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On the Use of the Historical Present in the *Gawain*-Poems

Yoshihiko Nakamichi

A few studies have been made concerning the use of the HP[1] in *SGGK*.[2] However, the study of the HP in a broader corpus, including its three companion poems—*PRL*, *CLN*, *PAT*—never seems to have been made so far. In this paper, I would like to examine the use of the HP in the four poems found in the MS. Cotton Nero A. x.

This paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, the frequency of the HP occurred in each poem will be presented and discussed. Secondly, the kinds of verbs which tend to be the HP will be shown, and thirdly, the use of the HP in the four poems. Lastly, some findings will be summarized and some problems concerning the authorship will be suggested.

All quotations are from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, eds. by M. Andrew and R. Waldron, Edward Arnold, 1978.

I. The HP Frequency

Before presenting the HP frequency, we have to distinguish the genuine HP from the pseudo HP. The pseudo HP, which confuses us sometimes because it takes the present form, includes the verbs used in the narrator/poet's comment on the development of the story, the narrator/poet's address to the characters in the poem or to the audience, the citation of authority, a statement of general truth, and so forth.[3] The verbs used in these ways, though they take the present form, could not be regarded as genuine HPs, and therefore, are excluded from my calculation. The genuine HP, on the other hand, is "the exact equivalent of a past tense".[4]

Table 1 indicates the number of lines in the narrative parts and in the conversational parts, the number of the HP occurring (the number in the parentheses shows the number of the HP occurring in the conversational parts) and the HP frequency. The HP frequency has been obtained through the division of the number of lines in the narrative parts by the number of occurrences of the HP.[5]

Table 1

	PRL (1212 11.)	CLN (1812 11.)	PAT (531 11.)	SGGK (2530 11.)	Total (6085 11.)
Narrative Parts	487.5 11.	1335.5 11.	345 11.	1775.5 11.	3943.5 11.
Conv. Parts	724.5 11.	476.5 11.	186 11.	754.5 11.	2141.5 11.
No of HP	11(15)[6]	176(5)	66	351[7]	604(20)
HP Freq.	44.3	7.6	5.2	5.1	6.5

Table 1 shows that *PRL* has more conversational parts than the narrative parts. In the other three poems, on the other hand, the narrative parts are larger in size than those of the conversational parts. Besides this fact, the HP frequency in *CLN, PAT*, and *SGGK* is quite high, as high as to the degree that one HP occurs about in every five to seven lines. The HP frequency in *PRL*, on the other hand, is extremely low, namely, one HP in every 44.3 lines. As far as the proportion between the narrative and the conversational parts and the HP frequency are concerned, *PRL* seems to be different from the others.

II. Kinds of Verbs Occurring as the HP

Benson maintains that the " verbs of motion " tend to be the HP, which supports his assertion that the HP is used in order to indicate " the connotation of continuing action ".[8] Mizutori expresses a similar view.[9] According to Mustanoja, " verbs of saying (*verba dicendi*) introducing direct speech are often in the present tense ".[10] Thus, the two kinds of verb—verbs of motion and verbs of saying—seem

to take the present form in the narratives if we follow their opinions.

I have divided all the examples of the HPs found in the *Gawain*-poems into seven categories—i) verbs of motion,[11] ii) verbs of perception, iii) verbs of saying (or affirmation), iv) verbs of emotion, v) verbs of wish and request, vi) verbs of causation,[12] and vii) miscellaneous verbs.

Table 2 below shows the occurrences of the HP in each verb category and their percentages.

