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Historical Present in the Cotton Nero A.x. Poems: Authorship Reconsidered

Yoko Iyeiri

1. Introduction

MS Cotton Nero A.x., produced around 1400 and now localized in Cheshire,[1] includes four alliterative poems, whose authorship has long been disputed: *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although it is often assumed that the four poems were all written by a single poet, some existing studies propose the possibility of multiple authorship for them. Clark (1949, 1950a, 1950b, and 1951), for example, casts doubt particularly upon common authorship between *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain*. While Tajima (1978) excludes *Sir Gawain* from the other three poems, Tajima (1989) proposes the possible existence of three poets: (1) the poet of *Pearl*, (2) the poet of *Cleanness* and *Patience*, and (3) the poet of *Sir Gawain*.

I have studied negation and the periphrastic use of *con* "did" in the four poems and concluded that at least the author of *Pearl* is different from the author(s) of the other poems.[2] There are some other scholars who are particularly doubtful about the suggestion to include *Pearl* into the same authorship group. Kjellmer (1975) is one of them. He studies vocabulary, length of clauses, length of sentences, conjunctive methods, subordinate clauses, passive forms, alliteration, and then infers that *Pearl* alone was perhaps produced by a different

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1) The manuscript is now localized in Cheshire by McIntosh, Samuels, & Benskin (1986, I : 106).

2) See Iyeiri (1996 & 1998).

author. Nakamichi (1982), who examines the historical present in the manuscript at issue, is another to raise the possible existence of a different poet of *Pearl.*

Since the principal purpose of Nakamichi (1982) was to investigate the use of the historical present in the four poems, he deals with the issue of authorship as a by-product. His discussion, however, provides some interesting material in relation to the authorship of the Cotton Nero A.x. poems. He notices the following four points in which *Pearl* alone deviates from *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*: (1) the conversational part (rather than the narrative part) is much more voluminous in *Pearl* than in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*; (2) the historical present is much less common in *Pearl* than in the other three poems; (3) the historical present in *Pearl* is mainly related to the exigency of rhyme whereas this is not the case with *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*; and (4) the historical present in *Pearl* does not occur with verbs of saying, verbs of emotion, or verbs of wish and request, while in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain,* these verbs display the historical present. Although Nakamichi's discussion is not centred upon the authorship issue, he maintains that one cannot wipe away the impression that *Pearl* alone is different in nature from the other three poems.

The present paper intends to focus the discussion of the historical present upon the authorship of the Cotton Nero A.x. poems, and for this purpose, examines and amplifies some of the arguments presented by Nakamichi. He already provides fairly substantial material which is in favour of multiple authorship of the manuscript under discussion. To link the material with the authorship issue, however, the second and the third points raised by him (i.e. (2) and (3) above) should be extended. The conclusion that I have reached is that *Pearl* should indeed be excluded from the same authorship group.

2. General backgrounds
The historical present is a device, by the use of which present-tense

verbs refer to events in the past. Examples are found copiously in the Cotton Nero A.x. poems:[3]

> Þat gracios gay wythouten galle,
> So smoþe, so smal, so seme sly3t,
> *Ryse3* vp in hir araye ryalle,
> A precios pyece in perle3 py3t (*Pearl*, 189-92)

> And Nabugodeno3ar *makes* much ioye (*Cleanness*, 1304)

> Þe whal *wende3* at his wylle and a warþe *fynde3*,
> And þer he *brake3* vp þe buyrne as bede hym oure lorde
> (*Patience*, 339-40)

> Ho *commes* to þe cortyn, and at þe kny3t *totes.*
> Sir Wawen her welcumed worþy on fyrst,
> And ho hym *3elde3* a3ayn ful 3erne of hir wordez,
> *Sette3* hir softly by his syde, and swyþely ho *la3ez,*
> And wyth a luflych loke ho layde hym þyse wordez
> (*Sir Gawain*, 1476-80).

Here the verbs in the present tense (italicized above) all refer to events in the past.

