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‘STAR OF THE EYE’ IN ENGLISH HISTORICAL DICTIONARIES

The Middle English Dictionary lists as separate entries the homonymic nouns sterne n.(1) ‘star’ and stern(e) n.(2) ‘stern of a ship’. Besides their most common applications, both words have developed some extended meanings. Under the entry for stern(e) n.(2), sense group 2, it is stated that the combinations stern(e) of the eie and eie stern(e) denote the cornea, the plural form sternes of the eie signifying the pupils of the eyes. The quotations illustrating the anatomical uses come from a single source, a fifteenth-century translation of the French surgeon Guy de Chauliac’s Inventarium seu collectorium in parte cyrurgali medicine.¹ The English text was edited by Margaret Ogden.² In its lexical analysis, Michael McVaugh’s edition of the original Latin work often provides indispensable information for understanding the words and phrases used by the translator.³

¹ Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn, and Robert E. Lewis (eds), Middle English Dictionary (Ann Arbor, 1952–2001). Consulted online at <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>. Hereafter MED.

² Margaret S. Ogden (ed.), The Chirurgie of Guy de Chauliac, EETS, o.s. 265 (London, 1971). Ogden edited the text found in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS ang. 25, fols. 2r–191v.

³ Michael R. McVaugh (ed.), Guigonis de Caulhiaco (Guy de Chauliac) Inventarium sive Chirurgia Magna, vol. I: Text, Studies in Ancient Medicine 14/1 (Leiden, 1997). Vol. II, a commentary on the text prepared by McVaugh and Ogden, was also published in 1997 as vol. 14, pt. 2, of the series.

In the light of the available evidence, stern(e) of the eie and eie stern(e) were rare terms in Middle English medical writing. Ogden's edition is the only text where they have been recorded. There are no occurrences in the Middle English versions of Benvenutus Grassus's De Probatissima Arte Oculorum, which use the loanwords cornea and pupilla instead, also mentioning that the latter has the English equivalent apple of the eye.⁴ A corpus of circa 11,500 manuscript and book pages, gathered from 72 medical treatises written in English or translated into English during the period 1375–1550, did not reveal any additional occurrences, either.⁵ The passages below, from Ogden's edition, thus contain the four attestations of stern(e) of the eie or eie stern(e) that are known at the present moment. The corresponding Latin term in McVaugh's edition is given within square brackets.

Of brekyng of þe ey3e sterne [L: cornee (230/15)] and of goyng out of þe humour. But if the sterne of þe ey3e [L: cornea (230/16)] be broken and þe humour comeþ oute so þat þere folwe areryng vp, it is an open token.⁶

Vngula ... is a manere of growyng owte of þe pannycles comyng forth fro þe lacrimale vpon þe coniunctyf, and sometyme vnto þe sterne of þe ey3e [L: ad corneam et pupillam (333/10)].⁷

⁴ Laurence M. Eldredge (ed.), Benvenutus Grassus: The Wonderful Art of the Eye; A Critical Edition of the Middle English Translation of his 'De Probatissima Arte Oculorum' (East Lansing, 1996).

⁵ The corpus was analysed for my Dictionary of Medical Vocabulary in English, 1375–1550: Body Parts, Sickneses, Instruments, and Medicinal Preparations (Abingdon, 2016).

⁶ Ogden, Cyurgie, 307/19–22. Areryng vp 'swelling'.

⁷ Ogden, Cyurgie, 451/11–13. Vngula 'ocular growth resembling a finger-nail', pannycles 'membranes', lacrimale 'corner of the eye', coniunctyf 'conjunctiva'.

He shall firste be examyned if he be dede or alyue in touchinge his pulse ... in byholdynge þe sternes of þe eyzen [L: pupillas oculorum (302/16–17)] if þai be movede.⁸

The corresponding Latin passages show that the referent of Middle English stern(e) of the eie or eie stern(e) was indeed the cornea or the pupil, in the second quotation apparently the complex formed by the two parts of the eye. One can thus agree with the definitions given in MED. What is puzzling, though, is the placing of the ocular meanings under the entry for stern(e) n.(2) ‘stern of a ship’. The stern is the rear part of a ship, which makes it difficult to see how that meaning could have formed the basis for the senses ‘cornea’ and ‘pupil’. The cornea, in medieval times as now, was understood to be ‘the convex, transparent anterior part of the eye, comprising one sixth of the outermost tunic of the eye bulb’.⁹ The cornea and pupil are not at the back of the eye, quite the contrary.

There is evidence that suggests that the actual source of the ocular terms is the other homonym listed in MED, sterne n.(1) ‘star’. There were at least fifteen different names used of the cornea during the period 1375–1550.¹⁰ Where writers did not just copy the Latin word as such or with minor modifications, the vernacular versions that they produced most often emphasized either the hardness or the translucence of this part of the eye. The entire text of Guy de Chauliac’s surgical treatise was translated into Middle English by at least three translators who worked independently.¹¹ One of them renders cornea as clear of the eye, clear tunicle, or lanterny tunicle:

⁸ Ogden, Cyurgie, 406/24–7.

⁹ Marie T. O’Toole (ed.), Mosby’s Medical Dictionary (St. Louis, 2017), s.v. cornea.

¹⁰ The following are the relevant entries in Norri, Dictionary: ball of the eye, clear of the eye, clear tunicle, corne, cornea, corneus, cornua, eye stern, horned cloth, hornen cloth, lanterny tunicle, sight of the eye, star of the eye, stern of the eye, tunica cornea.

¹¹ Björn Wallner, ‘A Newly Discovered Guy de Chauliac Manuscript’, N&Q, xxxviii (1991), 159.

