



**Citation:** G. Tessuto, C. Lawlor, I. Natali, A. Federici (2025) Introduction. Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on Healthcare and Disease: Themes and Trends from the Eighteenth Century to the Present. Serie Speciale "Quaderni di Lea – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente 7: pp. 7-12. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-16025>.

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

# Introduction. Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on Healthcare and Disease: Themes and Trends from the Eighteenth Century to the Present

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This special issue of *Quaderni di LEA* builds upon and expands the work initiated by the same editors in *Textus* (vol. 3, 2024), *Spreading Contaminations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Health, Illness, and Disease*, further advancing the analysis of the dialogue that linguistics and literary studies entertain with the discourses and practices of medicine and healthcare. The impetus for our renewed exploration stems from the increasing prominence of these encounters as focal points in humanistic research both in Italy and abroad. Accordingly, these introductory pages are geared towards developing the theoretical and practical foundations established in the previous venture (Tessuto, Lawlor, Natali, *et al.* 2024), offering reflections on the dissemination and impact of such foundations while making sense of the growing influence that the paradigms of human sciences exert on medicine and the way that these inform professional knowledge and ethical orientations in the realm of medicine and healthcare.

Recent bibliometric studies have highlighted a rise in publications devoted to medical humanities research (Ousager and Johannessen 2010; Dennhardt, Apramian, Lingard, *et al.* 2016) and identified consistent annual growth rates that some interpret as evidence of a sustained expansion of academic interest in the field (Hong, Song, Jiang, *et al.* 2024). However, such interpretations warrant caution, as quantitative data in scholarly research often prove difficult to collect due to the rapidly shifting nature of the academic landscape. Here, a degree of diachronic incommensurability must also be acknowledged, as the overall volume of scholarly production has proliferated across disciplines over time, not solely in research related to medicine

and the humanities. Beyond issues of data reliability, what appears particularly significant is an emerging consensus among researchers, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, that the flourishing of academic work at the nexus of medicine, linguistics, and literary studies represents such a manifest phenomenon that it demands systematic, thorough investigation.

Against this backdrop, there is a heightened recognition of the role that linguistics plays in shaping medical discourse, as indicated, for instance, by the increasing number of meta-study reviews assessing the application of discourse analysis in health professions education (MacLeod, Ellaway, and Cleland 2024). In the literary field, particular attention has been devoted to how its methods have influenced perspectives on the limitations of biomedical approaches while facilitating a critical interrogation of power dynamics related to gender, class, and ethnicity (Hurwitz and Bates 2016). Concurrently, discussions in the health sciences call for a redefinition of “knowledge translation” through the lens of the humanities, emphasising the interdependence of cultural, textual, and material practices (Engebretsen, Sandset, and Ødemark 2017; Ostherr 2023). These developments reflect a broader recognition that linguistics and literary studies not only offer insights into medical communication and associated practices but also contribute to reshaping epistemological horizons in healthcare.

The essays collected in the following pages are grounded in linguistic and literary inquiry but do not speak “with a single voice” (Shapiro, Coulehan, Wear, *et al.* 2009, 194), ultimately reinforcing the role of the diverse strands of humanities in contemporary discussions on well-being, illness, and disease. While they offer diverse methodological approaches, they share a common commitment to tracing the evolution of interdisciplinary exchange across centuries. Organised chronologically, these contributions illuminate historical transformations in the ways we think about biomedicine, healthcare, disability, and related topics, shedding light on how linguistic and literary perspectives have long constructed and shaped our understanding of scientific knowledge, professional identity, patient experience, illness, and care.

Girolamo Tessuto’s opening contribution, “Constructing Scholarly Ethos in Non-mainstream Medical Research Writing: Discursive and Linguistic Strategies”, examines how scholars in alternative and complementary medicine contend with the challenges of securing legitimacy within a predominantly biomedical framework, gradually gaining recognition in certain academic publishing venues. Scholars in this field, however, face considerable challenges, not only in securing legitimacy within a predominantly biomedical framework but also in articulating arguments that strengthen their credibility. To address these difficulties, they employ rhetorical strategies that assert their authority and align with the expectations of academic discourse, relying on linguistic and discursive techniques to construct a persuasive scholarly ethos. Through a corpus-driven analysis of academic articles in the field, Tessuto explores how these authors present themselves, engage with their audience, and structure their arguments to enhance credibility and persuasiveness. Drawing on research in academic discourse analysis, with particular attention to evaluative stance-meaning making resources, this study investigates how scholars assert expertise, negotiate disciplinary boundaries, and reinforce their legitimacy. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, Tessuto identifies recurring rhetorical patterns that shape persuasion and interaction in this form of academic writing, ultimately offering valuable insights into how alternative medicine researchers establish and maintain their scholarly ethos.