Since the historical present is available in Present-day English, one tends to feel familiar with the device. However, the device was not always common in the history of the English language. It gained ground only in the thirteenth century and came to be abundant from the middle of the fourteenth century, at least as far as written materials are concerned (Steadman 1917: 44; Trnka 1930: 17; Mustanoja 1960: 486). In this sense, it is one of the good scales with which to discuss the authorship issue of the Cotton Nero A.x. poems, since they

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3) Examples in the present paper are cited from: (1) *Pearl*, ed. Gordon (1953); (2) *Cleanness*, ed. Anderson (1977); (3) *Patience*, ed. Anderson (1957); and (4) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Tolkien & Gordon, and revised by Davis, 2nd edn. (1967).

were produced in late ME, when the historical present was still in the process of development, or at least in the process of being established in written materials. It is possible that the use of the historical present could differ from author to author or from text to text before it was fully established. In other words, the investigation of the device in the Cotton Nero A.x. poems can reveal some interesting hints as to the authorship issue.

The frequency of the historical present in the Cotton Nero A.x. poems differs depending upon scholars. Nakamichi (1982: 173-4) states that there are 351 examples of the historical present in *Sir Gawain,* while Steadman (1917: 20) finds 252 examples in the same text, Mizutori (1968: 2) 372 examples, Zimmermann (1973: 536) 340 instances, and Wada (1978: 2) 383 instances. The deviations among scholars tend to be large, but the data given by them suggest that there are perhaps well over 300 examples of the historical present in *Sir Gawain.* Similarly, Nakamichi (1982: 183) finds 26 examples of the device in *Pearl,* whereas Steadman (1917: 19) maintains that there are fewer than 20 clear examples in the same poem. I have also come across 26 examples of the historical present, although I am not certain whether all the examples that I have identified are the same as those found by Nakamichi. As far as I recognize, it is only Nakamichi (1982) who investigates all four of the alliterative poems in MS Cotton Nero A.x. I have, therefore, decided to connect my discussion with his figures so far as the number of the historical present is concerned. Needless to say, he does not specify all the locations where the device occurs. Therefore, it is quite possible that the present paper includes those examples which he does not regard as illustrating the historical present. The discussion below incorporates my own interpretation of examples which may not necessarily be the same as his.

3. The historical present and rhyme

Visser (1964: 137) maintains that the principal motive of the device of the historical present in verse is the exigency of rhyme and metre,

whereas he also notices the existence of the historical present which reports events "vividly" [4] and which are not relevant to rhyme or metre. He considers that the historical present of the former type and that of the latter type are different in nature and should be distinguished. The former, i.e. the historical present strongly related to rhyme and metre, he calls the "substitutive present", while the latter he calls the "vividly reporting present" (1966: § 779).

As for the Cotton Nero poems, Nakamichi demonstrates that the historical present in *Pearl* is much more closely connected with rhyme than in the other poems. Having analyzed the data given by him, I would suppose that the nature of the historical present in *Pearl* is fundamentally different from that of the other three poems. In other words, the historical present used in *Pearl* is in most cases what Visser calls the "substitutive present", while the historical present in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain* is unlikely the "substitutive present" but the "vividly reporting one".

It is rather straightforward that rhyme scheme is irrelevant to the occurrence of the historical present in *Cleanness* and *Patience,* since these texts are not rhymed. Still the historical present occurs in them fairly frequently. Indeed, the occurrence of the device in the texts is too frequent to be accidental. It is therefore reasonable to infer that the device in *Cleanness* and *Patience* had a different function from "substitution". Thus the abundant occurrence of the historical present in the texts itself proves that the type of the historical present in them is not the "substitutive" one.

As for *Sir Gawain,* which is rhymed partly, Nakamichi (1982: 180) shows that only eleven examples are in rhyme (3.1%) out of the total of 351 instances of the historical present in the text. In other words, as many as 96.9% of the examples of the historical present in the text are irrelevant to rhyme. The large proportion of the device outside rhyme again confirms that the principal function of it in *Sir*

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4) Whether or not the historical present describes events "vividly" is another matter, which the present paper does not intend to discuss.

