

The Meaning of bloi
in the Chanson de Roland

Most readers of the Chanson de Roland are somewhat surprised to note that bloi, as it appears in the text, does not necessarily mean blue. F. Whitehead, for example, is not at all certain, as his glossary entry of the word makes clear: "blue(?), light-yellow(?)." ¹ For T. Atkinson Jenkins the equivalent is yellow. ² The context, unfortunately, provides little help the four times the word bloi is used in the Chanson de Roland:

Li reis Marsilie. . . ,
.....
Sur un perrun de marbre bloi se culched
(ll. 10-12).

Escuz unt genz [paien]. . .
E gunfanuns blancs e blois e vermeilz
(ll. 998-99).

El cors li met tute l'enseingne [sic] bloie
(l. 1621).

Escuz ont genz [Franceis]. . .
E gunfanuns blancs e vermeilz e blois
(ll. 1799-1800). ³

Joseph Bédier and Edmond Soufflet, in their translations of the poem, render bloi as blue each time. ⁴ But La Curne de Sainte-Palaye (1697-1781) indicates how troublesome this one word can be: he gives as the meaning not bleu but rather blond and adds in a footnote that "bloi peut désigner une autre couleur que le blond." ⁵

Adolf Tobler and Erhard Lommatzsch give three

basic meanings: 1) fahl (also blass and bleich): faded, pale; 2) hellblond (Hellfarbe): fair (fair-haired); and 3) blau: sky-blue or dark blue. They too, like Bédier and Soufflet, suggest specific meanings for bloi as it is used in the Chanson de Roland:

- line 12: the "perrun de marbre bloi" of Marsilius is pale-color;
- line 999 (and therefore 1800): the banners are white, sky-blue (or dark blue) and bright red;
- line 1621: the small banner is sky-blue (or dark blue).⁶

One can wonder, however, how reliable this solution is since even in Tobler-Lommatzsch one finds at least seven different meanings for bloi: pale (ashy pale, lead color), not bright, fair (gold, yellow, light color), color of skin contusion (black and blue), light blue, bluish-gray and sky-blue (dark blue). Furthermore, the fahl, blass and bleich given by Tobler-Lommatzsch as one of the basic meanings of bloi can be pale, livid or any of the intermediate shades (ashen, gray, etc.). The Tobler-Lommatzsch work further complicates the problem by citing a passage from the Plaintes de la Vierge en anglo-français in which the flesh of the crucified Christ has become as bloi as marble (col. 1004). Depending on point of view, the body of Christ could conceivably be pale or blue (livid) following the crucifixion and death or black and blue as a result of the scourging which preceded the crucifixion. Although this second possibility is more remote, it nonetheless remains a possibility. Furthermore, it is unlikely that one could consider marble as having a pale or faded color. Thus Tobler and Lommatzsch, who do narrow somewhat the rather open-ended definition in the footnote in La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, do not definitively settle the question.

If the meaning of bloi in the Chanson de Roland creates problems, at least the word's development from the Indo-European *bh \bar{l} euo- > *bl \bar{e} wa provides an interesting study. Friedrich Kluge traces it into the Germanic, Italic, Celtic and Balto-Slavic subfamilies of Indo-European.⁷ From *bl \bar{e} wa developed not only the Middle High German blā and blāwer, the Old High German (Frankish and Bavarian) blāo and blāwēr and the Old Saxon blāo but also, among others according to Kluge, the Anglo-Saxon blāe(w) (light blue) and blāewen (bluish) as well as the Old Norse blar, which meant blue and blue-black when referring to things and dark when referring to persons. Thus the Old Norse blamaðr meant an Arab, Moor or African.

Related to the Germanic language derivatives are the Latin flavus (gold, reddish-yellow, fair) and the Celtic transmissions: 1) Scottish blār, which Kluge describes a white ("mit einer Blesse im Gesicht, von Tieren," p. 82, Blesse referring to the white mark or white stripe on the face of an animal), 2) Irish blār and 3) Welch blawr, the latter two meaning gray.

In addition, Kluge lists borrowings: the Latvian blāws (bluish and pale), the Italian biavo and the French bleu on which is based the English blue. (The development of the Italian biavo is interesting: it came not from the Latin flavus, as one might expect, but rather from the feminine form of the Old Provençal blau, blava. This Old Provençal form derived from the Late Latin blāvus, which in turn came from the Old High German (Frankish) blāo and only in the fifteenth century did the present meaning of biavo: azzurro chiaro become firmly established.)⁸

Kluge points out that blau, in the course of its development, did not refer to a particular color but rather to anything which could be considered light-colored ("Die Bedeutungen schwanken wie bei vielen Farbnamen; blau, gelb und blond zielen alle

auf lichte Farben," p. 82). It seems rather that the farther north one goes in Europe, the darker became the meaning of what developed from *bhlēuo: yellow or golden in Italy to gray in Ireland-Walês to dark blue and blue-black in Scandinavia. The exceptions here are Scotland (Scottish Gaelic), where what now means blue meant white, and Latvia (Let-tish) where both the northern and southern European meanings of the word prevailed, neither of which means sky-blue.

This brief study does not resolve the question. On the contrary, it appears that, having seen both the difficulty regarding the meaning of bloi as well as the development of what became bloi in Old French, we have good reason for treading lightly around this word when dealing not only with the Chanson de Roland but with any Old French text.

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NOTES

¹F. Whitehead, ed., La Chanson de Roland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), p. 134.

²T. Atkinson Jenkins, ed., La Chanson de Roland (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1924), p. 296.

³All the references to the Chanson de Roland are from the Whitehead edition.

⁴Joseph Bédier, ed., La Chanson de Roland (Paris: L'Édition d'Art H. Piazza, 1930), and Edmond Soufflet, traducteur, La Chanson de

Roland (Angers: Editions Jacques Petit, 1943), 11. 12, 999, 1621 and 1800.

⁵ La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, Dictionnaire historique de l'ancien langage françois ou Glossaire de la langue françoise depuis son origine jusqu'au siècle de Louis XIV, III (Paris: H. Champion, 1877), 32.

⁶ Adolf Tobler und Erhard Lommatzsch, Altfranzösischer Wörterbuch (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1925), I, cols. 1003-04.

⁷ Friedrich Kluge, Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963), p. 82.

⁸ Carlo Battisti e Giovanni Alessio, Dizionario Etimologico Italiano (Firenze: G. Barbèra Editore, 1975), I, 508.