Table 2

	i) VM	ii) VPer	iii) VS (or Aff.)	iv) VEm	v) VWR	vi) VC	vii) Misc.	Total
PRL	13 (50.0%)	2 (7.7%)	none	none	none	1 (3.8%)	10 (38.5%)	26
CLN	89 (49.2%)	13 (7.2%)	20 (11.0%)	3 (1.6%)	7 (3.9%)	none	49 (27.1%)	181
PAT	33 (50.0%)	5 (7.6%)	9 (13.6%)	3 (4.5%)	4 (6.1%)	none	12 (18.2%)	66
SGGK	177 (50.4%)	13 (3.7%)	32 (9.1%)	2 (0.6%)	11 (3.1%)	2 (0.6%)	114 (32.5%)	351
Total	312 (50.0%)	33 (5.3%)	61 (9.8%)	8 (1.3%)	22 (3.5%)	3 (0.5%)	185 (29.6%)	624

As mentioned above, Mustanoja says that the verbs of saying introducing direct speech tend to take the present form of a verb. However, his opinion does not apply to the *Gawain*-poems. This does not always mean that he is wrong. Many verbs of saying in the present can be found in such works as *Ywain and Gawain* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis* just as Mustanoja cites in his book. The variety of the verbs used as the HP seems to reflect the personal habit of each poet.

Verbs, which express mental activities, and consequently no external movement or action, take the HP form with a lower percentage. Table 2 indicates that such verbs as verbs of perception, emotion, wish and request, and causation form less than ten percent of the total number of occurrences of the HP. Verbs of motion

alone show a high percentage, as high as fifty percent. This indicates that what is described by the HP is mainly actions or movements, or to put it in a reverse manner, the HP is used frequently when a poet wishes to describe actions or movements.[13] We can therefore expect the HP to occur in such places as in scenes full of action, when characters enter a scene, and when a scene changes from one place to another, and the like.

III. The Use of the HP in the *Gawain*-Poems

i) The HP Due to the Exigency of Rhyme

As Visser says,[14] there are some examples of the HP due to the exigency of rhyme in the *Gawain*-poems. *PRL*, which makes use of both alliteration and rhyme, has some examples of the HP dictated by rhyme as in the following :—

> Dubbed wern alle þo downez sydez
> With crystal klyffez so cler of kynde.
> Holtewodez bryȝt aboute hem *bydez*
> Of bollez as blwe as ble of Ynde ;
> As bornyst syluer þe lef on *slydez*,
> Þat þike con trylle on vch a tynde ;
> Quen glem of glodez agaynz hem *glydez*,
> Wyth schymeryng schene ful schrylle þay schynde.
> Þe grauayl þat on grounde con grynde
> Wern precious perlez of oryente ;
> Þe sunne bemez bot blo and blynde
> In respecte of þat adubbement.   (*PRL* 73-84)[15]

The verbs, *bydez* (75), *slydez* (77), and *glydez* (79), are dictated by the rhyme scheme. Like *PRL*, *SGGK* has also a rhyming portion called the " bob and wheel ", where some examples of the HP dictated by rhyme scheme are also found as in the following :—

> Bot slokes !
> Ta now þy grymme tole to þe
> And let se how þou cnokez.'
> ' Gladly, sir, forsoþe,'
> Quoþ Gawan ; his ax he *strokes*.   (*SGGK* 412-16)

In the quoted passage above, the HP *strokes* (416) rhymes with " slokes " (412) and " cnokez " (414).

Eleven HPs are found in the line-end position out of a total of twenty-six occurrences in *PRL*, which is quite a high proportion, as high as 42.3%. As far as *PRL* is concerned, it can be said that the HP is used due to the exigency of rhyme in a dominant proportion. On the other hand, *SGGK* has eleven examples of the HP due to rhyme out of a total of 351 cases, which is quite small in proportion.

> Other Examples : *PRL* 98, 107, 125, 128, 510, 513, 886, 892 ; *CLN* none ; *PAT* none ; *SGGK* 464, 1017, 1351, 1453, 1506, 1600, 1686, 1688, 1918, 1919.

ii) The HP for Spatial Transition

The HP used for indicating spatial transition appears most frequently in Fitt III of *SGGK* in which scenes change from the hunting field outside the castle to the temptation scenes inside the castle. The following quotations show the change of scene during Gawain's first day at Bertilak's castle :—

