Plural Metaphors of Mass Plague and Individual Disease in The Canterbury Tales—Based on Sontag's Theory of Illness as Metaphor

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Abstract: Metaphorical rhetoric is widespread in human discourses about the expressions of diseases. This paper takes Sontag's idea of illness as metaphor to deconstruct in-depth the invisible context of plague and the outward characteristics of individual illnesses latent in The Canterbury Tales. The author finds that even though the plague doesn't act as a dominant background, it is used extensively throughout the text as a discursive label of powerful rhetorical energy and assumes an interpretive and transformative function. Its metaphorical system forms an interactive relationship with the objective social reality, exposing the crumbling and dark English society of the Middle Ages through the implicit character of the disease discourse, emphasizing the uncertainty and reflection of Chaucer's personal and English people's views on religion, medicine, humanism and love under the impact of the plague.

1. Introduction

In *Disease and History*, British scholars Frederick F.Cartwright and Michael Biddiss regarded pestilences, famines, and wars as three factors influencing the historical course of human civilization. As Swedish pathologist, Folke Henschen pointed out, the history of humans means the history of diseases. In the 1440s and 1450s, the plague broke out in Europe, killing a third of Europe's population. While destroying humans physically, this pestilence also eroded humans mentally. Various classes showed different degrees of delirium, mania, despair, and impertinency in this pestilence. After the outbreak, the miserable scene crushed the beautiful vision made up by humans with pettifoggery and lies. While bringing an unprecedented crisis to the healthcare industry, this pestilence also caused social instability and disordered religious values in Europe.

In the context of epidemics, the creation of literature and poetry was influenced in the 14th Century. The poets Chaucer lived in the 14th Century and The Canterbury Tales is a product of this age. The works in the post-pestilence age always reflect on life based on death, explore authentic existence, and describe pestilences by reconstructing the relationship between diseases and morality in a sorrowful and empathetic language. The Canterbury Tales depicts and describes the characters such as knight, attendant, landlord, owner-peasant, poor peasant, clergy, Buddhist nun, businessman, sailor, college student, and handicraftsman. Chaucer showed the actual appearance of British society in the 14th Century. Although it was different from Decameron of the same type in the same era, *The Canterbury Tales* neither set the plague period as the story background nor depicted the future plague environment but involved multiple metaphors of individual diseases in its environmental setting and portraits, worked in concert with the invisible background of mass pestilence skillfully and reflected the description of pestilence in the value selection of the author.

The current literature on literary criticism of the use of illness metaphors at home and abroad is small in number and mainly focuses on criticism of Chinese literary works. Tan Guanghui examines the situation of socio-cultural metaphors in Chinese novels of the late Qing dynasty. It elaborates on their significance for the modernization of Chinese fiction. Gu Guangmei uses Chinese literary works such as The Withering Flower as examples to examine the literary and social role of the causes, foci, and phases of illness of the female ill in them, providing female illnesses and metaphors. It is, therefore, still relevant to continue to dig deeper into this literature. Meanwhile, domestic and international

literary-critical studies of The Canterbury Tales are mostly limited to the fields of marriage, gender, feminism, and humanism, such as Zhang Junli's 'On Chaucer's Inheritance and Transcendence of Medieval Church Marriage,' which takes The Lawyer's Tale as an example to delve into the characteristics of a medieval English church marriage. There is still a gap in the literary-theoretical research on the excavation of disease metaphors and plague writing from The Canterbury Tales, with related studies leaning more towards the medical practice category than the literary criticism category, such as Ding Yang and Kong Xiangguo in Disease and Healing in England from The Canterbury Tales. Because of this, this study explores the metaphorical connotations of individual illnesses and the personal and social value choices inherent in the invisible context of mass plagues through the study of the Canterbury Tales. Meanwhile, it interweaves text and theory, colliding the real and the imaginary to re-enchant the fourteenth-century poetry, filling the research gap from this perspective and helping to provide a new reference for contemporary "post-epidemic" literary writing. This study fills the gap in this perspective and helps to provide a new reference point for contemporary post-epidemic literary writing.