Gawain was not at all "substitutive". Since the historical present is in any case frequent in *Sir Gawain,* even the occurrence of the eleven examples in rhyme may not necessarily mean that the rhyme scheme was the decisive factor in their occurrence. Thus the relationship between rhyme and the historical present in *Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain* is extremely weak. It is clear that the device in the three poems other than *Pearl* is fundamentally not the type which Visser calls the "substitutive present".

In the case of *Pearl,* Nakamichi (1982: 180) shows that eleven examples (42.3%) out of the total of 26 are found in the line-end position and thus rhymed, as illustrated below:

> So al watȝ dubbet on dere asyse
> Þat fryth þer fortwne forth me *fereȝ.*
> Þe derþe þerof for to deuyse
> Nis no wyȝ worþé þat tonge bereȝ (*Pearl,* 97-100).

Here the present-tense form *fereȝ*(1. 98) is in rhyme with *bereȝ*(1. 100).

42.3% is certainly much larger than the proportion in *Sir Gawain* (3.1%), but this also means that more than half of the examples in *Pearl* are found outside rhyme. A closer examination of the examples, however, reveals that the relationship between rhyme and the historical present in *Pearl* is even stronger than the proportion of 42.3% suggests. This is related to the fact that examples of the historical present in *Pearl* are, in fact, condensed in the following passage, which tells the vineyard parable in the Bible:

> Þat date of ȝere wel knawe þys hyne.
> Þe lorde ful erly vp he ros
> To hyre werkmen to hys vyne,
> And *fyndeȝ* þer summe to hys porpos.
> Into acorde þay con declyne
> For a pené on a day, and forth þay *gotȝ,*
> *Wryþen* and *worchen* and *don* gret pyne,

> *Keruen* and *caggen* and *man* hit clos.
> Aboute vnder þe lorde to marked *totȝ*,
> And ydel men stande he *fyndeȝ* þerate.
> 'Why standeȝ ydel?' he sayde to þos.
> 'Ne knawe ȝe of þis day no date?' (*Pearl,* 505-17).

Not only *gotȝ* and *totȝ*, both in rhyme,[5] but also other surrounding verbs are in the present tense. The small number of the examples of the historical present (26×) in *Pearl* are not evenly distributed in the poem, but rather collective in respect to their appearance. Indeed, this may partly be ascribable to the content matter of the text. The above is one of the major narrative parts in *Pearl*. However, it is not the poet's constant policy to employ the historical present even in narration. The vineyard parable itself is much longer in *Pearl* than the passage cited above and continues well after line 517. And, the lines after the above passage contain the historical present only sparingly or never. The condensed use of the device as illustrated above is rather exceptional in *Pearl*.

　　According to Visser (1964: 137), the historical present is inclined to occur in a mass. Once an example of the present tense is introduced perhaps for the sake of rhyme, one tends to find some other examples in the preceding and following lines. The passage cited above from *Pearl* is a clear case of this. *Gotȝ* and *totȝ* introduced for the sake of rhyme have instigated neighbouring verbs also to show the historical present. In this sense, the examples in ll. 505-17 in *Pearl* are directly or at least indirectly related to rhyme scheme. Outside the passage, the occurrence of the historical present is extremely restricted in the poem unless it is clearly linked with rhyme. Thus the relationship between rhyme scheme and the device of the historical present is much closer than the proportion given by Nakamichi (42.3%) suggests. This is in clear contrast to the relationship between the historical present and rhyme in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain.* In Visser's

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5) According to Gordon (1953: 19), Holthausen reads the end of line 513 as *market dotȝ*.

language, the "substitutive" nature of the historical present is dominant only in *Pearl*.