Serena Baiesi’s “Doctors and Medical Practices in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest*” examines the complex interplay between medicine and Gothic fiction in Ann Radcliffe’s novel (1791), highlighting how the author integrates contemporary medical discourse into the Gothic aesthetic. While medical Gothic is often associated with later texts such as *Frankenstein* or *Jekyll and Hyde*, Baiesi argues that Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest* marks a transitional moment

where illness and treatment are embedded within realistic rather than supernatural frameworks. In fact, Radcliffe challenges traditional Gothic representations of affliction by portraying disease and injury as consequences of tangible experiences such as trauma, psychological distress, or physical harm. Baiesi critically engages with Radcliffe's depiction of medical professionals, distinguishing between physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries to reflect contemporary debates on medical authority and practice. Radcliffe acknowledges the importance of medical intervention, yet she critiques its limitations, particularly through the portrayal of ineffective or self-important doctors. Particularly striking is Baiesi's discussion of gendered medical care through Madame La Luc, a female practitioner whose empirical knowledge and compassion contrast with the often ineffectual male doctors. By foregrounding the doctor-patient relationship, Radcliffe weaves medical discourse into the Gothic, using illness and treatment to negotiate themes of authority, agency, and rationality.

Valentina Pramaggiore's "‘I am at last vanquished by sickness’: The Narrative of Illness and Disability in Mary Darby Robinson's Letters" shows that Robinson's final letters construct a nuanced narrative of illness, disability, and selfhood, arguing that her correspondence provides a crucial, yet often overlooked, autobiographical account distinct from her published works. Framing her analysis within disability studies and narrative medicine, Pramaggiore explores how Robinson, a former actress and prolific writer, used letter-writing to express her bodily suffering, emotional turmoil, and precarious financial circumstances in the final months of her life. Unlike her published prose and poetry, which largely omit references to her paralysis, Robinson's letters offer an unfiltered record of physical decline and the psychological toll of chronic illness. The essay highlights the shifting ways in which Robinson coped with her identity as a patient, a mother, and a professional writer, particularly in relation to her daughter Maria Elizabeth, her primary caregiver. Pramaggiore highlights the tensions in this caregiving dynamic, as Robinson oscillates between gratitude and resentment, revealing the emotional and social complexities of dependence. Additionally, she situates Robinson's epistolary self-representation within the broader cultural stigmatisation of disabled women, emphasising how her letters challenge the satirical and often cruel public portrayals of her condition. Ultimately, Pramaggiore argues that Robinson's correspondence functions as both a therapeutic act and a form of resistance, reclaiming narrative control over a body that had been publicly objectified, medicalised, and ridiculed.

Carlotta Fiammenghi's "Discourses of Health, Wellbeing, and Sanitation in the Victorian Anti-Vaccination Popular Press: A Corpus-assisted Discourse Analysis of the VicVaDis Corpus" investigates discourses of health, illness, disease, and sanitation in Victorian anti-vaccination literature. Through a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the VicVaDis corpus, this study reveals how Victorian anti-vaccinationists framed vaccination as a dangerous intervention that disrupted the body's natural state. Frequently linking vaccines to the spread of disease, they portrayed them as unnatural and harmful rather than beneficial. Instead of supporting immunisation, these campaigners advocated for sanitation, hygiene, and natural remedies as superior forms of disease prevention. Fiammenghi situates these discourses within broader scepticism toward emerging medical practices and institutionalised medicine, highlighting how vaccination was positioned as a threat to bodily integrity and public health. Her findings reveal striking continuities between Victorian and contemporary anti-vaccination rhetoric, demonstrating how persistent themes – such as the valorisation of natural health, mistrust of medical authorities, and reliance on anecdotal evidence – continue to shape vaccine hesitancy today. By tracing these discursive patterns over time, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the historical foundations of vaccine opposition and offers insight into the ways long-standing narratives continue to influence contemporary public health debates.

Stefano Rossi's "The Stigma on 'the Tigress-Cub': Late-Victorian Psychiatric Genetics and Wilkie Collins' *The Legacy of Cain*" explores the intersection of late-Victorian medical discourse and literary representations of hereditary psychosis and criminality. Analysing *Legacy of Cain* (1888) alongside medical treatises by Prosper Lucas, Bénédict Augustin Morel, and Henry Maudsley, Rossi situates the novel within broader anxieties about biological determinism, degeneration, and gendered conceptions of hereditary pathology. He highlights how Victorian medicine pathologised women as primary agents of degeneration, attributing to them the transmission of mental illness and moral corruption to future generations. Collins' novel directly engages with these theories, interrogating the deterministic logic that links maternal inheritance to criminal behaviour. Through the figure of Eunice, the daughter of a convicted murderess, *The Legacy of Cain* critiques the notion that heredity dictates moral character, instead emphasising the formative influence of environment, nurture, and individual conscience. Rossi argues that Collins appropriates medical rhetoric to expose the fallacies of psychiatric genetics, resisting the fatalistic assumption that criminality is an inescapable legacy. Ultimately, *The Legacy of Cain* subverts contemporary fears of hereditary psychosis, questioning the entrenched stigma against women as conduits of degeneration and affirming the role of personal agency beyond genetic inheritance.