Of obtalmia & apostums, puschis, exituris or vncomes bihinde þe clere of þe iʒe
[L: retro corneam (100/29)].¹²

Puschis, bladris, bothers, quitres þat ben bihinde cornea, þat is þe clere of þe iʒe
[L: pustule, vesice, bothores, sanies retro corneam (100/34–35)], wiche or what þei ben apperip
bi þe þingis þat ben biforseid.¹³

Sief rosate is put of Ihesu in þe chapiter of wannes & quiture retro corneam .i.
byhinde þe clere tunicle [L: corneam (104/2)].¹⁴

Coniunctiua ... biclippip al þe iʒe saue þat þat schewip of cornea or lanterni tunicle
[L: de cornea (35/22)].¹⁵

Many Middle English and Early Modern English medical works comment on the
shininess of the cornea. They observe, for example, that this part of the eye ‘is clepid so for þe
liknesse þat it haþ to a schynyng horn’,¹⁶ ‘ys scheninge and sottill and translusente as a
schynging horne’,¹⁷ ‘schewip open in þe yʒe in þe maner of a briʒt horne’,¹⁸ ‘schineþ as a

¹² Cambridge, Jesus College MS Q.G.23, fol. 101rb. Obtalmia ‘eye inflammation’, apostums ‘swellings’, puschis ‘pimples’, exituris ‘purulent swellings’, vncomes ‘boils’.

¹³ Cambridge, Jesus College MS Q.G.23, fol. 101va. Bothers ‘pustules forming clusters’, quitres ‘suppurations’.

¹⁴ Cambridge, Jesus College MS Q.G.23, fol. 104va. Sief rosate ‘eye medicine made with rose petals’, wannes ‘swellings’, quiture ‘pus’.

¹⁵ Cambridge, Jesus College MS Q.G.23, fol. 33vb. Biclippip ‘surrounds’.

¹⁶ William of Saliceto’s surgical treatise in BL Additional MS 10440, fol. 4r.

¹⁷ Henri de Mondeville’s surgical treatise in Cambridge, Peterhouse MS 118, I, fol. 19rb.

¹⁸ Bernard of Gordon’s Lilium Medicinæ in Bodleian Library Ashmole MS 1505, fol. 100v.

schynynge horn’,¹⁹ ‘hap þat name of þe doynge þerof, for he is ful liche to a briȝt horne, and is briȝt and clere to þe spirit of siȝt’,²⁰ and ‘is called cornea bycause it shyneth like an horne’.²¹ It is evident that in the medical writings of the period, the cornea was associated with a shiny quality, the original motivation for the term, the horn-like toughness, being secondary for many writers. Medieval Latin medical treatises similarly compare the cornea to a shiny horn.²² In the MED, the senses ‘cornea’ and ‘pupil of the eye’, with the accompanying quotations, should be moved under the entry for sterne n.(1) ‘star’, accompanied by a brief explanation of how that extended meaning came about.

According to the MED, sterne ‘star’ is a borrowing from Old Norse first recorded in Middle English, and the Oxford English Dictionary concurs.²³ It is interesting to note that the native English word, star, has also been used of the cornea in at least one medical work. The English translation of the book written by the German surgeon Hieronymus Braunschweig was published in 1525. In the chapter on the wounds of the eye, readers are told that ‘[a] chylde of viij yeres of age was hurte with a shafte in y^e sterre of his eye that therin was sene a grete webbe’.²⁴ Chiara Benati has presented evidence suggesting that the English text was translated from a pre-1525 Middle Dutch version, now lost.²⁵ The earliest surviving Middle Dutch copy of the book has the phrase sterreken van zĳn oge corresponding to the English sterre of his eye.²⁶ Benati observes that both the Middle High German original and its Middle Low German

¹⁹ Richard Grothé (ed.), ‘Le ms. Wellcome 564: deux traités de chirurgie en moyen-anglais’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Montreal, 1982), 61/12–13. The quotation comes from a surgical treatise compiled by an anonymous London surgeon.

²⁰ M. C. Seymour et al. (eds), On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomæus Anglicus, ‘De Proprietatibus Rerum’, 2 vols (Oxford, 1975), 181/10–11.

²¹ Joannes de Vigo, The Most Excellent Workes of Chirurgerye (London, 1543), sig. B1rb.

²² R. E. Latham, D. R. Howlett, and R. K. Ashdowne (eds), Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources (Oxford, 1975–2013), s.v. corneus, sense 2.

²³ John Simpson and Michael Proffitt (eds), The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, 2000–), s.v. starn n. Consulted online at <<http://www.oed.com>>, accessed 29 July 2018. Hereafter OED.

²⁴ Hieronymus Braunschweig, The Noble Experyence of the Vertuous Handywarke of Surgeri (London, 1525), sig. H4rb.

²⁵ Chiara Benati, ‘Dat Boek der Wundenartzstedye’ und der niederdeutsche chirurgische Fachwortschatz (Göppingen, 2012), 8–9.

²⁶ Hieronymus Braunschweig, Das Hantwerck der Cyrurgien (Utrecht, 1535), sig. H1vb.

rendering employ a similar stellar metaphor, stern des ougenn / oghen.²⁷ Clearly, the model for the English star of the eye ‘cornea’ is to be found in Dutch and, ultimately, German.

Hieronymus Braunschweig’s surgical manual appears in the OED bibliography. A quotation title search of the OED yields a list of 105 entries which cite passages from the book. The entry for the word star, now updated for the third edition, is not among the results. Nor do the many senses of star given in the OED include ‘cornea’. It is possible that those analysing the vocabulary of the surgical book failed to recognize that star is used as an anatomical term rather than a general description in the above-cited passage. The ocular meaning should be added to the list of the senses of star in the OED, illustrated by a quotation from Hieronymus Braunschweig’s book.

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²⁷ Benati, ‘Das Boek’, 224.