'Blachleor ides’ in the Old English Poem Judith

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1. Introduction

It sometimes happens that we cannot decide how we should interpret a polysemic word in a story because more than two meanings of the word could be appropriate to the context. Deciding which meaning is more suitable to the context depends totally on the readers’ interpretation of the story, and the decision they make could change the images of the characters that appear in the story. In this paper, I will deal with one such polysemic word: blachleor, found in the Old English poem Judith. I will discuss how the image of Judith’s maid, described using the word: blachleor, could be changed by the two possible meanings: ‘pale-cheeked, with fear’ and ‘bright-cheeked, beautiful.’ It will be considered which of the two meanings of the word is more suitable to the context from a philological point of view.

2. Blachleor in Judith 128

It happened on the fourth day that the brave Hebrew woman Judith who believed in God, beheaded an Assyrian tyrant Holofernes, who had become deeply drunk after a banquet he himself held. On that night, Judith prayed in Holofernes’s chamber for the help of God to strengthen her resolve, struck his head twice with a sharp blade, and then, she picked up the bloody head which had rolled down on the floor, put it into a bag and handed it to her maid to bring back to Bethulia, their hometown.

This is a passage from The Book of Judith, Chapter thirteen, in the Apocrypha of the Vulgate. The Old English verse Judith, which will be called Judith in this paper, is said to have been composed on the basis of this Latin translation. Here we will see the two corresponding passages from Judith and the Vulgate describing the scene mentioned in the beginning of this section.

Et post pusillum exivit, et tradidit caput Holofernis ancillae suae, et iussit ut mitteret illud in peram suam.

(Vulgate Judith xiii. 11)
A moment later she went out and gave Holofernes’s head to the maid, ...who put it in her food-bag...  

'ţa seo snotere mægð snude gebröhte  
'þæs herewæðan heafod swa blodig  
on ðam fætelse, þe hyre foregenga,  
blachleor ides, hyra begea nest,  
ðéawum gehungen, þyder on lædde  
7 hit ða (s)wa heolfrig hyre on hond ageaf,  
(hige) þoncolihe ham to berenne  
Judith gingran sinre.  

(Translation and italics mine)

Then the prudent maiden brought swiftly  
the warrior’s head all bloody  
in the bag, in which her servant,  
a blachleor woman, of excellent virtue,  
thither had fetched the food for them both,  
and then [Judith] gave it [= Holofernes’s head]  
so gory into her [= maid’s] hand,  
to her attendant thoughtful-minded  
to carry home.  

It can be said that in this passage, at least, Judith seems to be more embellished by its author than the Vulgate, and alliterative effects seem to have been employed fully concerned when it was composed.

Receiving the bloody head from her mistress, Judith’s maid is described by the word blachleor, which Whitelock\(^1\) explains in the gloss as meaning “fair-cheeked,” while Timmer\(^4\) gives the definition of “(a woman) with pale cheeks.” This suggests that there can be two different interpretations of the word blachleor, although the difference may be slight. The comparison between the two passages above, moreover, indicates that line 128, including the word blachleor, was not mentioned in the Vulgate and that the author of Judith used the word blachlor originally. In this paper, I will examine the meaning of blachleor through the context of Judith.
3. OE *blachleor*

According to *The Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1986-), which will be abbreviated *DOE* in this paper, the word *blachleor* occurs only in *Judith* 128 and in *Genesis* 1790 throughout the extant Old English literature and it is immediately followed by the word *ides* in both cases.

\[\text{þa seo snotere mægð snde gebrohte} \]
\[\text{tas herewæðan heafod swa blodig}, \]
\[\text{on ðam fiætelse, þe hyre foregenga,} \]
\[\text{blachleor ides, hyra begea nest,} \]
\[\text{ðæwum gedungen, þyder on lædde} \]
\[\text{7 hit ða (s)wa heolfrið hyre on hond ageaf,} \]
\[\text{(hige) toncole ham to berenne} \]
\[\text{Judith gingsan sinre. } \quad (\text{Judith 125-132})^1; \quad \text{italics mine} \]

\[\text{Sceolde forht monig} \]
\[\text{*blachleor* ides bifiende gan} \]
\[\text{on fremdes fæðm;} \quad (\text{Genesis 1969-1971})^2; \quad \text{italics mine} \]

