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Some Problems in Benson’s Interpretation of Chaucer’s Historical Present

HASEGAWA Kazuko

Introduction

My investigations on Chaucer’s historical present in 1991 and 1993 leaves some disagreements with Benson’s interpretation. He explains that an action expressed in the historical present is so general, unspecific, and of so little importance in its temporal sequence that the action of a major character and actions in the climax are not expressed in the historical present. And he also claims that the historical present expressing a character’s emotional disturbance merely establishes “a background tone” for the following narration. 1)

On the other hand, I deduce the opposite interpretation that an action which should be highlighted is expressed in the historical present, and it is generally important or suggestive in a plot and is acted by a major character, as far as The Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde are concerned, on which my previous investigations were based.

The purposes of this paper are to manifest how the disagreements are brought between our interpretations and to investigate the validity of application of the criteria for the historical present found in my previous investigations to The Miller’s Tale and The Merchant’s Tale (henceforth Mil, Mck respectively) and finally to account for the lack of the historical present in the scene of the confused chase after the fox in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, 2) which Benson points out. 3) Each of them will be discussed in the first, second, and last chapter. The definition of the historical present follows the one in my investigation in 1991.

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Chapter I

1.1 An Important Event Expressed in The Historical Present

The comicality of *Mum* starts with Absolon’s going to church and his meeting with Alison.

(1) This Absolon, that jolif was and gay,
    *Gooth* with a sencer on the haliday,
    Sensyne the wyves of the parisshe faste;  (3339-41)
    And many a lovely look on hem he caste,
    And namely on this carpenteris wyf.
    To looke on hire hym *thoughte* a myrie lyf,
    She was so propre and sweete and likerous.  (3342-45)
    I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous,
    And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon.  (3346-47)

Dividing the text, Benson explains the relationship between the development of the narrative and the tense given to verbs in it. I would like to scrutinize his statement and explain my interpretation. Benson affirms, “Absolon is first introduced by a formal portrait in the preterite (3312-38). Then, as he customarily carries a censer in the church (present - 3340), he meets Alison. Since this is an important event in the plot, it is entirely in the preterite (3342-47).”

First, the most crucial problem is about Absolon’s going to church, described in the present. According to his interpretation, Absolon’s going to church is not important because of his customary service. However, there is no description that his carrying a censer “on the haliday” (3340) is customary, except that he is a “parissh clerk” (3312). Far from the little importance of his going, it is indispensable for his meeting with Alison, even if his action is customary. Therefore the verb *go* is given the present tense to suggest the beginning of an important event, besides its mutative feature put in a new topic initiation.

Secondly I cannot recognize the preterite verbs in lines (3342-47) as the preterite for an important event. In the part, two lines (3346-7) should be excluded from this discussion because of the narrator’s judgment or his short summary of the relationship between Absolon and Alison. The four lines that
remain include three preterite verbs *caste*, *thoughte* and *was*. The latter two are expressed in the preterite because of their explanatory semantic feature. Especially the feature of the verb *be* is contrasted with the dynamic verb *go* by the different tenses in the lines (3339 and 3340). As the verb *caste* occurs in the rhymed position, nobody can decide its preterite for an important event as Benson says or for the compulsory one in the rhyme scheme. Strictly speaking, the action to cast a look on Alison is less important than Absolon’s feeling caused by the action, as seen in Example (4) which will be discussed soon. In *The Knight’s Tale*, the similar contrast between the preterite for the causal action and the present for its result is already pointed out in my paper in 1991.5)

The third problem is the ambiguous difference between the preterite in “a formal portrait” and that in “an important event” which Benson distinguishes.

(2) . . . he was somdeel squaymous
Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous. (3337–8)

(3) She was so propre and sweete and likerous. (3345)

Example 2 belongs to “a formal portrait” and Example 3 to “an important event” according to his explanation. Obviously his distinction is not tenable.

Between Benson’s citation which ends with the line (3347) and the next citation which starts from the line (3352), there are several lines disregarded by him, in which the subsequence of Absolon’s meeting is described in the historical present.

(4) This parissah clerk, this joly Absolon,
*Hath* in his herte swich a love-longyne (3348–9)

The amorous feeling in his heart is the very beginning of this comical plot. Without the feeling, the story is reduced to a mere story of the adultery between Nicholas and Alison. The stronger Absolon’s love is, the more comical the story becomes.