2. The redemption behind the metaphor of mass plague

2.1. Concept definition

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle defined 'metaphor' in his work Poetics, stating: Metaphor is the substitution of an unknown noun, either by genus for species, or species for the genus, or species for species or by analogy, i.e., comparison. As a rhetorical device, metaphor refers to a substitution relationship between words within the domain of their original meaning, mostly a word (the energetic) applied to a target object or action (the referent) in a cliché-breaking, non-literal way, which emphasizes the similarity (correspondence) between the energetic and the referent. In 1936 the linguist Richards, in his book The Philosophy of Rhetoric, freed metaphor from its traditional rhetorical meaning, suggesting that the idea of the metaphor of thought preceded the idea of the metaphor of language, that metaphor is thoughtful, conceptual, empirical, ubiquitous and is a tool of human thought for understanding the world. With the development of literature, metaphor expands the space of words and the field of meaning, adding brightness and beauty to language and enriching its expressiveness and creativity.

American scholar Susan Sontag in her articles Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphor delves into the cultural significance of disease metaphors and points out that, at different historical periods, any severe illness with an unknown cause and no cure (tuberculosis, leprosy, AIDS, etc.) often carries corresponding cultural meanings. These meanings are reworked by social life and bound with stigmatizing and punitive moral meanings. The use of illness as metaphorical rhetoric in various discourses is one of the major causes of the moralization of illness. Literature is theoretically a collection of cultural symbols that construct a network of meaningful texts from long-established human experiences. In literary texts, 'illness' is generalized as a category of symbols that act as both target and source domains in a metaphorical system of textual output. Thus, the term 'illness' is not defined in the same way as the intuitive physiological or psychological abnormalities and experiences at the medical level but rather is encompassed within a non-medical mode of interpretation. The illness metaphor situates the signifier 'illness' within the familiar cognitive iconography and conceptual framework of the 'man of the hour', allowing the reader to derive its connotations and practical value through analysis

2.2 Reinventing values- the enlightening role of mass plague metaphor

There are three major outbreaks of plague in European history (the Black Death was often referred to as the plague due to the lack of medical knowledge), the worst of which occurred in the mid-14th Century. Chaucer was born in the plague era and wrote The Canterbury Tales in the late 14th Century. The Canterbury Tales is a long collection of poetic tales set in the context of pilgrims from all classes making the journey to Canterbury to visit St Thomas. The general prologue of the poem mentions that "And specially from every shires ende of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende, The holy blissful

martyr for to seke, That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeking." The pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas, a Becket in Canterbury, is said to cure the sick and strengthen the body. The poet portrays this line of pilgrims with various kinds of persistent illnesses： the wife of Bath who is a little hard of hearing, the pardoner who does not grow a beard, the cook with a foul sore on his calf, the churchwarden with a small pustule and a thin beard and scabs on his eyebrows, the miller with a wart on the tip of his nose, the steward with a burning liver, etc. The pilgrimage is thus a purely religious event driven by utilitarian aims. In particular, in the general introduction to the doctor's role, it is stressed that 'yet he was but easy of dispense, he kept that he wan in pestilence.', which points to the invisible context of the pilgrimage - the plague. The intertwining of the explicit story and the invisible context of the times reveals the confusion of the public's religious beliefs under the influence of the plague. Most people believed in the 'doctrine of divine retribution and saw the plague as an act of the gods or a demonic vengeance, as in the knight's tale, where the Roman God of agriculture, Sarduin, is described to be the bane of all pestilence. Meanwhile, in the other tales, the casualties of the plague are attributed to the atrocities of death. "A robber called Death came secretly - this plague epidemic, and he killed a thousand people." The "doctrine of the wrath of God" was still "public knowledge" at the time, but its credibility was already wavering in the community and literary production. Chaucer ostensibly supports a theological interpretation of the plague but sets up multiple characters and multiple theological causes in the text, which in turn confirms the absurd reality that the same religious theory can derive contradictory causes for the same real-life event.