4. The frequency of the historical present

One of the reasons Nakamichi (1982) casts doubt upon single author-ship of the four poems is that *Pearl* shows a markedly limited use of the historical present in contrast to *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*. This is the third point he raises, which is based upon the table below:[6]

Table 1: The overall situation of the historical present in the Cotton Nero A.x. poems

	Pearl (1,212 ll.)	*Cleanness* (1,812 ll.)	*Patience* (531 ll.)	*Sir Gawain* (2,530 ll.)	Total (6,085 ll.)
Narrative Parts	487.5 ll.	1335.5 ll.	345 ll.	1775.5 ll.	3943.5 ll.
Conv. Parts	724.5 ll.	476.5 ll.	186 ll.	754.5 ll.	3141.5 ll.
No of HP	11 (15)	176 (5)	66	351	604 (20)
HP Freq.	44.3	7.6	5.2	5.1	6.5

(Nakamichi 1982: 183)

First of all, the table given by him needs some explanation. Since the historical present occurs mainly in the narrative, the numbers of the examples in the conversational part are in round brackets in his table. *Pearl*, for example, provides eleven examples of the historical present in the narrative part and fifteen examples in the conversational part. The frequency of the historical present in his table (i.e. HP Freq.) refers to the frequency in the narrative part only. 44.3 in the case of *Pearl* signifies that one example of the historical present occurs in every 44.3 lines of its narrative part. Indeed, the table shows that the historical present is distinctively sparse in *Pearl* in contrast to the other three poems, which provide an example in approximately every six to eight lines.

I would assume that his argument is exposed to some possible

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6) I have expanded some of the abbreviations in his table and removed the notes attached to the table.

contentions which can militate against multiple authorship of the poems, and that it needs therefore to be supplemented. First of all, one could argue that there is no harm in a poet deciding not to use the historical present, since it is a literary device. One could assert on this ground that the exceptionally infrequent use of the historical present in *Pearl* should not necessarily arise from the difference of the author. Secondly, the limited occurrence of the historical present in *Pearl* itself can be much dependent upon the content matter or the genre of the text. At least, it has been observed that the overall frequency of the historical present varies even among works produced by a single author. For example, Chaucer is known to display the historical present frequently in some of his works and infrequently in some other works of his (Benson 1961: 67). Furthermore, Veldhoen (1993: 113) describes *Sir Gawain* as a work of an action-based narrative, which can encourage the relatively frequent occurrence of the device in the poem, since the historical present occurs commonly with verbs of motion (Benson 1961: 67; Nakamichi 1982: 182). Perhaps the way the story of *Sir Gawain* proceeds is particularly suitable for the use of the historical present.

Acknowledging these possible counter arguments, I would still argue that Nakamichi's table provides some important information in relation to the authorship of the Cotton Nero A.x. poems. Indeed, the historical present is markedly sparse in *Pearl* than in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain,* but *Pearl* is not an exceptional text in comparison to some other ME texts, as far as this particular literary device is concerned. In the context of ME texts in general, it is not *Pearl* but *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain* that are rather exceptional. The frequent occurrence of the historical present in the three poems other than *Pearl* is outstanding.

Chaucer is known to employ the historical present rather commonly, but according to Benson (1961: 67), there are at least 1,345 examples in his works. In contrast to this, the occurrence of the 351 examples in the 2,530 lines of *Sir Gawain* is outstanding, since

(73)

Chaucer produced an enormous amount. *The Canterbury Tales* alone is five times longer than *Sir Gawain*. Steadman (1917) also gives the frequencies of the historical present in some ME texts, none of which provides the literary device as frequently as *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*. To give an example, *Cursor Mundi* (MS Cotton Vespasian), according to him, provides 53 instances. The text is again an enormous work with almost 30,000 lines.

As mentioned above, the narrative in *Sir Gawain* is action-based, which is strongly in favour of the use of the historical present, but *Cleanness* and *Patience*, both different in genre from *Sir Gawain,* also show approximately the same rate of the historical present. In a way, the religious seriousness in *Cleanness* and *Patience* is most unsuitable for the use of the historical present, if the device belonged to the register of popular household expressions as often suggested.[7] However, the historical present is abundant in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, as well as in *Sir Gawain*, and in fact more abundant than the ME standard. If a single author has produced *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain,* he is a poet who shows a particular favour for the employment of the historical present. By contrast, the device is extremely sparse in *Pearl*, where in fact it is reserved almost exclusively as a metrical device.

