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A Milestone Work in the Interdisciplinary Study of English Literature and Medicine: A Review of *Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature*

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Abstract: Tao Jiusheng's *Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature* is a pioneering academic work. The book aligns with the development trend of interdisciplinary research, systematically examining the complex relationship between disease metaphors and national anxiety in early modern English literature from the intersecting perspectives of literature and medicine. The work not only expands the scope of domestic Renaissance literature research but also constructs a literary pathological criticism paradigm with distinctive Chinese characteristics, drawing on Western theoretical frameworks. It provides a methodological model for interdisciplinary literary studies and demonstrates the theoretical awareness and innovative potential of Chinese scholars in participating in international academic dialogue.

Keywords: the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature; Interdisciplinary Research; Literary Pathology; Disease Awareness; National Anxiety

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标题：英国文学与医学跨学科的里程碑著作——评《英国 16、17 世纪文学中的疾病意识与国家焦虑研究》

摘要：陶久胜的《英国 16、17 世纪文学中的疾病意识与国家焦虑研究》是一部具有开创性意义的学术著作。著作顺应跨学科研究的发展趋势，从文学与医学的交叉视角系统考察早期现代英国文学中疾病隐喻与国家焦虑之间的复杂关系。著作不仅拓展了国内文艺复兴文学研究视域，亦在借鉴西方理论的基础上，构建了具有中国特色的文学病理学批评范式，为跨学科文学研究提供了方法论的示范，并展现出中国学者在参与国际学术对话中的理论自觉与创新潜力。

关键词：英国 16、17 世纪文学；跨学科研究；文学病理学；疾病意识；国家焦虑

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1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary research on literature and medicine in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. The physician John Charles Bucknill, in his work, *The Medical Knowledge of Shakespeare* (1860), systematically catalogued the various disease motifs in Shakespeare's plays and analyzed early modern English conceptions of health and recovery from a professional medical perspective. At this stage, scholarship was largely grounded in medical empiricism, focusing on identifying specific illnesses represented in literary texts and correlating them with contemporary therapeutic practices. From the twentieth century onward, the rise of postmodernism, semiotics, rhetoric, and modern psychology opened new avenues for interdisciplinary inquiry between literature and medicine. Scholarly attention gradually shifted toward the metaphorical functions of disease and its cultural and political implications, with particular emphasis on the role of medicine in shaping identity, power relations, and emotional expression. For instance, Margaret Healy, in her monograph *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics* (2001), offers a comprehensive analysis of representations of plague, syphilis, and obesity across early modern literature, medical treatises, travel narratives, and political pamphlets. She examines the relationship between disease narratives and social transformation in England, demonstrating how early modern writers employed notions of the natural body to interpret forms of disorder in political, religious, and economic spheres, and thereby revealing the complex cultural and psychological dimensions embedded in the rhetoric of disease.

However, existing scholarship has paid relatively limited attention to the relationship between disease consciousness and national anxiety in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature, and has not yet provided a systematic account of how early medical humanities intersect with notions of nationhood in this period. The monograph *Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature*, published in 2025 by Peking University Press and authored by Tao Jiusheng, undoubtedly fills this scholarly gap and stands as a pioneering academic contribution. Integrating perspectives from medicine, theology, political science, and economics, the book offers an in-depth investigation into how disease metaphors in early modern English literature reflect the anxiety surrounding the formation of an emergent national identity. The study not only provides a novel theoretical framework and methodological approach for interdisciplinary literary research, thereby deepening scholarly understanding of early modern English literature, but also innovatively establishes a distinctively Chinese paradigm for the study of literary pathology. The following section outlines the main contents of the book and subsequently evaluates its distinctive features from three perspectives.

2. Overview of Contents

Chapter One, “Disease, the Theory of the Body Politic, and National Anxiety in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” takes a wide range of contemporary medical treatises as its primary corpus and offers a systematic account of early modern theories of disease alongside the concept of the body politic. By tracing the legacy of ancient Greek humoral theory, the medieval theological tradition that moralized disease, and the Renaissance revival and development of classical medicine, the chapter demonstrates how disease gradually evolved from a purely physiological phenomenon into a discursive construct laden with ethical and political significance. It further provides a focused exposition of the theory of the body politic, situating it within the historical context of recurrent plague outbreaks and crises of monarchy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. In doing so, it shows how this particular conjuncture fostered a powerful social imaginary of the “diseased body of the nation.” The chapter not only establishes the theoretical framework for the study as a whole, but also reveals the deep entanglement of medical discourse and political imagination in early modern England, thereby laying a solid intellectual foundation for interpreting disease metaphors in the literature of the period.