> Þe leue lorde of þe londe watz not þe last
> Arayed for þe rydyng with renkkez ful mony ;
> Ete a sop hastyly, when he hade herde masse,
> With bugle to bent-felde he *buskez* bylyue.   (*SGGK* 1133-36)

> Þus *laykez* þis lorde by lynde-wodez euez
> And Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed *lygez*,
> *Lurkkez* quyl þe dayly3t lemed on þe wowes,
> Vnder couertour ful clere, cortyned aboute.   (*SGGK* 1178-81)

> And ay þe lorde of þe londe *is* lent on his gamnez,
>   (*SGGK* 1319)

> Bi þat þe dayly3t watz done þe douthe watz al wonen
> Into þe comly castel, þer þe kny3t *bidez*
>   Ful stille,
>   Wyth blys and bry3t fyr bette.   (*SGGK* 1365-68)

The scene changes from the castle to the hunting field in the first quotation, from the hunting field to the castle in the second, from the castle to the hunting field in the third, and from the hunting

field to the castle again in the fourth, respectively. During Gawain's stay on the second and third days in the castle, a similar shift of tenses occurs when the scene changes from one place to another.

In *PAT*, when the protagonist Jonah goes to the Port Joppa in order to escape to Tarshish in spite of God's bidding, the HP appears frequently as shown in the following passage:—

> Þus he *passes* to þat port his passage to seche,
> *Fyndes* he a fayr schyp to þe fare redy,
> *Maches* hym with þe maryneres, *makes* her paye
> For to towe hym into Tarce as tyd as þay myȝt. (*PAT* 97-100)

> Other Examples: *PRL* none; *CLN* 129; *PAT* 433-35; *SGGK* 1309-11, 1418, 1468-69, 1558, 1562, 1615, 1686-88, 1731, 1870-74, 1894, 1924-25, 2175-78, 2489.

iii) Entrances of Characters

When new characters are introduced into the scene, the tense shifts often from the preterite to the HP.

The first scene of *SGGK* is in Arthur's court as King Arthur makes his Christmas feast at Camelot. On New Year's Day he declares that he will not eat until he is told a novel tale of "sum auenturus þyng" (93). When the first course of the feast is served, "an aghlich mayster" (136) comes into the hall.

> For vneþe watz þe noyce not a whyle sesed,
> And þe fyrst cource in þe court kyndely serued,
> Þer *hales* in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,
> On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe; (*SGGK* 134-37)

Similarly, when Gawain meets the lord and the lady of the castle on his way to the Green Chapel, the HPs are used extensively:

> Þe lorde *loutes* þerto and þe lady als;
> Into a cumly closet coyntly ho *entrez*.
> Gawan *glydez* ful gay and *gos* þeder sone.
> Þe lorde *laches* hym by þe lappe and *ledez* hym to sytte
> And couþly hym *knowez* and *callez* hym his nome
> (*SGGK* 933-37)

As shown in the passage quoted above, when a character enters the

scene and meets someone there, the verbs of motion in the HP form appear often, which corresponds to the fact that the verbs of motion form a large portion of the total number of HPs.

> Other Examples: *PRL* none; *CLN* 601, 1304; *PAT* none; *SGGK* 833, 1742–43, 2221, 2229.

iv) Contrast

    a) Picture vs. Action

Static pictures are described in the preterite and the action or movement of a character following after them are usually described in the HP. As a result, the pictures and actions are contrasted:

> Þat watz þe rauen so ronk, þat rebel watz euer;
> He watz colored as þe cole, corbyal vntrwe.
> And he *fongez* to þe flyȝt and *fannez* on þe wyndez,
> *Halez* hyȝe vpon hyȝt to herken tyþyngez.
> He *croukez* for comfort when carayne he *fyndez*
> Kast vp on a clyffe þer costese lay drye; (*CLN* 455-60)

The nature and the colour of a raven are described in the preterite and its action in the HP.