Benson adverts to Absolon’s wooing: “Absolon begins his wooing. This starts in the preterite (3352–54), but since it continues throughout the tale, it is mainly in the present (3355–93), while the result of his wooing – also an
important event for the plot — is in the preterite (3394–96). 6)

To clarify my discussion, I divide his statement into three parts, lines (3352–54), (3355–93), and (3394–96). In the first part, Benson disregards one present verb *hath ytake* in the following example.

(5) The moone, whan it was nyght, ful brighte shoon,
And Absolon his gytene *hath ytake;*
For paramours he thoghte for to wake.

(3352–4)

In the above examples, the verbs *shoon* and *thoghte* are reasonably assigned the preterite tense owing to the rhymed scheme of *noon* in the preceding line (3351) and *shoon,* and to the explanatory semantic feature of the latter. Between these two preterite verbs, the verb *hath ytake* showing Absolon’s direct action gets the present. His wooing never begins in the preterite as Benson says.

With regard to the second part, Benson says that the historical presents here connote the continuity of Absolon’s wooing. I can accept the connotation of continuity if it is limited in this part, although the criterion that an action caused by a strong emotion is easy to get the present tense can be applied safely here. To see whether his claim in my limited recognition can get the validity throughout the story, I peruse the temporal sequence in the story. Although Benson emphasizes the continuity of Absolon’s wooing, the accomplishment of his rival’s, Nicholas’ love takes long a time too. For the first time, Nicholas has an amorous desire for Alison earlier than Absolone does.

(6) That on a day this hende Nicholas
Fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye,
Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye,

(3272–4)

Then Alison promises that she will accept him when she has a chance. After the agreement between them, Absolon happens to see her. His wooing and Nicholas’ wicked design are advancing synchronized. It is evident that the historical present cannot be used to emphasize only Absolon’s long wooing in a common temporal circumstance shared with Nicholas, unless the actions of Nicholas and Alison are entirely described in the preterite. Their actions,
however, are described in the historical present as in those of Absolon. Her feeling, her favorable promise, and its realization are all expressed in the present. 7)

(7) She loveth so hende Nicholas

(8) Doun of the laddre stalketh Nicholay, 
    And Alisoun ful softe adoun she spedde; 
    withouten wordes mo they goon to bedde, 
    Ther as the carpenter is wont to lye.  

Surveying these historical presents above used in a dramatic scene where Nicholas or Alison is in focus, I recognize them in the effect of highlighting an indispensable action or feeling in the plot.

As to the last part (3394–96) of Benson's statements, he attributes the assignment of the preterite to the importance of the result of Absolon's wooing.

(9) Ful sooth is this proverbe, it is no lye, 
    Men seyn right thus: "Alwey the nye slye 
    Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth."  

For though that Absolon be wood or wrooth, 
By cause that he fer was from hire sight, 
This nye Nicholas stood in his light.  

Now her thee wel, thou hende Nicholas, 
For Absolon may waille and syngge "allas."  

The questioned lines are sandwiched between the quotation of a proverb expressed in the narrator's present (3391–93) and his vocative to Nicholas (3394–98). The lines are evidently an explanation of Absolon's disadvantage by the narrator. The preterites in them are not owing to the importance, but an ordinal explanation. Essentially, it is so natural to describe something happened in the past in the preterite that we should consider the meaning of the unusual present in the past environment, not of the preterite.

1.2 A Conspicuous Action as The Result of A Strong Emotion.

In the preceding section, I have concluded that the historical present is assigned to an important action in a dramatic scene supported by a major
character. In other words, the important action should be conspicuous.

First, the frequent historical presents appear in Absolon’s wooing.

(10) For day to day this joly Absolon
So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon,
He waketh al the nyght and al the day;
He kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay;
He woweth hire by meenes and brocage,
And swoore he wolde been hir owene page;
He syngeth, brokkyng as a nyghtynge;
He sente hire pyment, meeth, and spiced ale,

Among the frequent present verbs, the verbs made, swoore, and sente are in the preterite. The first two cannot be alternated with their present forms, maketh and swereth, for the metrical disorder. From the viewpoint of the metrical scheme, only the employment of the preterite verb sente is unexplainable because the mono-syllabic verb sent as the contracted present form of sendeth is available. Mil includes no example of the historical present of the verb. The following example shows how the verb is prevented from getting the present tense even in the historical present-environment.