Chapter Two, “Melancholy Bodies and Monarchical Anxiety in Revenge Tragedy” takes revenge drama as its central object of analysis, examining how melancholic figures in plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* deploy the metaphor of the sword to register crises of kingship. The chapter begins with a review of transformations in England's political structure during this period, arguing that, against the backdrop of increasing monarchical centralization and bureaucratic corruption, revenge tragedy emerged as a crucial literary form for interrogating the legitimacy of rule. At the same time, the influx into England of the European theory

of the “melancholic genius” furnished the intellectual elite with a discursive framework through which to articulate disappointment, resentment, and political anxiety. Within this context, the chapter offers a close reading of melancholic avengers, who assume the role of “surgeons” to the body politic, wielding swords as “scalpels” to perform a kind of bloodletting on a diseased political body. The chapter also addresses the limitations of a static analogy between the individual body and the body politic. Taking *Julius Caesar* as a case study, it demonstrates how the body politic undergoes dynamic transformation in the aftermath of regicide, intensifying Brutus’s melancholy and thereby revealing the profound anxiety experienced by the avenger both before and after the act of killing the monarch.

Chapter Three, “Madness of the Body and Anxiety over National-Religious Identity in the Poetry of John Milton” takes Milton’s poetry as its primary focus and explores how he constructs a Protestant national identity through the experience of trauma. The chapter begins with a systematic examination of the dual meanings of “madness” in the period surrounding the English Civil War, showing that it functioned both as a form of divine ecstasy in theological discourse and as a category of mental illness in medical thought. Against this backdrop, the chapter analyzes how Milton mobilizes the trope of madness to narrate national failure and collective trauma, aligning the collapse of the Puritan republic with the Fall of humankind, and thereby exposing the hypocrisy, fanaticism, and self-corrosive tendencies within England itself. It then turns to a close reading of *Samson Agonistes*, demonstrating how the ambivalent nature of madness—poised between the divine and the pathological—is generated by traumatic melancholy and ultimately transformed into a force for self-repentance and redemption. In this sense, the chapter argues that Milton wields “madness” as a disciplinary and redemptive instrument, through which he seeks to forge a purified Protestant nation, while simultaneously articulating deep anxieties surrounding national religious identity.

Chapter Four, “Garrulous Rumor as a Metaphor of National Disease and Anxiety over Governmental Authority in the Poetry of John Donne” takes Donne’s works as its central focus and examines how social maladies such as judicial corruption and misinformation threaten governmental authority. The chapter begins with a comprehensive consideration of the historical and intellectual contexts of Donne’s writings, noting that his early satires frequently deploy images of vomiting and plague to allegorize corruption within the judicial system and injustices in land distribution. By contrast, his later works and sermons turn toward defending the doctrine of the divine right of kings, recasting rumor, slander, and other forms of “loquacious speech” as diseases that erode the political body. In this way, Donne’s works expose the crisis of public opinion faced by the early Stuart dynasty and convey a profound sense of anxiety over political disorder. The chapter further demonstrates that in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, the loss of control over public discourse forms an intertextual parallel with the poet’s own physical illness. Exaggerated and excessive rumor is likened to a surplus of bodily humors, while the threat posed by social disease

to national security mirrors the suicidal impulses arising from Donne's own bodily affliction. Through this parallel, the chapter reveals Donne's deep-seated anxiety over the erosion of governmental authority.

Chapter Five, "Utopian Worlds in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Prose and Anxiety over the Church of England" takes the works of Thomas More and Robert Burton as its primary case studies, examining how utopian imagination articulates visions of the ideal state. The chapter argues that, in a context marked by recurrent plague outbreaks and intense religious conflict, utopia should not be understood as a purely fantastical construct, but rather as a form of literary intervention into the "diseases" of contemporary society. In *Utopia*, More constructs an ideal commonwealth that combines religious piety with sanitary rationality. Its strict systems of public hygiene and moral discipline not only respond to the realities of epidemic disease, but also implicitly encode a Catholic vision for reforming the Church of England. By contrast, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton imagines a healthy polity through geometrically ordered and rationalized spatial arrangements, positioning this ideal against the social "pathologies" produced by Puritan extremism. The chapter further observes that the utopian visions articulated by More and others ultimately remain unrealizable due to the monopolization of authority and the stagnation of reform within the Church of England. The widening gap between visionary projection and historical reality, the author suggests, lays bare a profound unease regarding the trajectory of the Church of England.