If a single author, who is exceptionally fond of the historical present, had produced all four poems, he could have used the device more frequently in *Pearl* than he did. The author of *Pearl* was certainly aware of the dramatic effect of the device as the examples below illustrate:

> Þenne *verez* ho vp her fayre frount,
> Hyr vysayge whyt as playn yuore (*Pearl*, 177-8)

> Þat gracios gay wythouten galle,
> So smoþe, so smal, so seme sly3t,
> *Ryse3* vp in hir araye ryalle,

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7) The issue is discussed under Section 6.

A precios pyece in perleȝ pyȝt (*Pearl*, 189-92).

However, he limits its use virtually to cases related to rhyme. He does not display exceptionally frequent use of the device as found in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain.*

5. The other points raised by Nakamichi

Among the four points raised by Nakamichi (1982), two have been left aside so far: (1) the conversational part (as opposed to the narrative part) is much more substantial in *Pearl* than in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*; and (2) the historical present in *Pearl* does not occur with verbs of saying, verbs of emotion, and verbs of wish and request, whereas these verbs present examples of the historical present in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain.* The present section discusses these issues.

It is true indeed that the conversational part is much larger in *Pearl* than in the other three poems. This is shown in Table 1 above, from which I have extracted the relevant part below:

Table 2: The overall situation of the historical present in the Cotton Nero A.x. poems

	Pearl (1,212 ll.)	*Cleanness* (1,812 ll.)	*Patience* (531 ll.)	*Sir Gawain* (2,530 ll.)	Total (6,085 ll.)
Narrative Parts	487.5 ll.	1335.5 ll.	345 ll.	1775.5 ll.	3943.5 ll.
Conv. Parts	724.5 ll.	476.5 ll.	186 ll.	754.5 ll.	3141.5 ll.

As Table 2 shows, the conversational part in *Pearl* (724.5 lines) is much larger than its narrative part (487.5 lines), whereas the relationship between the conversational and the narrative parts is reversed in the other texts.

I would maintain, however, that this is much due to the difference of the nature of the text and the content matter between *Pearl* and the other three poems. *Pearl* is presented in the first person. The fundamental characters that appear in *Pearl* are Pearl herself and her

father (i.e. "I"), whereas most of the other characters appear indirectly inside the conversations between them. In other words, not only the poet but also characters inside the poem are story-tellers in the case of *Pearl*. In a way, the conversational part functions as an outstanding foreground of the poem, and the development of the story is heavily dependent upon the conversation in the poem. The historical present, therefore, occurs in conversation as well.[8] This is how the proportion of the conversational part is larger in *Pearl* than in the other three poems, and therefore, the first point raised by Nakamichi is perhaps a matter of the nature of the texts involved.

The final point raised by Nakamichi (i.e. the absence of the historical present with verbs of saying, verbs of emotion, and verbs of wish and request in *Pearl*), I find, is very interesting, since it shows the difference of the nature of the historical present between *Pearl* and the other three poems. The table given by him to show the point has been rearranged below:[9]

Table 3: The historical present with particular verbs

	verbs of saying	verbs of emotion	verbs of wish and request	. . .	Totals
Pearl	none	none	none	. . .	26 (100%)
Cleanness	20 (11.0%)	3 (1.6%)	7 (3.9%)	. . .	181 (100%)
Patience	9 (13.6%)	3 (4.5%)	4 (6.1%)	. . .	66 (100%)
Sir Gawain	32 (9.1%)	2 (0.6%)	11 (3.1%)	. . .	352 (100%)

Indeed, *Pearl* does not provide examples of the historical present for verbs of saying, verbs of emotion, or verbs of wish and request.

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8) The historical present in *Pearl*, though not frequent, occurs in the narrative and the conversational parts almost equally. The table below shows the frequencies of the historical present I have calculated on the basis of Nakamichi (1982: 183):

Table: The frequency of the historical present in every 100 lines

	Pearl	*Cleanness*	*Patience*	*Sir Gawain*
narrative	2.26	13.18	19.13	19.77
conversational	2.07	1.05	0	0

9) I have extracted only the relevant portion of his table (i.e. the part of verbs of saying, verbs of emotion, and verbs of wish and request). For the full table, see Nakamichi (1982: 182).