Of *blachleor*, *DOE* says that it is “of uncertain meaning”; ‘pale-cheeked (with fear)’ and ‘with a shining or fair face, beautiful’ have been proposed; *blachleor* ides? ’a pale woman’? ‘a beautiful woman.”’ It suggests that there can be two different interpretations of this word. Bosworth and Toller, on the other hand, in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1929) say that *blachleor* represents “having a pale face, pale-faced, fair” and they cite the passage from *Genesis* 1790 mentioned above with a modern English translation: “many a pale-faced damsel must trembling go.” Their interpretation seems clearer than that of *DOE*, while *Judith* 128 is not mentioned at all.

In *Genesis* 1790, *blachleor* is used to describe a lot of women running away from Sodom and Gomorra, which a mighty host of four kings going south and another host of five kings fight fiercely over. *DOE*’s interpretation “pale-cheeked (with fear)” applies aptly in this case, if the term *blachleor* refers to the faces of many women who are terrified by the threat of war, and the translation of this passage by Bosworth and Toller, which is mentioned above, seems appropriate. Other translations of this passage include Gordon^3) with “many a pale-cheeked woman must go trembling to a stranger’s bosom,” Kennedy^4), “many a trembling maiden, pale with fear, must needs endure a foe’s embrace,” Mason^5), “many a terrified pale-
cheeked maiden would have to go trembling to the embrace of a stranger," and Grein\textsuperscript{12}, "es sollte furchtsam manche bleichwangige Braunt bebend gehen in die Umfassung eines Fremden." Doane, in his gloss in *Genesis A: A New Edition* (Madison, 1978), defines the term *blachleor* as "pale-cheeked, pale (with fear)."

It is more difficult to interpret the word *blachleor* in *Judith* 128 than in *Genesis* 1970. Judith’s maid appears only twice throughout the whole book (*Judith* 128 and 172), and though she herself "remains very vague"\textsuperscript{13} throughout the story, she plays a very special role in that she holds Holofernes’s bloody head which was beheaded by Judith. Moreover, Huppé says that "she (Judith’s maid) shares equally with Judith in concentrated adjectives of praise... courageous, bold in spirit, blessed, ellentriste...colleenferhðe...eadhreðige."\textsuperscript{14} There seems ample room to doubt *DOE*’s interpretation of the word *blachleor* as simply "pale-cheeked (with fear)."

4. OE *blac*

In this section, I will examine the meanings of the word *blac* to interpret the word *blachleor* more clearly.

According to *DOE*, there are 35 examples of the word *blac* in total, of which 25 examples are cited in it. They are divided into two groups according to their meanings and subsequently each group is divided according to the phrases which the word *blachleor* modifies, as follows:

1. bright, shining (mainly poetry) .......................................................... 12exs.
   1. a. of naturally luminous substances or objects such as light,
      the sun, the moon, and fire .................................................. 9exs.
   1. b. of other objects ................................................................. 3exs.
2. pale ................................................................. 13exs.
   2. a. pale in color, rendering pallens ........................................... 1ex.
   2. b. of the face of skin; pale, pallid ........................................ 12exs.

The examples of *DOE* above can be categorized as follows: (The words in bold print are nouns / pronouns which the word *blac* directly modifies, and the corresponding modern English translations are shown in quotation marks.)
blac 1. (12 exs.)

1. a. (9 exs.)

leam ‘ray of light’ Beowulf 1516
leam ‘lightning’ Daniel 379.
leowgl ‘sun’ Guthlac B 1330
leoh ‘light’ Boethius, Consolation of Philosophy 4. 10. 5.
fyr ‘fire’ Daniel 245.
beam ‘beam’ Exodus 120.