(11) He wepeth weyleth, maketh sory cheere;
He siketh with ful many a sory swogh;
He gooth and geteth hym a knedyng trogh,
And after that a tubbe and a kymelyn,
And pryvely he sente hem to his in,

In my previous investigations of The Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde, the historical present of the verb occurs only three times as the phrasal verb, hath sent after or sendeth after. The phrase expects someone coming to join. The connotation accepts the historical present. On the other hand, the single verb sende describing an action toward a thing which is going away loathes the present tense. This interpretation accords with the effect of highlighting someone in focus.

The second outstanding historical presents occur in the description of the carpenter’s emotional disturbance seen in Example (11). Besides the concentrative occurrence of the historical present, its single occurrence can be seen in the scenes where Absolon and the carpenter are in their emotional disturbance.
The historical present describing a strong emotion highlights the invisible human feeling as clear as a conspicuous action.

1.3 The Amplification of Comicality

In *The Knight’s Tale* and *Troilus and Crisyde*, the historical present used in the description of a major character involved in a strong emotion amplifies the tragic feature of the stories. In *Mil*, it amplifies the comicality which is based on a foolish or exaggerated action and a disharmonious action with its agent. The amorous man sings like a nightingale as seen in the line (3377) in Example 10 and dresses himself handsomely as below.

(14) And hym arraieth gay, at poynt-devys.
    But first he cheweth greyn and lycorys,

The historical presents above emphasize the incongruity between the character and his actions. They work effectively to increase his comicality.

Not only the comicality brought by the incongruity, but also a foolish action is expressed by the historical present. In the case of the carpenter, it emphasizes his simple honesty as already seen in Example (11) and as follows.

(15) And stille he sit, and biddeth his preyere,

Nicholas’ and Absolon’s farce is also described in the historical present.

(16) And out his ers he putteth pryvely
(17) And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
(18) And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,

The examples (17) and (18) are cited from the passage initiated by the adverb *thus*. The passage is the narrator’s summary of the whole story. The line following to the examples (17) and (18) has a verb in the narrator’s present: “This tale is done” which is addressed to his audience. As the sequence of the
historical present and the narrator's present in the passage shows, the historical present accompanied with the adverb thus keeps a position close to the narrator's present. It confirms my deduction in 1993.

1.4 Sounds

My previous investigations show that the verb describing a sound is generally assigned the present tense in order to bring in a kind of tension to a long narrative. Mil includes seventeen descriptions of a sound except human crying. The proportion of the assignment of the present to the preterite is almost even. The reasons why half of them take the preterite in spite of a sound-description are attributed to metrical compulsion, a lexical tendency, and the lack of immediacy or synchronism with the present scene in the narrative. The following examples contrast the different tenses.

(19) On which he made a-nyghtes melodie. (3214)
(20) And pleyeth faste, and maketh melodie. (3306)

It is evident that the metrical difference between made and maketh influences the assignment of the tenses. As to the lexical tendency that the verb ginne rarely takes the present, Example (21) proves it.

(21) Til that the belle of laudes gan to rynge, And freres in the chauncel gonne synge. (3655–6)

The next two examples show the lack of immediacy.

(22) But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne (3257)
(23) Ther to he song som tyme a loud quynyble; And as wel koude he pleye on a giterne. (3332–3)

Alison is not singing in Example (22) which is an introduction of her. The similar description is seen in Example (23), in which Absolon's habit or his ability to dance, play instruments, and sing is introduced. The following two are in sharp contrast with respect to immediacy or synchronism.

(24) A litel after cokkes hadde ycrowe, (3357)
(25) Whan that the firste cok hath crowe, anon
Up rist this joly loveure Absolon,

In Example (24), the cocks have crowed before Absolon comes to the scene. On the other hand, in Example (25) the crowing and Absolon’s action are synchronized. The former lacks in immediacy but the latter satisfies it. At the same time, Example (25) satisfies my deduction that the time-description gets the historical present generally, especially when it initiates a new topic. Only the preterite verb knokked in the following example (26) puzzles me because it satisfies the immediacy or synchronism. Also it does not change the metrical scheme even if it is alternated with the present knokketh.

(26) He cride and knokked as that he were wood,
(27-a) He cogheth first, and knokketh therwithal
( b) This Absolon knokketh al esily,

When Example (26) is contrasted with Example (27-a), the first verb cride, which takes the preterite generally, may influence the verb knokke to get the preterite.

To add to the examples (20, 25, and 27a-b), Mil has four more historical presents.