The literature has provided a renewed demystification of ecclesiastical theology and a quiet surge of humanist thought. Medieval Christian society in Western Europe developed a unique dualism between church and state, with the regime and the church having their own traditional and relatively stable spheres of control. This divided human life into spiritual and material life, or religious and secular life, giving people a dual social role - as members of both heavenly and secular society, as church members and secular subjects - and giving rise to two contradictory values that pointed to a dual authority - the reverence for divine religious authority and the guardianship of secular life. It was a pluralistic pattern of medieval Western European society and a dual sphere of life for the people. Moreover, it was a stumbling block to the sanctity of Western European religious theology, laying the ideological foundations for the emergence and development of humanism. Chaucer's portrayal of pilgrimage as a utilitarian religious activity questioned the shackles of medieval religion from the perspective of the faithful. After the outbreak of the plague, more and more people became deeply disillusioned with the role of God and turned their attention to the present life in pursuit of self-interest and worldly pleasures. The transformation of devotional pilgrimage into purposeful psychological comfort was one of the city's most relevant manifestations of post-plague humanism. The Canterbury Tales is not set in the period of the plague, obviously, as The Decameron. It focuses on the post-plague period, using the act of pilgrimage to Canterbury for one's malady as a broad framework metaphor to imply people's post-plague state of mind. They are intended to seek balance and redemption between religious piety and self-consciousness.

2.3 Regulating medical care- the enlightening role of mass plague metaphor

The invisible setting of the plague also serves another path to redemptive innovation - the standardization of medical care and the professionalization of the discipline in the Middle Ages. Chaucer condenses the chaos of the medieval healthcare industry into the archetypal figure of the physician: "In al, this world ne was ther noon him lik To speke of physic and ofsurgery, for he was grounded in astronomy. He kept his patient a ful greet deel in hours by his magik natureel. Wel koude he fortune the Ascendent Of hise images for his pacient. He knew the cause of every maladye." Chaucer's image of the physician as absurd and unprofessional. The physician treated his patients based on his knowledge of astrology and the times of the day. He would count when that star of the sick family, having risen into the star position, performed exorcisms and cures. Moreover, Chaucer mentions that Christ is the most powerful in dispelling disease and calamity in the lawyer's story. These descriptions are meant to give a glimpse of the medieval "medical" and "religious" unity on physiology in the actions and words of these minor characters. From the actions and words of these minors, the

author can figure out the obstruction of the physiological sciences and health care by the unity of "religion." He sees the plagues of the past as a measuring stick or a trial for medical practice and consciously portrays physicians playfully and mockingly, incorporating a post-plague reflection that favors the scientific rather than the religious aspects of medicine. The demand for rationalization and professionalization of medicine has once again weakened the dominance of religious theology in all fields, forming a dynamic relationship with the development of medicine. Chaucer aims to break away from the barriers of religious salvation and bring about substantial, society-wide salvation from the post-plague plague through humanistic thinking, scientific medical knowledge, and techniques.

3. The metaphor of social values behind individual diseases

Most of the pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales and the characters in their stories suffer from individual illnesses with strong characteristics. The external symptoms of illness strengthen the portrayal of the characters and improve the differentiation between them. Meanwhile, diseases have naturally become a social symbol with cultural and moral significance as a discourse of illness. This common perception can be used as a starting point to explore the underlying personal and social value choices.

3.1 Characterizations behind the metaphor of disease representations

Chaucer's general description of the miller's appearance is that he has a wart on the tip of his nose and adds, "A werte, and theron stood a tuft of heris, reed as the bristles of a sowes eris." According to medieval phrenology, such a symptom corresponds to the negative characterization of boisterousness, lustfulness, and impudence. When discussing the errand boy (somnour), the poem reads, "That hadde a fir-reed cherubinnes face, For saucefleem he was with eyen narwe. As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe, With scaled browes blake and piled berd; Of his visage children were aferd." It means that His eyes are tiny, and he has a small pustular face. He was thinly bearded and had scabs on his black eyebrows. Both 'pustules' and 'black scabs' suggest that the servant suffered from skin disease such as acne or alopecia, which would have been classified as leprosy in the Middle Ages.