The woodbine is depicted in the preterite and Jonah's action in the HP in the following passage:—

> For hit watz brod at þe boþem, boȝted on lofte,
> Happed vpon ayþer half, a hous as hit were,
> A nos on þe norþ syde and nowhere non ellez,
> Bot al schet in a schaȝe þat schaded ful cole.
> Þe gome glyȝt on þe grene graciouse leues,
> Þat euer wayued a wynde so wyþe and so cole;
> Þe schyre sunne hit vmbeschon, paȝ no schafte myȝt
> Þe mountaunce of a lyttel mote vpon þat man schyne.
> Þenne watz þe gome so glad of his gay logge,
> *Lys* loltrande þerinne lokande to toune;
> So blyþe of his wodbynde he *balteres* þervnder,
> Þat of no diete þat day þe deuel haf he roȝt. (*PAT* 449-60)

The Green Knight's clothes are described in the preterite and his action in the HP:

> Ande al grayþed in grene þis gome and his wedes:

A strayt cote ful streȝt þat stek on his sides,
A meré mantile abof, mensked withinne
With pelure pured apert, þe pane ful clene
With blyþe blaunner ful bryȝt, and his hod boþe,
Þat watz laȝt fro his lokkez and layde on his schulderes;
Heme wel-haled hose of þat same grene,
Þat spenet on his sparlyr, and clene spures vnder
Of bryȝt golde, vpon silk bordes barred ful ryche,
And scholes vnder schankes þere þe schalk *rides*.

<div align="right">(SGGK 151–60)</div>

Other Examples: *PRL* none; *CLN* none; *PAT* none; *SGGK*
173, 196, 221, 570, 605, 621, 740, 748, 773, 1932, 2050.

b) Alternation of the Sentence Subject

When a subject of a sentence changes from one character to
another or from one thing to another, one party is described in the
preterite and the rest in the HP, or vice versa. Just as in the case
of a) Picture vs. Action, actions of two parties are contrasted with
the tense shift:

The more I frayste hyr fayre face,
Her fygure fyn quen I had fonte,
Suche gladande glory con to me glace
As lyttel byfore þerto watz wonte.
To calle hyr lyste con me enchace,
Bot baysment gef myn hert a brunt.
I seȝ hyr in so strange a place —
Such a burre myȝt make myn herte blunt.
Þenne *verez* ho vp her fayre frount,
Hyr vysayge whyt as playn yuore: (*PRL* 169–78)

(Dreamer vs. Pearl Maiden)

And þenne euelez on erþe ernestly grewen
And multyplyed monyfolde inmongez mankynde,
For þat þe maȝty on molde so marre þise oþer
Þat þe Wyȝe þat al wroȝt ful wroþly *bygynnez*. (*CLN* 277–80)

(Evils vs. God)

Then he tron on þo tres, and þay her tramme *ruchen*,
Cachen vp þe crossayl, cables þay *fasten*,
Wiȝt at þe wyndas *weȝen* her ankres,

<div align="center">— 177 —</div>

Spende spak to þe sprete þe spare bawelyne,
Gederen to þe gyde-ropes, þe grete cloþ *falles*, (*PAT* 101-05)

(Jonah vs. Sailors)

With all þe wele of þe worlde þay woned þer samen,
Þe most kyd knyȝtez vnder Krystes Seluen
And þe louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden,
And he þe comlokest kyng, þat þe court *haldes*; (*SGGK* 50-53)

(Knights and Ladies vs. Arthur)

Other Examples: *PRL* 181-92; *CLN* 777-80, 945-50, 1420-24;
PAT 186 b-87, 339-40, 377-80, 469-75; *SGGK* 316, 330-31, 444-
45, 465, 536, 566-67, 594-95, 720, 1029-31, 1044, 1163-64, 1340-
42, 1450-53, 1461-62, 1476-79, 1583-85, 1606-14, 1695-96, 1704-
10, 1756-59, 1824, 2013-14, 2072.

v) The HP in a Summary Statement

The HP occurs often at the end of an episode. This is the case
in which it is used in a summary statement. In such a case, the
adverb " thus " appears often with the HP.