(28) He syngeth in his voys gentil and smal,
(10) He syngeth, brokkyngye as a nyghtyngale;
(29) For travaille of his goost he groneth soore,
(30) And softe he cougheth with a semy soun:

The sounds in the examples above are made by a major character. As Nicholas plays a psaltery passionately, flirting with Alison in Example (20), Absolon sings to a guitar accompaniment by the window of Alison’s house in Example (28). The carpenter’s snoring is expressed in the present tense as Absolon’s coughing. Even if a sound is made gentil, smal, and softe, the historical present makes it impressive and significant in the audience’s consciousness. These eight sound-descriptions confirm the criterion that the verb describing a sound gets
the present tense generally if it satisfies immediacy. In *Mil*, the historical present makes an action with a sound conspicuous or significant and amplifies comicality of the action. And the historical present given to cocks’ crowing becomes a definite temporal marker in the course of time, like the bell’s ringing in general, which often accords with the initiation of a new topic. Although Benson claims that the historical present is not given to a verb which evolves a plot, the temporal marker tells a clear development of the tale.

1.5 Dynamism

From the viewpoint of dynamism, the mutative verb gets the present tense easily. In *Mil*, the verb *go* satisfies the general tendency. Especially in the scene where the carpenter and his boy worry about Nicholas’s seclusion, the historical present of the verb occurs frequently.

(31) This knave gooth hym up ful sturdily, And at the chambre dore whil that he stood. (3434-5)
(32) Adoun he gooth, and tolde his maisters soone (3446)
(33) This carpenter goth doun, and *cometh* ageyn, (3496)

Benson claims that the historical present connotes a continuing action and is coupled with a preterite that culminates the action. His claim is acceptable for the first two examples, but it cannot explain Example (33) because the culminated action of *going* is *to come*. It is certain that the dynamism of the verb favors the present tense. Although the narrator does not tell how large the carpenter’s house is, it is unnatural that the boy who is ordered to see Nicholas in seclusion takes a long time in going upstairs and coming down. The historical present emphasizes his young dynamic action, not its continuity. The emphasis contrasts with the stillness of Nicholas like a “*stoan* (3472).” The similar historical present is seen in the scene where Alison and Nicholas go to her bed while the carpenter sleeps.

(8) Withouten wordes mo they goon to bedde, (3650)

The historical present above is not for the continuity of going but for the
dynamism in contrast with the carpenter’s stillness in his sleep. The dynamism explains the preterite verbs in the following passage where Chaucer employs concentrative historical presents.

(34) Up rist this joly lover Absolon,
And hym arraieth gay, at poyn-devys,
But first he cheweth greyn, and lycorys,
To smellen sweete, or he hadde hembd his heer.
Under his tonge a trewe-love he beer,
For therby wende he to ben gracious.
He rometh to the carpenters hous,
And stille he stant under the shot-wyndowe-
Unto his brest it raughte, it was so lowe-
And softe cougheth with a semy soun:

(3688-97)

The five verbs in italics are reasonably assigned the preterite. Hadde hembd is an action without synchronism with Absolon’s chewing herb, beer is in the rhyme compulsion with beer, and raughte is a situation of a window. Wende and was lack in dynamism like the verb thoughte mentioned in the section 1.1.

In contrast with twelve historical presents of the verb go, there are five preterite wentes. Some of them are explainable. They are the preterites describing Absolon’s habit (3319) which lacks in immediacy and the action of the carpenter (3400) who is going to disappear from the scene where Nicholas and Alison are in focus. The non-employment of the historical present in the latter case has the common feature with the verb sende mentioned already.

On the other hand, the preterites in the following examples are unexplainable.

(35) A softe paas he wente over the strete
Until a smyth men cleped daun Gerveys,
That in his forge smythed plough harneys;

(36) Ful softe out at the dore he gan to stele,
And wente unto the carpenters wal.

(3760-2) (3786-7)

The verb wente in both examples satisfies dynamism, immediacy and even the continuity of Benson’s claim. Additionally the alternation of wente with went which is the contracted form of wendeth does not disorder the metrical scheme. Trying a possible explanation, I may attribute the preterite to the shift of the focus from the process of going to the arrival point. As a proof of it, the verbs in the sentences following to these examples get the present as seen in
Example (27-a).

And the verb *wente* occurring in the objective clause led by the subjective one with *fil it . . . that* (3307-9) puzzles me. Although the verb *falle* has the lexical tendency that it takes the preterite usually, its influence on the verb in the objective clause is not clear because there are examples in which such verbs are expressed in the present as follows.