Chapter Six, "External Forces as Metaphors of National Disease and Anxiety over State Security in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Drama" takes the plays of Thomas Dekker and his contemporaries as its central focus, examining how governments appropriate a logic akin to "countering poison with poison" in order to preserve the health of the state. The chapter offers a detailed account of the influence of Paracelsus's pharmacological principle of using toxins therapeutically on early modern functionalist theories of the political organism. Within this framework, foreign groups and heterodox forces are construed as "pathogens" invading the national body, while the state sustains its vitality by resisting and managing such threats, thereby contributing to the consolidation of a national community. The discussion then turns to close readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Witch of Edmonton*, and *The Whore of Babylon*, analyzing how Jews, Catholic forces, and other external agents are represented as dangerous yet manipulable "toxins." It further demonstrates how both state and church deploy such representations to legitimize repressive measures against these groups. In this way, the chapter reveals how early modern English drama mobilizes pathological metaphors to articulate anxieties over national security amid religious conflict and international pressures.

Chapter Seven, "Foreign Politics as Metaphors of National Disease and Anxiety in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Drama" takes the plays of Ben Jonson and other dramatists as its primary corpus, examining how disease discourse is mobilized to imagine international relations with England positioned at the center of an emergent imperial order. The chapter begins by situating this

development within the historical context of the post–Age of Exploration world, when medical discourse increasingly permeated political and cultural thought. It argues that early modern playwrights, by integrating frameworks drawn from pathology, geography, and political economy, reconfigured the international order as a dynamic medical geography structured by binaries of “health” and “disease,” as well as center and periphery. Within this conceptual matrix, *Richard II* and *Henry VI, Part 2* construct relations between England and Ireland as a “patient–disease” dynamic, thereby legitimizing colonial intervention as a form of therapeutic treatment. *The Comedy of Errors*, by contrast, binds narratives of plague to those of commerce, enabling England to be repositioned as both “healthy” and central within the European geopolitical imagination. In *Volpone*, the dual capacity of medicine to heal and to poison reflects a miasmatic understanding of disease causation, revealing how commodity exchange may insidiously erode the integrity of the political body. Collectively, these dramatic texts register a persistent anxiety regarding England’s position within an expanding network of international relations.

3. Brief Review

3.1 A Masterwork in Interdisciplinary Studies of English Literature and Medicine

As a major trend in contemporary scholarship, interdisciplinary research has propelled literary studies from the analysis of isolated texts toward a culturally oriented mode of interpretation grounded in multiple fields. In 1926, psychologist Robert S. Woodworth first articulated the concept of “interdisciplinarity” at the inaugural meeting of the U.S. Social Science Research Council, emphasizing that the Council’s mission was to promote synthesis among two or more disciplines that have been separated by specialization (Frank, 1988, p. 92). This formulation challenged the rigid boundaries of disciplinary division and facilitated a shift in the social sciences from closed, specialized systems toward more open forms of intellectual exchange and integration. By the mid-twentieth century, interdisciplinary approaches had become a significant theoretical turn in the humanities. In 1961, the American scholar Henry H. Remak systematically defined the interdisciplinary nature of literary studies, arguing that comparative literature is “the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other” (Remak, 1961, p. 3). This definition expanded literary studies from textual analysis within national boundaries to a comprehensive cultural inquiry, positioning literature as a key medium for understanding social, historical, and intellectual development. In 1965, the *Levin Report* issued by the American Comparative Literature Association further underscored the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, advocating close engagement between comparative literature and fields such as linguistics, art history, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Bernheimer, 1995, p. 22). From this point onward,

interdisciplinary literary studies evolved from spontaneous convergence to theoretical self-consciousness and systematic formation, becoming a defining tendency in contemporary literary scholarship.

Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature represents a significant contribution by Chinese scholarship to the interdisciplinary field of literature and medicine. Responding to the contemporary trend toward integration within the humanities, the study draws upon multiple disciplines—including literary studies, medicine, political science, theology, and economics—to investigate the relationship between the “diseases of the natural body” and those of the “body politic” in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature. In doing so, it reveals how disease metaphors function as a lens through which the national anxieties of early modern England are refracted. Adopting a New Historicist critical approach, the book places the literary works of authors such as William Shakespeare, John Milton, and John Donne in dialogue with a wide range of contemporaneous “non-literary” texts, including medical treatises, official documents, sermons, and economic pamphlets, thereby offering a systematic account of the dynamic interactions among medicine, literature, and politics in early modern England. At the same time, the study engages with a range of modern critical frameworks—such as literary pathology, theories of disease metaphor, body criticism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies—to examine how various forms of social anxiety, including monarchical corruption, religious extremism, the circulation of rumor, and the perceived infiltration of heretical and foreign forces, are articulated within literary texts. It demonstrates how early modern English writers mobilized the language of disease to reflect upon the crises confronting the kingdom in religious, political, and economic domains. By situating literary texts within the intersecting discursive fields of medical history, political philosophy, religious thought, and economic discourse, the book establishes a clear and operational paradigm for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of literature and medicine, underscoring the critical importance of such approaches for uncovering the deeper intellectual and cultural meanings embedded in literary works.

3.2 Early Modern English Literary Studies from an Interdisciplinary Perspective of Literature and Medicine

Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature represents a pioneering contribution to the study of early modern English literature within Chinese scholarship. For a considerable period, research on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature in China has primarily focused on areas such as humanism, Western cosmology, garden culture, Baroque art, textual scholarship, discourses of power, legal studies, astronomy, geography, and psychology. Since the 1980s, propelled by the development of multidisciplinary approaches and diverse theoretical paradigms, scholars have produced a wealth of insightful interpretations of early modern English literature. These studies have achieved notable progress in both scope and depth, broadening the intellectual horizon of the field and laying a solid theoretical

foundation for subsequent research. Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been paid to medical discourse and the representation of disease in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature. Existing studies are largely confined to analyses of disease metaphors in the plays of William Shakespeare. On the whole, interdisciplinary research exploring the relationship between early modern English literature and medical culture remains comparatively underdeveloped in the Chinese academic context and calls for further systematic investigation. In this regard, *Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature* undoubtedly fills a significant gap in the field.

The work approaches Renaissance English literature from an interdisciplinary perspective that brings together literary and medical inquiry, offering a systematic examination of disease consciousness and national anxiety in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. During this period, recurrent outbreaks of epidemics such as the Black Death and syphilis contributed to a shift from humoral theory toward etiological explanations that emphasized external causes of disease, whereby illness came to be understood as an invasive and transmissible substance. This transformation in medical thinking provided a conceptual foundation for political metaphor: foreign powers, heterodox ideologies, and social unrest were increasingly figured as “pathogens” invading the body of the nation. At the same time, the theory of the “body politic” gained wide circulation, conceptualizing the state as an organic entity analogous to the human body. Within this intellectual framework, writers drew upon medical discourse to articulate social disorder, employing bodily illness as a metaphor for political corruption and moral decay, and thereby establishing disease as a central trope for expressing national anxiety. Building on this premise, the monograph by Tao Jiusheng offers a systematic account of the roots of disease discourse in classical medicine, Christian ethics, and political theology, while also exploring how recurrent plagues and the corruption of monarchy in Renaissance England shaped social perceptions of the “diseased body of the nation.” It proceeds to analyze in depth how different literary genres of the Renaissance deploy disease metaphors to represent national anxiety: revenge tragedy reflects crises of kingship through motifs of melancholy and violence; the poetry of John Milton uses “madness” to articulate anxiety over national religious identity; the works of John Donne map rumor and disease onto judicial corruption and the erosion of governmental authority; the utopian writings of Thomas More and Robert Burton respond to the institutional impasse of ecclesiastical reform; and dramatic works more broadly express concerns over national security by pathologizing foreign forces under conditions of religious and international pressure. By situating Renaissance English literature within an interdisciplinary framework that integrates literary studies and the history of medicine, the book offers a comprehensive account of the cultural and political meanings of disease representation. It demonstrates how literature in early modern England participated in the imagining of the nation, diagnosed social maladies, and contributed to the shaping of national consciousness. In doing so,

the study not only expands the scope of Renaissance literary scholarship but also provides an illuminating methodological pathway for analyzing the representation of disease in literature.