1. b. (3 exs.)

beam ‘tree’ Elene 88.
hiw ‘hue’ Panther 25.
split ‘spot’ Phoenix 295.

blac 2. (13 exs.)

2. a. (1 ex.)

carbunculus ‘carbuncle’ Pastoral Care 52. 411.28.

2. b. (12 exs.)

ondwliita ‘face’ Bede, History of the English Church and Nation 2 13. 144.
14, Homilies for Unspecified Occasions 8 46.

ba men, he, bu ‘the men, he, you’ Homilies for Unspecified Occasions 9 323, Latin-OE Glossaries 1 3745,
Chrodegang of Metz 1 60. 19, Bald’s Leechbook II (2) 36. 1.
1, Bald’s Leechbook I 35. 1. 8, Judith 278, Fortunes of Men 39.
hraw ‘corpse’ Rune Poem 90.
hiw ‘hue’ Bald’s Leechbook II (2) 17. 1. 18.
= pallidus Aldhelm Fragments 2. 3. 1. 145.

This table shows the distribution of the examples of blac 1 and 2. Blac 1, as DOE says, is seen mainly in poetry except for the example of Boethius, Consolation of Philosophy, while blac 2 is seen in prose except for three examples: Judith, Rune Poem and Fortunes of Men. As for the words blac modifies, blac 1 is used in connection with fire and light (fire, light of fire, flame; sun, lightning, moon), while blac 2 is used mainly in the description of men, and its usage is apparently different from that of blac 1.

According to A Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (Ithaca, 1978) the usage of blac in poetry is summarized thus: out of a total of 20 examples, there are 17 examples
of blæc 1 and 3 of blæc 2 (Judith 278, Rune Poem 90, Fortunes of Men 39.) These 3 examples are the same as those cited in DOE, and in every case, the phrase which includes blæc has been used to describe a body whose soul has departed upon death.

Considering Latin word pallens and its translation into the Old English word blæc, meaning 2. a., it can easily be imagined that if the word pallens was automatically rendered into the word blæc, the Old English meaning would have been deeply influenced by the original Latin meaning of pallens. It is not unnatural to suppose that widespread use of this type of word rendering spread to other Old English prose as well. I will develop this idea further in future research, as my research is incomplete at this point.

Is it not likely that the original meaning of words employed in poetry is involved as poets create new images and vocabularies? Huppé presents a partial answer to this question in The Web of Words (Albany, 1970):

Blacne has a root meaning, "shining," particularly with reference to fire and lightning (Bosworth-Toller s.v.). The derived meaning "pale" appears in a reference to the light of the moon, one must suppose because of the contrast of darkness and light. A further meaning, "pallor of death," is attested, and derives presumably from the pale shine of death in contrast to the ruddiness of life.¹⁹

Although his statement is very interesting, the basis of his supposition relies only upon An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary by Bosworth and Toller (Oxford, 1929), which is problematical.

As for the etymology of the word blæc, I examined Holthausen's Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Heidelberg, 1963), Lehmann's A Gothic Etymological Dictionary (Leiden, 1986) and Pokorny's Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Bern and München, 1959); however, equal importance is given to the two meanings 'bright' and 'pale,' so that it is difficult to discover the original meaning. It may be possible to suppose that 'bright' is the original meaning, as those three scholars present this meaning as the first of two meanings.

5. Blachleor in Judith 128 reconsidered

Here we will continue to consider the point discussed in section two and the meaning of the word blachleor. Two different possible meanings of blachleor were presented in DOE, these being 'pale-cheeked (with fear)' and '(a woman) with a shining or fair face, beautiful.'
Then we saw that blac formerly had two different, simultaneous meanings: 1. 'bright, shining' and 2. 'pale,' and that meaning 1 was used mainly in poetry and meaning 2 may have been influenced by Latin as it was mainly found in prose. Moreover, meaning 1 represents the light of fire etc., while meaning 2 represents the hue of a man's face; this meaning occurs only in certain situations in poetry, when a man's soul has departed from his body upon death.