(37) ... bifil
That Jaunarie hath caught so greet a wil    (Mch, 2133-4)

Although there are some preterite which cannot be explained, here in *Mil*, I confirm the criterion that a verb with the feature of dynamism is generally expressed in the present tense if the action is done by a character in focus in a scene.

Chapter 2

2.1.1 An Important Event and The Climax of The Tale

Benson says, “In *The Merchant’s Tale*, for instance, the climax of the tale (2328-2411) is almost entirely in the preterite, while the falling action of the last few lines (2412), . . . is almost in the present. . . .” The climax of the tale falls on the very lines (2328-2411) as he points out. These 84 lines consist of 20 narrative lines and 64 conversational lines by the knight, Januarie, his wife, May, and her lover, Damyan. The occurrence or non-occurrence of the historical present is relevant to the narrative lines, mainly lines (2348-65), which should be discussed. And these 18 lines include four lines of the narrator’s addressing to his audience and one line of the statement of a general truth as below.

(38) Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;  
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man— (2350-1)

(39) In swich manere it may nat been expressed,  
But if I wolde speke uncourteisly; (2362-3)

(40) As dooth the moorder whan the child shal dye: (2365)

Only thirteen lines are essential for my discussion of the historical present after
these five lines above are excluded. In the thirteen lines, two historical presents occur, although one is in the rhymed position.

(41) He stoupeth doun, and on his bak she stood,  
    And caughte hire by a twiste, and up she gooth—  
(2348-9)

One historical present occurs per 6.5 lines in this scene, while it does per 5.6 narrative lines throughout the whole tale. Comparing the proportion above, it cannot be said that the occurrence of the historical present in the climax scene is scarce. At the same time, the proportion does not confirm Benson’s claim that the historical present is not assigned to a verb describing an important event. In this important scene, although there are three verbs in the preterite, their tense assignment is reasonable because of the metrical compulsion for caughte (2349), the lexical tendency of gan (2353), and the rhyme scheme for throng (2353).

2.1.2 Rising Action toward The Climax

Before the narrative comes to the climax, there are some important actions suggesting it. May and Damyan fall in love. The young squire who cannot bear his secret love writes a letter and keeps it on him.

(42) He hath it put, ...  
(1884)

When May comes to him to comfort, he slips it to her.

(43) This Damyan ...  
    Hath' put into here hand, ...  
(1936 ... 9)

And she accept it:

(44) This purs hath she inwith hir bosom hyd.  
(1944)

The media to accelerate the accomplishment of their love are highlighted by the historical present without fail. Besides the letter above, a key to open Januarie’s garden is another medium.
In warm wex hath emprented the clyket

The description how May counterfeits the key is expressed in the historical present too. These media highlighted by the historical present suggest the climax and accord with narrator’s addressing to the audience: “Som wonder by this clyket shal bityde Which ye shul heeren, . . . ” (2123-4). In other words, the events with such media are the indispensable preparations for the climax. They are in the “rising action.” The occurrence of the historical present is as frequent as in the climax.

2.2 A Common Emotion Shared with Audience

The very last part of the tale called the “falling” part by Benson includes the narrator’s present and the historical present although he does not distinguish them. They should be distinguished because the historical present expresses an action in the definite past, which has no relationship with the narrator’s world, while the narrator’s present expresses an action in his world.

This Januarie, who is glad but he?

He kisseth hire and clippeth hire ful ofte,
And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe,
And to his palays hoom he hath hire lad.

Now, goode men, I pray yow to be glad.
Thus endeth heere my tale of Januarie;
God blesse us, and his mooder Seinte Marie!

The middle three lines including four verbs kisseth, clippeth, stroketh, and hath...lad in the historical present are sandwiched between the sentences with the verbs of the narrator’s present. Such a historical present is similar to that in the end of Mil, which summarizes the tale. It means this type of its employment is close to that of the narrator’s present. For he draws actions concluded in the past into his world by the historical present. The actions drawn near are felt so close to the audience that the historical present used in the ending part is generally effective to share the emotion of delight or sorrow as in The Knight’s Tale and Troilus and Criseyde, and laugh in Mil with the audience, or to set their minds at rest in Mech.
2.3 A Strong Emotion and An Action Caused by It

*Mch* has the most frequent occurrences of the historical present in the descriptions of a strong emotion and actions caused by it. First, Januarie's actions on the first night of his wedding are almost expressed in the present tense. He *drynketh* herb, *hath* electuary, *hath* taken his wife in his arm, *kissett*, *rubbeth* and *laboureth* till the dawn. His actions clarified by the historical present convey his delight grammatically.