Unfortunately, however, one cannot entirely eliminate the possibility that this is rather accidental. Especially, the cases of verbs of emotion and verbs of wish and request are difficult to judge. The proportions of these verbs are, even in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain,* just around 5 % or much less than that. In the case of *Pearl,* where there are only 26 examples of the historical present in all, one could expect only one example at the maximum, even if the literary device were to occur with these verbs at the same rate as in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain.*

In the case of verbs of saying, their proportions in *Cleanness, Patience* and *Sir Gawain* are 11.0%, 13.6% and 9.1% respectively. Since *Pearl* provides the total of only 26 examples of the historical present, one could again expect only a few examples of verbs of saying, even if *Pearl* were to show the use of the historical present with these verbs at the same rate as in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain.* The absence of examples in *Pearl* can therefore be due to the limited occurrence of the historical present itself in the poem.

The other point that enhances the difficulty is that *Pearl* provides some examples of verbs of saying in the present tense, though they are not counted by Nakamichi as examples of the historical present :

> Anende ryȝtwys men ȝet *saytȝ* a gome,
> Dauid in Sauter, if euer ȝe syȝ hit (*Pearl*, 697-8)

> "I seghe", *says* John, "þe Loumbe hym stande
> On þe mount of Syon ful þryuen and þro,
> And wyth hym maydenneȝ an hundreþe þowsande,
> And fowre and forty þowsande mo" (*Pearl*, 867-70).

They illustrate the case in which an authoritative statement is made by someone in the Bible (e.g. John, Matthew, and Paul).

It is perhaps better to treat these examples separately as Nakamichi does, since the use has a longer history in written

literature than the historical present of the ordinary type. Visser (1966: § 781) states that this use of the present tense was available from the OE period onwards, while the historical present of the ordinary type increases only in later ME (Visser 1966: § 760). However, simply because of the nature of the content matter of *Pearl*, most verbs of saying in the text are connected with subjects such as John, Matthew, and Paul in the Bible. If they are not regarded as illustrating the historical present, it would be natural that verbs of saying cannot provide the historical present in *Pearl* as much as in *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain.* Hence the final point raised by Nakamichi, though interesting, cannot be proved easily.

6. Additional comments

The origin of the historical present has been controversial. While some advocate the Old French influence upon English, others argue that the historical present is essentially native in origin.[10] Among the latter group, Trnka (1930: 17) asserts that the historical present is a common feature in all living Germanic languages, although he does not necessarily deny the influence of Old French on the expanded use of the device in written English. He considers that it was essentially in popular register in OE.

The historical present, however, is not limited only to Germanic languages or French, but it also occurs in Japanese. Wada (1978: 33) notices an extensive use of the historical present in the Japanese oral tradition. The device itself is possible or at least inherent in a number of languages. The origin in the ultimate sense can, therefore, be considered native, though examples are not really attested in OE written materials. Jespersen (1924: 258) states that the historical present fundamentally belongs to the class of everyday expressions. Even in OE, it was possible to use the present tense while "referring

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10) For example, Mossé (1952: § 125.2) and Mustanoja (1960: 48) are for the Old French influence, whereas Steadman (1917: 21 & 44), Jespersen (1909-49, IV: 19) and Trnka (1930: 17) are for the native origin.

to or quoting sayings of eminent men living in the past" (Visser 1966: § 781). Also, the present tense was used in chronicle tables even in OE (Visser 1966: § 784). Thus it was at least possible in OE to employ the present tense even when reference was to things in the past. In this way, OE was not entirely devoid of the capacity for the use of the historical present.