_Judith_ was written rather freely by its author and as I stated earlier in section 1, although it is based on the Vulgate, it is a completely original work. Therefore, we cannot use only the style of writing to help interpret the meaning of the word _blachleor_, nor can we interpret _Judith_ 128 from a semantic point of view. If we dare to interpret _blachleor_ with the analogy of the meaning of _blac_; it is difficult to give it the meaning 'bright' since this meaning is not used to refer to the hue of a man's face. Thus, we may consider that since _blachleor_ is used to describe the hue of a man's face in the poem, the definition 'pale' is more appropriate, yet in section 3, we found that _blac_ is only employed in poetry when the person described has already met death which is inconsistent to the context of _Judith_ 128. Is it possible to conclude that the fear which made possible the description of 'pale' was caused by a pallor close to death? In _Genesis_ 1970, there is no problem with the word _blac_ being rendered as 'pale' because of the context, yet the case of _Judith_ 128 is more questionable. Of course, since much has not survived, it is hard to believe that the extant Old English literature includes all of the examples from this period. Therefore, we cannot conclude that the word _blac_ used to modify men in poetry always represents the 'pale' hue of a dead man's face. We, however, should pay attention to the fact that the _Judith_-poet used the word _blac_ only once in _Judith_ in the context that the tyrant Holofernes lay beheaded on his bed, deprived of his soul (_Judith_ 278). There is still room to doubt that _blachleor_ in _Judith_ 128 indicates the same meaning as it does in _Genesis_ 1970.

Incidentally, Taylor mentions, touching on the fact that 'bright' and 'shiny' were thought to be the same as 'beautiful' at this time, that "the association of radiance with beauty and goodness is of long Indo-European tradition." By analogy, it is conceivable that 'bright,' meaning 1 in section 3, had come to be employed as a descriptive word for men and women.

As to this, the _Judith_-poet himself seems to present an answer through his characterization of Judith and Holofernes in the story. Timmer writes that "both Holofernes and Judith are clearly drawn characters, Holofernes in his cruelty, sinfulness and drunkenness and Judith in her courage and goodness. The poet has given Judith the features of an Anglo-Saxon woman, with everything the Anglo-Saxons admired in their woman. She is white and shining (_beorth_, _ælliscinu_), with curly hair (_wundenlocce_); she is noble and holy, but courageous (_ides ellenrof_)."
and above all wise (*gleaw, snotere, seardoncol, gleawhydig, gearotoncol*)." Moreover, Belanoff says that "the poet takes liberties with his source in the Apocrypha in order to make the Christian nature of his version explicit." The *Judith*-poet contrasts Judith and Holofernes on two extremes of the Christian belief: virtue vs. vice. Also, if we consider that Judith’s maid has almost the same characteristics as Judith, as mentioned by Huppé, it may be better to interpret the word *blachleor* in *Judith* 128 as ‘bright-cheeked’ on the basis of the Indo-European tradition which connects light, beauty and virtue. This interpretation can be more effective with Judith, a symbol of virtue, against Holofernes, a symbol of vice.

### 6. Interpretation of *blachleor* in *Judith* 128

In this section, we will examine how *Judith* 128 has been interpreted so far through dictionaries and modern English translations. The dictionaries, translations and texts consulted here are listed in the notes. Translations, which include some sentences just before and after the phrases discussed, are cited as they are in the translator’s style. The category <discussions> in the following chart indicates that it concerns *Judith* 128. Italics in the category of <translations> are mine.

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Timmer (1978) with pale cheeks
Griffith (1997) of pale, or fair complexion
Mitchell & Robinson⁶ (2001) fair-cheeked
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<Discussions>
Hupper (1970) fair
Damico (1984) fair cheeks
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<Translations>
Garnett (1889)
The cunning maid then quickly brought
The army-leader’s head so bloody
In that [very] vessel in which her attendant,
The fair-faced woman, food for them both,
In virtues renowned, thither had brought,
And it then so gory to her gave in hand,
To the thoughtful-in-mind to bear to their home,
Judith to her maid.