Damyan's delight is also expressed in the historical present. When he receives a letter from May, he is raptured and *riseth*, *kembeth*, *preyneth* himself, *pyketh*, and *dooth* whatever she likes (2009-12). On the other hand, the old knight falls in sorrow for he *is* woxen blind, and he *desireth* to die, *wepeth*, and *wayleth* (2068-72). As the jealous man confines May, she who loves Damyan *wepeth* and *wayleth* (2093-6). Whether a strong emotion is delight or sorrow or lamentation, the expression of it gets the present tense certainly.

2.4 Sounds

In *Mch*, there are twelve descriptions of a sound. One of them is irrelevant to this discussion for the infinitive predicate.

(47) Sat in the bussh, and caughten she bigan. (2208)

Five descriptions have no verbs making direct sounds although nouns in them make the audience imagine sounds.

(48) That sleep til that the coughe hath hym awaked. (1957)

(49) He was al coltissh, ful of ragerye,  
And ful of jargon as a flekked pye. (1847-8)

(50) Al ful of joye and blisse is the paleys,  
And ful of instrumentz. .. (1712-3)

Three examples have the verb *sang* or *rong* which are prevented from getting the present tense, *singeth* or *ringeth*, for the metrical scheme. The other three get the present tense.
(51) . . . so chaunteth he and craketh.  (1850)

(52) That in the gardyn with his faire May
      Syngeth ful murier than the papejay.  (2321)

They show evidently that if a verb is free from the metrical compulsion to
take the preterite form, the verb making a sound gets the historical present
when a major character makes the sound in the course of the story. The
historical present given to the description of a sound confirms my conclusion in
the section 1.4.

2.5 Dynamism

With regard to dynamism, the historical present in Mch shows the
peculiarity in its employment. It is no problem that the mutative verbs get the
present tense as frequently as in the description of a strong emotion. The
problem is so many historical presents of verbs like be with no dynamism, have
and take with little dynamism. Especially the historical present of the verb sit
occurs more than twice riseth. If Benson’s claim of continuity is applied to it,
only three historical presents of the verb satisfy the continuity in a strict
meaning. They express May sitting like a fairy at the wedding feast (1742) and
Damyans sitting under a bush (2155) and among the leaves of the pear (2326).
The other sits are describing the action rather than the situation of someone
sitting.

(53) Thus been they wedded with solemnpitee,
      And at the feeste sitteth he and she  (1709-10)

(54) Whan that the heighbe masse was ydoon,
      In halle sit this Januarie and May.  (1894-5)

The former example depicts the moment when May and Januarie come to the
feast from church after the wedding ceremony is over. The latter describes the
moment when Januarie and May who has stayed in her chamber for four days
come and sit in the hall. The connotation of continuity of the verb is diluted.
For their sitting is the “culminated” action after the wedding ceremony in
Example 53 and the wedding seclusion in Example 54, which should be expressed
in the preterite according to Benson’s claim of culmination. Therefore, the continuity of the verb is not supported. The historical present in these scenes where the plot evolves throws a strong light on a new scene: in Example 53, the feast full of joy and bliss contrasts Damyan in sorrow (1772) and in Example 54, the feast makes Januarie remember Damyan (1898). The other historical presents of the verb are ambiguous as to whether they mean the action itself, or the continuity of sitting. They, however, get the present tense in a passage where other verbs almost get the present. It means, a whole scene full of delight with a sequence of actions is highlighted.

In connection with the delightful scene, the verb hath has five occurrences of its historical present. All of them are commonly used in positive expressions: May hath a beautiful face, Januarie’s ideal wife should have beautiful voice and a face, he hath electuary at the bed of his wedding night and hath pleasure in his garden with May. These historical presents express how Januarie is in delight getting a beautiful wife without any loquacious explanations. They are related with the historical present in the description of a strong emotion discussed in the section 2.3.

2.6 A Heavenly Body, Mythological Gods, and God

My investigation based on The Knight’s Tale finds a tendency that actions by God or the mythological gods and the movement of a heavenly body are generally expressed in the historical present. In Mch, the mythological gods intervene the love affair among May, Januarie, and Damyan. There are eight historical presents describing their actions.