Even so, the suddenly expanded use of the device in English from the middle of the ME period needs to be explained in one way or another. Steadman (1917) argues that the historical present develops, once the periphrastic future forms (i.e. those with *will* and *shall*) establish themselves in English. In OE, the present tense also referred to events in the future and therefore it would have been awkward also to refer to events in the past. I do not necessarily understand, however, why the use of the present-tense form for the future in OE militates against the use of the historical present. In Japanese, the use of the historical present is possible even though the same verb forms can be used both for present and future events. I also do not understand why the development of the periphrastic future should lead to the development of the historical present. There is no need for the present tense suddenly to start referring to events in the past simply because it has stopped referring to events in the future. Moreover, the historical present is available in present-day German, where present-tense verb forms can refer to future events as well. In fact, German and English are similar in respect to the development of the historical present. As Frey (1946: 46) states, the thirteenth century was the turning point in German, before which the device was hardly available.

The factors can possibly include both the popularization of ME literature and the influence of Old French. The influence of Old French literature becomes particularly strong in the ME period, and especially at the court, where French was dominantly used. In the mean time, English literature sees the rise of romance literature. Romances are under strong influence of the continental literary tradition where the

historical present was available, while they often include extended narration, which is also an ideal condition for the use of the historical present. Furthermore, as Waldron (1957: 793) states, romance "flourished for the most part as oral poetry, and only incidentally found its way into writing", which is again favourable for the use of the historical present. Although religious themes were continuous in literary materials, active human beings with clear personality came to be introduced in ME literature. Chaucer and the poet of *Sir Gawain* are representative in this respect. The central stage of literature was partly given up to human beings. In other words, literature was popularized, though it was often still within the framework of the courtly tradition in essence. Supposing that the historical present belonged to popular register as Jespersen suggests, the change of literary conditions in late ME was perhaps more favourable for the extended use of the device. In short, the change of the literary tradition in the latter half of the ME period facilitated an ideal condition for the occurrence of the historical present in written materials.[11]

As far as the Cotton Nero A.x. poems are concerned, the use of the historical present differs, as discussed above, much between *Pearl* and the other three poems. This means that at least the attitude towards the newly developed literary device was different between the poet of *Pearl* and the poet of *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain.* The poet of *Pearl* is hesitant in its use. Most probably he knew the historical present as an effective narrative device,[12] but in actuality, he reserves it more or less as a poetical device for the rhyme scheme. In contrast, *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain* employ the newly established device willingly, and in fact, much more willingly than most ME authors. It would perhaps be easier to propose the existence

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11) Yasui (1960: 194-200) also refers to the change of the literary tradition in English, although his contention is slightly different from mine. He states that the West-Saxon literary tradition in OE was not in favour of the device and that the termination of the tradition after the Norman Conquest led to the rise of the historical present in English.

12) See section 4 above.

of two authors at least, who display different attitudes towards the use of the historical present.

7. Conclusions

The present paper has discussed the use of the historical present in the Cotton Nero A.x. poems. The nature of the historical present differs much between *Pearl* and the other three poems. In *Pearl*, it is strongly dictated by rhyme, and appears only sparingly. In *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*, by contrast, the poetical factor is not at all strong or non-existent. In the three poems, the historical present is used, not as a poetical device, but often as a narrative device. As far as the narrative part is concerned, the frequent use of the device in the three poems is outstanding in contrast to *Pearl*, and even in contrast to ME literature in general. Their author is a person who is particularly in favour of the device. He uses it in the three works equally often, even though the genre differs. Thus, one can most reasonably be hesitant about including *Pearl* into the same authorship group as the other three poems.

According to Nakamichi, there are two more features which eliminate *Pearl* from the group of *Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain*. Firstly, the proportion of the conversational part in *Pearl* is much larger than in the other three texts. This can, however, arise from the difference of the content matter of the text. Secondly, the historical present in *Pearl* does not occur with verbs of saying, verbs of emotion, and verbs of wish and request, although these verbs present examples of the historical present in the other three poems. This is an interesting point to make, but unfortunately, the small number of the examples in the poems cannot prove it.

Finally, some comments were made upon the origin of the historical present. Most probably it was a device in popular register in OE, which came into written materials in ME, when literature was popularized. Also, the influence of Old French cannot be denied.

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