Gawain's solitary journey in quest of the Green Knight is sum-
marized in the following manner :—

Þus in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde
Bi contray *caryez* þis knyȝt tyl Krystmasse Euen,
        Alone.   (*SGGK* 733-35)

Other Examples: *PRL* none; *CLN* none; *PAT* 245; *SGGK*
104-07, 666, 988, 2494-95.

IV. Conclusion

The examination of the HP in the *Gawain*-poems has revealed
that its use varies among the four poems in terms of both quantity
and quality. *PRL* shows the lowest HP frequency and its HPs are
mainly dictated by rhyme. Admitting its abundance in imagery
and symbolism, *PRL* seems to be colourless and monotonous as far
as the HP is concerned. *CLN* and *PAT* have many examples of
the HP and its freqnency is almost as high as that of *SGGK*. Though

the HP frequency is high, its use has not fully developed yet. The HPs in *CLN* and *PAT* might even give us an impression that they are used at random. On the other hand, *SGGK*, with its highest HP frequency, includes various kinds of use of the HP. In addition to the examples shown in Part III in my paper, three exchange-of-winnings scenes, in which Gawain kisses Bertilak in return for the games he hunted in the field, are all described in the HP as in 11. 1388-89, 1639, and 1936. These three scenes are closely related to the three temptation scenes in which the lady kisses Gawain. Two of the latter scenes are also described in the HP. In this way, the poet tries to indicate the structural resemblance by the employment of the HP. Though *SGGK* has still some inexplainable cases, it is a well-structured poem compared with its companion poems and its poet seems to have been highly aware of the effect produced by the HP.

The bi-product in the course of my study is that these differences in the four poems seem to present evidence against the common authorship of the *Gawain*-poems. Since there is no external evidence concerning their authorship, grammarians have discussed the possibility of both single and multiple authorship and have not come to a clear-cut conclusion. As far as the HP is concerned, however, we cannot wipe out the impression that *PRL* alone is different from the other three poems. *PRL* has quite a low HP frequency compared with the others, and has no verbs of saying, verbs of emotion and verbs of wish and request in the HP forms while the other three poems have such verbs in the HP. What is common in the *Gawain*-poems in terms of verb category is that verbs of motion alone tend to take the HP form with a high percentage, namely, about fifty percent of the total number of HPs are verbs of motion. As for the use of the HP, *PRL* has only two HPs for the alternation of the sentence subject but not in the rest of the category. Having examined the *Gawain*-poems in terms of the HP, the multiple authorship theory seems to be more plausible, and about this, more study will be necessary in the future.[16]

NOTES

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1. Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: HP=Historical Present, *PRL=Pearl*, *CLN=Cleanness*, *PAT=Patience*, *SGGK=Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

2. See Mizutori, Y. " The Historical Present Found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ", *Jimbun Kenkyu*, 19:7 (1968), 1-26, 20:7 (1969), 76-90 and Zimmermann, R. " Verbal Syntax and Style in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ", *English Studies*, 54 (1973), 533-43. Zimmermann's article is not about the HP alone but he discusses 1) choice of tenses, 2) active and passive voice, and 3) indicative and subjunctive mood.

3. Some examples of the pseudo HPs are: " I wot and wene " (*PRL* 47); " Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan," (*SGGK* 487) and " And ȝe wyl a whyle be stylle,/I schal telle yow how þay wroȝt." (*SGGK* 1996-97); " as Maþew recordez," (*CLN* 25); " For þe Welder of wyt þat wot alle þynges,/Þat ay wakes and waytes, at wylle hatz He slyȝtes." (*PAT* 129-30). Such present tense verbs as these shown above are not considered to be genuine HPs, and are therefore excluded from my calculations.