(55) Bacus the wyn hem shynketh al aboute,
And Venus laugheth upon every wight,
Daunceth biforn the bryde and al the route. (1722–8)

(56) Ful ofte tyme he Pluto and his queene,
Proserpina, and al hire fayerye,
Disporten hem and maken melodye
Aboute that welle, and daunced, as men tolde. (2038–41)

(57) Bright was the day, and blew the firmament;
Phebus hath of gold his stremes don yeent (2219–20)

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The verb in the rhymed position (2234) and verbs describing invisible actions of Gods (2354–6) are expressed in the preterite. Only the verb daunced in the line 2041 in Example 56 is unexplainable.

Chapter 3

3.1 The Less Frequent Occurrences of The Historical Present in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale

It is evident that The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is very unique in regard to the less frequent occurrences of the historical present. It had one historical present in the prologue and seven in the tale which has 626 lines. In these lines, 464 lines consist of the conversational lines of major characters and the narrator’s statements, lamentation, and addressing to his audience. They are irrelevant to the discussion of the historical present and occupy 74 percent of the whole lines, while the proportion is 38.7 percent in Mil, and 41 percent in Mch. The high proportion in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale makes the occurrence of the historical present less frequent as a whole. And the narrative lines per one historical present are 23 lines in this tale, additionally 5.4 in Mil, and 5.7 in Mch respectively.

The most remarkable thing in this tale is the non-employment of the historical present in the description of a sound, where we expect its employment. There are eleven descriptions of a sound. Nine of them are described in the preterite: three of them have the verb gan which does not get the present tense generally, and other four verbs, two creus, soong, and yolleden cannot be alternated with their present forms croweth, singeth, and yellessen because of the metrical compulsion. Two descriptions have the verb was which is apt to get the preterite tense because of its explanatory description. Although the frequent occurrences of the preterite in the sound-description are impressive, its assignment to verbs in the nine descriptions has common reasons in Mil and Mch. Only the following example including four preterite verbs cannot be
explained.

(59) Of horn, of boon, in whiche they blewe and powped,
    And therwithal they skriked and they howped.  (3399-400)

As to the non-employment of the historical present, Benson points out the scene of the chase after the fox, Russel. In fact, the scene is described entirely in the preterite. All the verbs in it (3375-400), however, need not be always in the present even if the vividness of the chase is demanded. For the verbs without dynamism like *herde* and *syen*, with the progressive connotation like *stirred*, and of the human voice like *cryden* get the preterite generally. Apart from the metrical compulsion, the problem is the verb *ran* or *ronne*, which should be assigned the present if the vividness is demanded. The preterite allows us two possible interpretations. One is the denial of the vividness as the primary factor of the historical present, which nullifies every interpretation in my previous investigations. The other is Chaucer's preference of the instructiveness to the vividness of the narrative, as far as *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is concerned. Judging from the high proportion of the narrator's statement mentioned already, I would rather take the latter interpretation, although Benson says, "Nor is the mere proportion any index of the quality of the work." The interpretation accords with the only concentrative occurrence of the historical present in this tale.

(60) He looketh as it were a grym leoun,
    And on his toos he rometh up and doun;
    Hym deigned nat to sette his foot to grounde.
    He chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounde,
    And to hym rennen thanne his wyves all.
    Thus roial, as a prince is in his halle,  (3179-84)

The dignified figure of Chauntecleer is exaggerated by the historical present as well as the simile like *a grym leoun* or *a prince*. Just as the historical present contrasts movement and stillness as mentioned already in the section 1.5, it contrasts the cock's happiness in his prime and the unlucky happening stealing near. The contrast works effectively for an instructive purpose.
Conclusion

First, there are disagreements between Benson’s and my interpretation of the historical present in *Mil*, especially with regard to the tense assignment in the descriptions of Absolon’s going to church, his meeting with Alison, and his wooing. Benson regards Absolon’s meeting with Alison as the most important event in a sequence of his actions, and attributes the preterite verbs in the description to the importance of the plot.

But I attribute them to the rhyme compulsion or the lack of dynamism which is the primary factor to get the historical present, as found in my previous investigations. And I find Benson’s non-distinction between the historical present and the narrator’s present in his statement, and his ambiguous distinction between the preterite of a formal portrait and that of an important event.