Cook and Tinker (1902)
The clear witted maid
Then quickly brought the leader’s bleeding head
Into the bag that her attendant maid,
A pale-faced woman, trained to noble ways,
Had carried thither with the food of both,
And Judith, thoughtful-minded, gave it then,
So gory, to her maid to carry home.

Gordon (1926)
Then the wise maiden swiftly brought the warrior’s head all bloody in the bag in which her servant, a fair-cheeked woman of excellent virtue, had fetched thither the food for them both, and Judith gave it then all gory into her hand, to her attendant, the prudent woman, to bear home.
Grain (1930)

Schleunigst brachte drauf die scharfgesinnte Magd
des Heerführers Haupt so blutig
in den Vorratsack, in welchem ihrer Vorgeherin,
die blankwangige Frau, ihrer beider Nahrung
dahin gebracht, die hehr gesittete,
und das so schwertblutige gab der sinnbedächtigen
in ihre Hand allda, um es mit heim zu tragen,
Judith ihrer Jüngerin.

Bone (1943)

What manifest glory in the feat
When Judith, as taught by God, taking the creel
In which her white-cheeked servant had carried meat,
Brings back the head in a basket!

Raffel (1964)

And the wise virgin quickly dropped
Holofernes’ bloody head
Into the sack her female slave, a girl
With fair hair and skin, used
To carry food for them both; Judith
Handed the bloody bundle to her faithful
Servant, thoughtful and quiet of tongue,
To carry home.

Hamer (1970)

The wise maid quickly put the warrior’s head,
All bloody as it was, into the bag
Which her fair-faced attendant girl had brought,
Most excellent in virtues, with their food,
And gave it back, thus gory, to her hand,
To carry home, Judith to her wise servant.

Huppé (1970)

The prudent maiden then hastily pressed
the bloody head of the battle hunter
into the pouch in which her companion
pale of visage accomplished in virtue
thither had fetched food for them both,
and Judith gave it gory with blood
into the hands of her servant serious of purpose
to carry home.

Bradley (1982)
Then the clever woman swiftly put the harrier’s head, all bloody, into the bag in which
her attendant, a pale-cheeked woman, one proved excellent in her ways, had brought
food there for them both; and then Judith put it, all gory, into her hands for her discreet
servant to carry home.

Trask (1997)
Then the clever maiden quickly deposited
the head so bloody of the heathen warrior
in the provision sack which her servant woman,
pale cheeked lady, had packed along,
finely efficient, with food for the two of them,
and gave it into her hands— the headsack so gory,
home to carry the hostile thinker—
Judith’s handmaiden.

Treharne (2000)
Then the prudent woman immediately placed
the warrior’s head still bloody
into the sack in which her attendant,
a woman of pale complexion, an excellent handmaiden,
had brought food for them both; and then Judith
put it, all gory, into the hands of her
thoughtful servant to carry home.

Let us consider Huppé’s statements. In The Web of Words, Huppé translates the word
blachleor in Judith 128 as "pale of visage," while within the same book, he discusses
the same phrase mentioned above by stating “... she /=Judith’s maid/ is called fair, excellent in
virtue, prudent ... (itales mine.)”21) It is clear that the same person may translate blachlear differently even within the same book. Cook does the same thing. He translates blachlear (ides) as "a pale-faced (woman),” while, in the text edition, he puts "fair-cheeked, fair" in the gloss.

It can be said that when we translate, we tend to think of the style and the flow of the context on the whole more than the slight differences between the meanings in each word. Concerning the examples cited above, for example, Raffel translates quite freely on the basis of his own interpretation of the work. In contrast, when we put the glossary to the text edition, where we tend to pay more attention to the partial interpretation than the translation, we may choose a completely different word from that which we choose for the translation.