In the Middle Ages, leprosy was seen as a divine punishment, and the leper was a sinful person. Chaucer also mentions the errand boy's love of leeks, garlic, and onions. These vegetables were seen by the intellectuals of the time as symbols of moral decadence. The positive and negative values of the characters in The Canterbury Tales are mainly proportional to their physical appearance. The character of the great sensible figure in the text is basically in good physical condition in The Canterbury Tales, such as Sir Topaz. Moreover, characters with character traits such as lust, greed, laziness, and bigotry often suffer from dominant skin disorders that gather on the face. Sontag once said, "Disease is the dark side of life, the more troublesome citizenship." The facsimile of disease in The Canterbury Tales is a concrete realization of this theory.

3.2 Analysis of the social value of the "leprosy" metaphor

The disease symbol of leprosy appears more than once in The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer, in creating the hypocritical and snobbish side of the friar of the Torah, it emphasizes that "he was far more familiar with innkeepers and chambermaids than with beggars or lepers; for how could he, who was a man of respectability and status, go and make the acquaintance of one who had leprosy?"(the rough meaning). Here, the leper is conceptualized as a citizenship that has become synonymous with inferiority, evil, and deficiency due to the disease. Chaucer's placement of the leper as the antithesis of the friar of the Torah does not make the figure of the friar of the Torah great, but also brings it down to dust, showing the vileness of the character and the lack of compassion, which also reflects the corrupt nature of the medieval church: deceitful and profit-oriented. The leper in this context refers to the masses, who are pitted against the church's interests, a consequence of its decadence and the beginning of the awakening of humanity.

3.3 Analysis of the social value of the "lovesickness" metaphor

Another major symbol of illness in The Canterbury Tales is lovesickness. Often translated as 'the

disease of love,' lovesickness was described in medieval medical treatises as temporary epilepsy caused by love, with insomnia, pallor, lack of appetite, depression, and hysteria. In the knight's tale, two warriors are sufferers of lovesickness, obsessed with Emelye, whose every movement seems unusual and depressing. As if he were not only suffering from a severe case of lovesickness, but a condition had developed in his head: depression had entered his forebrain, where the problem caused a manic obsession. In the tradition of elegant romance, authors tend to use lovesickness to show the love of both characters, advocating that emotional impulses should ultimately return to the 'spiritual love' of faith. In the chapter on the Wife of Bath, Chaucer says of her that she has her cure for lovesickness. The disease of lovesickness corresponds to elegant love, which emphasizes spiritual union and refined sentimentality, a matter of 'love and propriety.' Chaucer portrays her as a new type of woman who dares to love and hate, who is independent of property, dares to criticize, tries to bring love down to a sensual level in the mouth of the marketplace, and seeks to justify erotic love. However, the view of love presented by Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales is antagonistic and intertwined. In addition to her hard of hearing, she has a gaping hole in the middle of her incisors, which was seen as a sign of lechery and licentiousness at that time. Hence, the author suggests that the wife of Bath is a woman whose image and even view of love was ahead of their time and could not be understood through secular spectacles. Chaucer's placement of lovesickness between the two stories is an attempt to create the possibility of communication between human liberation and ecclesiastical abstinence and examine the choice of subjective love in the context of social construction.

4. Conclusion

Although The Canterbury Tales is not narrated in terms of the plague, Chaucer has solidified consciousness, useing plague and stubbornness extensively throughout the text as discursive labels of powerful rhetorical energy, which inevitably assumes the function of interpretation and transformation. In virtue of that, the metaphorical system forms an interactive relationship with the objective social reality. The aim is to expose the crumbling and dark English society of the Middle Ages through the implicit character of the discourse of disease and to emphasize the uncertainty and reflection of Chaucer's personal and British views on religion, medicine, humanism, and love in the face of the plague. The Canterbury Tales metaphorically binds the disease of the plague to moral values. The literature born of the plague is not just about the plague itself but about the construction of a picture of individual and social thought. Today, we are experiencing a new plague. It is also a new challenge to both physical health and value consciousness. The way forward for post-disaster culture might be to look back at the early literature of the epidemic and focus on the transformative process of values.

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