4. See Steadman, J. M. Jr. " The Origin of the Historical Present in English ", *Studies in Philology*, 14 (1917), p. 5. Other definitions made by several scholars include " the present tense ... used in speaking of the past " by Jespersen, O. *A Modern English Grammar, Part IV*, 1954, p. 19, " the present tense ... used ... for describing past events " by Mustanoja, T. F. *A Middle English Syntax, Part I*, 1960, p. 485, " the occurrence of a present tense verb in the narration of a past event " by Benson, L. D. " Chaucer's Historical Present—Its Meaning and Uses ", *English Studies*, 42 (1961), p. 66, and " the present tense used as a variant of the preterite " by Visser, F. Th. *An Historical Syntax of the English Language, Part II*, 1966, p. 705.

5. The HP occurs, in most cases, in the narrative parts except in 11. 508-14, 884-86, and 1. 892 in *PRL* and in 11. 1660-85 in *CLN*. In producing the HP frequency, the HPs in the conversational parts are excluded because, in so doing, we can obtain a more impartial frequency among these four poems.

6. Andrew and Waldron emend *stonden* (*PRL* 113) as " stoden " which is a preterite plural form. However, I have followed the MS. reading *stonden*, so this is also counted as an example of the HP. See also Gordon's edition of *PRL*, (*Pearl*, ed. by E. V. Gordon, Oxford University Press, 1953), which leaves the MS. reading in this part of the poem.

7. The number of the HP found in *SGGK* varies among scholars. Steadman says that " there are 252 examples in 2530 lines of the poem, or,

roughly speaking, one to every ten lines." (Steadman, *op. cit.*, p. 20). Mizutori finds 372 examples of the HP (Mizutori, *op. cit.*, p. 462). Zimmermann discovers "about 340 forms" (Zimmermann, *op. cit.*, p. 536), which is closest to mine, 351.

8. See Benson, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
9. See Mizutori, *op. cit.*, p. 471.
10. See Mustanoja, *op. cit.*, p. 488.
11. See Ikegami, Y. "The Semological Structure of the English Verbs of Motion: Old and Middle English", *Key-Word Studies in Beowulf and Chaucer*, *I*, Centre for Medieval English Studies, 1980, pp. 67–104 and Fridén, G. *Studies on the Tenses of the English Verb from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri AB, Uppsala, 1948, pp. 38–117. Fridén's study deals with mutative verbs in connection with "have" and "be" as auxiliaries of the perfect and pluperfect.
12. The verb classification from ii) to vi) is mainly based upon the one made by Jespersen. See Jespersen, O. *A Modern English Grammar*, *Part V*, 1940, pp. 280–92. As regards ii) verbs of perception and iii) verbs of saying (or affirmation), see also Kruisinga, E. *A Handbook of Present-Day English*, *Part II*, P. Noordhoff, Groningen, 1931, p. 208. Jespersen points out also verbs of permission in his book, but there are no such HPs found in the *Gawain*-poems, and therefore, it is not set up as a category.
13. From this follows a further observation that pure description without any movement is depicted in the preterite, concerning which will be discussed in detail in Part III.
14. Visser takes note of the fact that the HP appears mainly in verse, not in prose, and maintains that its use is dictated by rhyme and metre. See Visser, *op. cit.*, pp. 707–11.
15. In the quoted passage, the HPs are in italics.
16. As for the authorship studies of the *Gawain*-poems, see Kjellmer, G. *Did the "Pearl Poet" Write Pearl?*, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Göteborg, 1975, which supports my suggestion.

My suggestion against the common authorship is only a tentative one. An examination of several works by a single author, Chaucer's works, for instance, will be necessary. If we find a similar HP frequency and similar uses of the HP in Chaucer's works, irrespective of the date of composition, we might be able to say the *Gawain*-poems would not have been composed by a single author. If we find the HP frequency, the types of verbs used as the HP, and the use of the HP different from each other among Chaucer's works, however, its difference might not be caused by the habit of several authors but may be caused by the development of stylistic awareness in a single author.

Another point is that the use of the HP might vary according to the contents or genre of the writing. Such an elegiac poem as *PRL* which contains much dialogue between two persons might be different from a romance like *SGGK* with many characters introduced and with a complicated plot development.