As for the words chosen for translating the quotations in the papers, they seem to be connected to the flow of the writer’s ideas more closely than the meaning of each word. Huppé (1970), for example, translates blachlear as "fair" in his discussion to make Judith and her maid’s characteristics clearer, enumerating all kinds of virtuous adjectives for these women who had easily engaged in a fierce slaughter: “/they are/ fair, excellent in virtue, prudent ... courageous, bold in spirit, blessed...”22) Taylor (1990) also translates blachlear as “bright-cheeked” in the discussion in which she positively treats women’s beauty as a virtue: “The beauty of women is not a fragile virtue. ... Woman’s beauty is, generally, a sign of strength and not a seductive lure. ... It is a particular force in itself whose frequent manifestation in words for brightness suggests a natural power.”23) It is very natural for her to translate blachlear as 'bright-cheeked’ in the course of her discussion and blachlear in this case could never be rendered 'pale-cheeked.’ Moreover, Taylor also translates blacheor in Genesis 1970 as ‘bright-cheeked.’

7. Conclusion

We so far have examined the different possible interpretations of the word blachlear (Judith 128) from several points of view. Blachlear appears only twice—once in Judith 128 and Genesis 1970 respectively—throughout the extant Old English literature and two possible interpretations, as 'pale-cheeked’ and 'bright-cheeked, beautiful’ have been presented for this word. As for Genesis 1970, 'pale-cheeked (with fear)’ seems appropriate considering the context, while for Judith 128, there is room to question the interpretation that the word has the same meaning as in Genesis 1970.

We subsequently examined the examples of the word blac first to learn the range of its meanings, and then we tried to analogize the meaning of blachlear. Through this examination,
we determined that the word *blac* meant 'bright' mainly in poetry, while it meant 'pale' mainly in prose. If we analogize the meanings of *blachleor* which appear only in poetry, naturally, it is thought to mean 'bright-cheeked'; however, the word *blac* in poetry refers mainly to the light of fire and all other examples which modify men (3 out of 20 examples) represent 'pale-cheeked,' in which the man modified by *blac* is always dead. *Blac* is used only once in *Judith* (*Judith* 278) where the tyrant Holofernes, modified by this word, has been beheaded and this fact agreeing with the conclusions we reached above. However, it is difficult to apply this fact to our interpretation of *Judith* 128, because there is an inconsistency in the context. It seems better to interpret *blachleor* in this case as 'bright-cheeked' on the basis of the Indo-European tradition which connects light, beauty and goodness. Therefore, we came to the conclusion that our interpretation of *blachleor* in *Judith* 128 represents a different meaning from that in *Genesis* 1970.

Notes:
4) Timmer, 24.
6) Timmer, 40.
7) Timmer, 24.
15) Hupphé, 181.
19) Dictionaries, translations and texts consulted in this paper are as follows:
'Blachlor ide' in the Old English Poem Judith

(Dictionaries and Glossaries)


(Discussions)


(Translations)

Garnett, J. M. trans., *Elene; Judith; Athelstan, or the Fight at Brunanburh; and Byrhtnoth, or the Fight at Maldon: Anglo-Saxon Poems* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1889).


20) Somner seems to confuse *blac,* and *blac* in his interpretation of these two words. He defines the word *blac* as "Niger, ater, pullus, pallidus, fuscus. black, russet, brown, pale, wan, swart, swarthy, bleak," while he writes only " i.e. blac" under the entry word *blac.* *DOE* also points out both the orthographical and the semantic ambiguity between the words *blac* and *blac.* Apart from these problems, Somner here presents an interesting statement about their geographical knowledge at that time.

21) Huppé, 170.
22) Huppé, 170.

(しまざき さとこ 英語コミュニケーション学科専任講師)

**要 旨**

多義的な語をどのように解釈するかによって、作品に登場する人物の人物像が大きく変わってしまうことがある。本稿では、古英詩 *Judith* 128 に見られる *blachlear* という多義的な語をめぐり、従来提出されている二つの解釈（'pale-cheeked, with fear' か 'bright-cheeked, beautiful' か）について文献学的な視点から調査・分析を行なった。どちらの解釈をとるかで作品における *Judith’s maid* の女性像は180度変化するが、考察の結果、後者の解釈の方が妥当なのではないかと結論した。