3.3 A Distinctively Chinese Paradigm of Literary Pathological Criticism

At present, Western scholarship has developed a relatively mature theoretical framework in the field of literary pathology. In *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), Susan Sontag offers an in-depth exploration of the metaphorical meanings of disease across different contexts, arguing that any serious illness whose causes remain obscure and whose treatment proves ineffective has historically been invested with specific cultural significance (Sontag, 1978, p. 58). In this sense, disease is not merely a physiological condition but also a symbolic construct embedded within broader socio-cultural frameworks. Accordingly, Sontag reexamines representations of illness in literature through an interdisciplinary lens encompassing medicine, political science, theology, economics, and military studies. She traces the shifting cultural meanings of disease from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and onward through Romanticism and modernism to contemporary society, demonstrating how illness has continually been reconfigured as a latent language for interpreting the body, power, and moral order within different historical contexts. Sontag's work significantly advanced the study of disease narratives in literature and opened new avenues for analyzing the political, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions of early modern English texts. Subsequent scholarship has further enriched this field. The concept of "social pathology" proposed by Jonathan Gil Harris, the study of disease fictions in early modern England by Margaret Healy, and the analysis of plague culture as "sign systems" by Ernest B. Gilman have all contributed to the expansion of Western literary pathology. However, existing Western approaches to literary pathology have often overlooked the dynamic relationship between disease discourse and the formation of the nation, and have yet to fully examine how literature, through medical metaphor, participates in the construction of national identity and political order.

Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature responds to the limitations of Western scholarship on literary pathology by constructing a distinctively Chinese critical paradigm in this field. In contrast to the dominant Western tradition of cultural criticism centered primarily on "disease as metaphor", the monograph moves beyond the mere inheritance of existing theoretical frameworks. Through a systematic reading of early modern English literature, it expands the study of disease from the level of individual bodily experience to broader dimensions such as national identity, religious politics, and social anxiety, thereby proposing what may be termed a "Chinese approach to literary pathology" with greater intellectual-historical depth. Tao Jiusheng explicitly argues that "early modern medical theory is not a scientific language, but a form of discourse and rhetorical terminology with strong ideological tendencies and clear orientations toward state values. Physicians, monarchs, political commentators, clergy,

lawyers, and economists all employed the language of disease to express their understanding, reflection, and critique of various problems in English society” (Tao Jiusheng, 2025, p. 413). On this basis, he emphasizes that disease discourse in early modern England operates not only at the level of physiological reference but also as a crucial metaphorical resource for articulating the body politic, social order, and cultural identity. Accordingly, through close textual analysis of disease imagery in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature, Tao reveals a dual structure of pathology in both the natural body and the body politic, and examines the literal, metaphorical, and metonymic dimensions of disease across different historical contexts. He demonstrates how disease becomes a representational form through which the operations of state power, religious conflict, and social psychological unrest are articulated. From this interdisciplinary vantage point, Tao reconstructs the analytical nexus of disease, body, and nation, guided by a distinctly Chinese scholarly sensibility and problem-consciousness, and thereby formulates a critical paradigm of literary pathology that is both differentiated from Western models and marked by its own intellectual and cultural specificity.

4. Conclusion

Research on Disease Awareness and National Anxiety in the 16th and 17th Centuries' English Literature responds to contemporary intellectual developments by actively constructing a literary pathological critical paradigm with distinct Chinese characteristics. The study's interdisciplinary orientation and strong sense of historical consciousness align closely with current efforts to build an autonomous Chinese academic discourse. By situating disease discourse within the broader contexts of state governance and national identity, the work moves beyond the traditional emphasis in literary pathology on metaphor alone, opening up new theoretical possibilities for reexamining representations of illness within China's own literary tradition. Indeed, Chinese literature itself sustains a rich and continuous tradition of disease narrative: from the notion of “malady” (cuo) in *The Book of Songs*, to the motif of frailty in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, from the depiction of tuberculosis in the writings of Lu Xun to contemporary “cancer narratives.” These representations of illness have remained deeply intertwined with the historical transformations, ethical orders, and psychological structures of Chinese society, serving as vehicles for profound reflection on national destiny, social pathology, and individual existence. By constructing a critical framework of literary pathology through the study of early modern English literature, Tao Jiusheng not only provides a new analytical lens for understanding disease discourse in Western literary traditions, but also offers

valuable methodological resources for Chinese scholars seeking to reinterpret and theorize disease narratives within their own cultural context. Through its integrated approach—placing disease within the interconnected domains of the body politic, social governance, and cultural identity—the study lays a solid foundation for the development of a literary pathological criticism rooted in Chinese intellectual traditions while possessing cross-cultural explanatory power. In doing so, it highlights the originality and theoretical self-awareness of Chinese scholarship in its engagement with global humanities discourse.

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