
“COROUNES TWEYNE”: THE EYES HAVE IT

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For years, scholars have pondered the meaning of the mysterious “corounes tweyne” in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. Pandarus uses the phrase as he ushers Criseyde into the bedroom where Troilus is feigning an illness. Pandarus tells Criseyde (lines II-1733 ff.):

Nece, I conjure, and heighly yow defende,
On his byhalf which that us al sowle sende,
And in the vertue of corounes tweyne,
Sle naught this man, that hath for yow this peyne.

In most interpretations, of course, “corounes” literally means “coronas” or “crowns,” and “tweyne” means “twin” or “two.” But what were the twin crowns or twin coronas? What was Chaucer referring to when he used the term, “corounes tweyne”? Skeats speculated that “corounes tweyne” were nuptial crowns of roses and lilies mentioned in the “Second Nun’s Tale” (573), and Malarkey gives an interesting interpretation of the crowns as symbols of the spiritual and temporal power of the church (with an allusion to the then-double crown of the papal tiara). Root thought the crowns might stand for Pity and Bounty or Justice and Mercy, while Patch thought they might have been suggested by “the crown of virtue” mentioned in Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*. Doob, in 1972, discussed her opinion that the word

“corounes” was actually supposed to be “ceraunius,” a semi-precious stone often listed in medieval lapidaries. Dozens of other suggestions have been considered, but none to the satisfaction of any large body of scholars. Two heretofore undiscussed interpretations which I briefly entertained included the possibility that Pandarus was invoking the power of the Northern and Southern Crowns, two constellations, consisting of elliptical rings of stars, that were known in Chaucer’s time; or an allusion to the use of the two crowns in English coronation ceremonies. (Although the Imperial State Crown which is used as the “second crown” in contemporary English coronations did not exist until 1838, there are many references in coronation histories to the use of more than one crown in medieval ceremonies.) However, I have come across a reference which yields far greater potential as a possible solution to the “corounes tweyne” problem. I believe that when Pandarus used those words, he was referring to Criseyde’s eyes.

My first clue that Criseyde’s eyes might be involved in the interpretation was an entry in the *Middle English Dictionary* for the word “coroune.” Definition 9 (e), which follows three pages of agate-type definitions for that word, reads: “the iris (of the eye).” This was listed as a miscellaneous use of the word, with an example from a1398, as follows (612).

(e) (a1398) *Trev. Earth. 42a / a: Þe blak of þe eige ... haþ a boute hire a cercle þat hatte corona; by þat corowne þe blak of þe yze is I merked & I bounded ... Þis corowne by þe roundenes þerof hizteþ þe blak of þe yze. [The black of the eyes has a circle that has coronas; by that corona the black of the eye is marked and bound ...]

The next question was: Could “in the vertue of” be translated as

“by virtue of”? Root implies that one of the translations of “in the virtue of” could be “by the power of” (457). Doob points out that there is confusion over whether exact wordings should be “in the vertu” or “in vertu,” and “of the corounes tweyne” or “of corounes tweyne” (85). She further cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* to justify the exchange of “in” for “by.” *OED* 8 states that “in virtue of” and “by virtue of” both mean “by the power or efficacy of (something aiding or justifying),” and Doob adds that this usage was current in 1230 (92).

By applying these definitions to Pandarus’s passage, we arrive at the meaning as follows: “Don’t slay Troylus by virtue of your eyes,” i.e., “Don’t slay Troylus by the power of your eyes,” i.e., “Don’t slay Troylus with your eyes.” This interpretation is satisfying as well as appropriate because it fits in not only with the motif of Criseyde’s “eyen cleere” but also with the motif of the power of Criseyde’s eyes to harm or heal. Criseyde’s eyes had triggered Troylus’s misery early in lines I-302 ff.:

Lo, he that leet hymselfen so konnyng,
And scorned hem that Loves peynes dryen,
Was ful unwar that Love hadde his dwellyng
Withinne the subtile stremes of hire eyen,
That sodeynly hym thoughte he felt dyen
Right with hire look the spirit in his herte.

In lines 229 ff., Chaucer says that, although Troylus was a “ferse and proude knight,” yet “with a lok his herte wax afere.” Troylus had also been deeply affected by Criseyde’s “looks” in I-293 ff. Criseyde had given him a look that said, “What, may I not stonden here?” But soon

"hire lokyng gan she lyght." In I-363, he dreams of her looks, and later, he wants to be "esed" of "his hote fyr" by seeing "hire goodly look" (445 ff.). In Book II, Pandarus tells Criseyde that he has overheard Troylus talking to himself about the power of her eyes (II-534 ff.):

‘For certes, lord, so sore hath she me wounded,
That stod in blak, wyth lokyng of hire eyen,
That to myn hertes botme it is ysounded,
Through which I wot that I mot nedes deyen.’

Therefore, it would be extremely appropriate for Pandarus to warn Criseyde, as he ushers her into the bedroom where Troylus awaits, not to slay Troylus with her eyes. Also, if it is true that Chaucer wrote "Merciless Beaute," he would have been familiar with the concept of eyes that slay a lover quickly. That poem opens as follows (Fisher 705):

Yowr eyen two woll sle me sodenly;
I may the beaute of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit throughout my herte kene.

And if Chaucer did not write this poem, it is possible that he was familiar with it or similar concepts.

It is revealing to reread Doob's article and omit her references to the lapidarian translation. She has developed an argument in which the semi-precious ceranium stones come to symbolize Criseyde's beauty. Doob often discusses Criseyde's eyes in connection with her beauty and mentions the "special prominence" that Chaucer gives

them by frequent mention of 'eyen cleere' and "bryghte hewe" (91). Her final conclusion omits Criseyde's eyes, though:

. . . so in mentioning the "corounes tweyne," Pandarus is, I believe, referring to Criseyde's beauty, the sight of which initiated Troylus' illness in Book I. Distant glances of her have almost killed Troylus, Pandarus seems to be saying; let her be careful that beauty near at hand does not slay him outright (94).

If one substitutes "eyes" for "beauty" throughout Doob's paper, she and I have arrived at similar conclusions, but by a different route. I have eliminated the extraneous lapidarian middleman. Furthermore, the previously discussed powers of Criseyde's eyes to heal and to harm, plus the documented usage of "coroune" to mean iris of the eyes, make it not only aesthetically pleasing but also academically feasible that Chaucer was referring to the "corounes tweyne" of Criseyde's eyes.

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