students' awareness of the world they live in, with all the complexities of its human beings.

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