Annalisa Federici's "Echoes of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in Scientific Periodicals: Sexual and Mental Pathology in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Medical Discourse" offers a corpus-based terminological analysis of the language of moral decadence, sexual deviance, and mental degeneration introduced and disseminated by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his seminal medical-psychiatric treatise, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). She further examines the extent to which this specialised terminology permeated British medical discourse, particularly in scientific periodicals between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Applying corpus linguistics methodology, Federici's study analyses Krafft-Ebing's work to identify and contextualise domain-specific terms related to sexual and mental pathology, assessing their role in the broader dissemination of dominant discourses on decadence and degeneration. These terms are then examined for frequency and collocational patterns in a corpus of medical articles published in the *Journal of Mental Science*, a leading specialist periodical of the time. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, Federici demonstrates how specific lexical choices not only reflected but also reinforced prevailing cultural and ideological frameworks surrounding sexuality and mental health. Given that terminologies represent conceptual structures within specialised domains, her essay bridges linguistic and historical approaches to medical-psychiatric discourse, ultimately illustrating the potential of corpus-based methods to reveal underlying knowledge systems and professional ideologies within expert communities.

Isabella Martini's "A volitional interference': A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study on Birth Control in Edwardian England" focuses on the Edwardian period as a time of profound social transformation in Britain, characterised by legislative reforms that laid the foundation for the modern welfare state. These reforms ignited widespread public debate, particularly in the British press, where health and social policy were extensively discussed. Among the most contentious issues was birth control, a topic that provoked polarised opinions across different social strata. Despite its criminalisation in 1861, abortion remained a common birth control practice among both working-class and upper-class women. Although the prevalence of such practices during the Victorian and Edwardian eras has been widely studied, their linguistic representation in the Edwardian press has received little attention. Addressing this gap, Martini's study contributes to research in historical pragmatics and news discourse by applying corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Examining a corpus of letters to the editor on birth control published in Edwardian

British newspapers, she identifies recurring linguistic patterns to investigate how the subject was framed in early twentieth-century news discourse. By doing so, this study offers insight into the intersection of language, ideology, and social change, revealing how press discourse shaped contemporary perceptions of reproductive rights and morality.

Andrea Raso's "Diffusing the Vir/us: Derek Jarman's Transmedial Eco-logy as Pharmacopoeia" examines how Jarman's artistic and literary output constructs a transmedial ecology that resists the epistemic violence of medicalised stigma in the context of HIV/AIDS. Engaging with *Modern Nature* (1989-1990), *The Garden* (1990), and his gardening practice at Prospect Cottage, Raso argues that Jarman's multimodal aesthetic – spanning film, writing, and landscape – challenges dominant biomedical discourses by intertwining illness with environmental entanglements. Rather than depicting disease as an isolated affliction, Jarman formulates a pharmacopoeia, a *sympoietic* fusion of medical, ecological, and political narratives that dismantles the binary between subject and object, health and contagion. At the core of this project is Jarman's garden, which, in its defiance of conventional horticultural order, embodies resistance to heteronormative purity and the biopolitical regulation of queer bodies under Thatcherism. Raso situates Jarman's work within ecocriticism and transmediality, demonstrating how his rejection of linear storytelling and fixed forms mirrors his challenge to stable identities and medical determinism. Ultimately, Jarman's practice foregrounds an ethics of care and interdependence, where illness is not merely endured but actively reimaged through aesthetic and ecological interventions, affirming queer survival beyond the constraints of biomedical and cultural stigma.

Closing the issue, Ilaria Natali's "The Doctor-Writer and the Boundaries of Literariness: The Case of Dannie Abse" interrogates the tensions between medical practice and literary authorship, using Abse's dual identity as a physician and poet to examine the complex negotiations between these two domains. Situating her analysis within broader debates in medical humanities, Natali investigates how Abse's poetry reflects the ethical, psychological, and epistemological dilemmas of medical practice, particularly its hierarchical structures and the asymmetrical power dynamic between doctor and patient. Considering the tendency to categorise physician-authored literature either as lacking aesthetic merit or as primarily serving a therapeutic function, Natali argues that Abse's work resists both medical and literary essentialism. His poetry presents doctors as conflicted figures, often detached, self-doubting, or morally burdened, destabilising the heroic ideal of the physician. At the same time, Abse's Jewish heritage and engagement with collective trauma introduce another layer of complexity, as survivor's guilt inflects his poetic meditations on illness, death, and care. Ultimately, Natali contends that Abse's writing challenges rigid disciplinary boundaries, illustrating that the doctor-writer is neither fully physician nor purely poet but an unstable figure whose work thrives in the interstices of medicine and literature.

By tracing the constantly shifting and reconfiguring convergences of linguistics, literary studies, and medical discourse across historical and contemporary contexts, these contributions bring to light the critical role of the humanities in interrogating medical knowledge, challenging power structures, and expanding our understanding of well-being, disease, and care. In the wake of global health crises and as debates on medical authority, patient agency, and the ethics of care grow increasingly complex, the urgency of this kind of endeavour becomes ever more pressing. We are therefore convinced that this collection provides valuable ideas and insights into the interdisciplinary lines of research afforded by the various contributors and will be enjoyed by junior as well as senior researchers in the field.



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