And he claims Absolon’s wooing is expressed in the historical present because of its long continuity. I cannot accept his claim because Absolon’s wooing is synchronized with Nicholas’ wicked design which evolves in the same duration till it is accomplished. The historical present cannot emphasize only the continuity of one side in a common temporal circumstance shared with the other. Here it is used to highlight the strong emotion of Absolon in love. Not only the scene of Absolon’s wooing, but also the scene where the carpenter laments is expressed with verbs in the historical present. Certainly it is used in order to highlight the invisible human feeling as clear as an action with dynamism.

The emotional turbulence often causes farce which is conspicuous and draws the audience’s laugh. The comicality is brought by disharmonious actions with their agent too. The amorous parish clerk behaves like a dandy. His actions get the present tense which emphasizes the gap and amplifies his comicality. The amplification is seen, without fail, in the descriptions of the carpenter’s simple honesty and the farce of Nicholas and Absolon who are the rivals in love.

Secondly, Benson parts actions in *Meh* into three kinds: the rising action,
the action in the climax, and the falling action. He claims that the preterite verbs occur entirely in the climax while the historical presents do in the rising or falling action.

In the climax part he points out, many irrelevant lines to the occurrence of the historical present are included. They are conversational lines of characters, which occupy 76 present of whole lines in the climax part (41 percent throughout the tale). After they are excluded, the proportion of the narrative lines to one occurrence of the historical present is not markedly different against the proportion in the other part.

With regard to the falling action, Benson does not distinguish the historical present from the narrator's present and the present of general truth. Therefore, the occurrence of the historical present in the ending part is misunderstood to be frequent. The historical present used in the part stands close to the narrator's present, for it is sandwiched between verbs of the narrator's present. The narrator draws actions concluded in the past into his world just as he addresses his audience directly. The employment of the historical present at the ending is very common with that in \textit{Mil}.

Both in \textit{Mil} and \textit{Mch}, when a sound is made in the present scene in the narrative, that is, when it satisfies immediacy, the verb describing such sound gets the present tense generally if it is free from the metrical compulsion to take the preterite form. The historical present employed in the sound-description is effective in two ways: to give acoustic tension in the narrative and to clarify a new phase which is often accompanied with a temporal marker expressed in the historical present. Benson's claim that the historical present is not given to verbs in an important event cannot be applied to the sound-description.

Another common employment is seen in verbs with dynamism. The mutative verb represents the dynamism. In \textit{Mil}, the verb \textit{go} gets the historical present generally. Therefore, I regard the present verb in the description of Absolon' going to church as crucial. It satisfies the dynamism as the mutative verb, especially put in the initiation of a new topic, and above all, it describes an important and indispensable event as the beginning of the comical plot. It
gets the present tense not for the little importance of the action, but for its importance. Even in the description without the strong sense of continuity of the verb go, the historical present is used in the intended contrast between movement and stillness. The contrast makes the action conspicuous in Mil.

In Mch, the mutative verb gets the present tense following the criterion. As a peculiar tendency, the verbs with no or little dynamism like be, have, and take get the present tense frequently. The employment of their historical present often accords with a dramatic scene full of joy and delight. The historical present works to highlight the scene. Especially the verb sit is outstanding in contrast with the historical present of riseth. The verb gets the tense when the action draws a new important phase, as frequently as the verb connotes the continuity of sitting.

The historical present which can be found only in Mch is that of verbs describing actions of a heavenly body and gods who intervene the love affair on the earth. This kind of historical present is found already in my investigation of The Knight’s Tale.

In relation to the third purpose of this paper, I recognize that The Nun’s Priest’s Tale has fewer occurrences of the historical present as a whole. The tale, however, contains the irrelevant lines to the discussion of the historical present, which consist of the conversational lines of characters and the narrator’s statement, lamentation, and addressing to his audience. They occupy 74 percent of the whole lines. This high proportion makes the total occurrences of the historical present fewer than in Mil and Mch. Additionally the narrative lines per one historical present are 23 lines. On the other hand, they are 5.4 and 5.7 in Mil and Mch respectively. This high proportion and the complete non-employment of the historical present in the sound-description seem to suggest the quality of the tale. The peculiarity is compatible with the extraordinarily many lines of the narrator’s statement. It may be Chaucer’s subtle intention of the instructiveness than the vividness of the narrative.
Notes
2) This investigation is based on the text The Riverside Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987)
3) Benson, 77.
4) ibid., 75.
6) Benson, 75.
8) See The Knight’s Tale (2762 and 2870) and Troilus and Criseyde V (280).
9) Benson, 70.
10) ibid., 75.
11) ibid., 67.

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