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THE NARRATIVE PRESENT PERFECT REVISITED: A STUDY OF MIDDLE ENGLISH TEXTS

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the emergence and functions of the narrative Present Perfect (NPP) in Middle English, using data from the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*. The study compares the NPP with the historical present, drawing on Steadman's findings, and examines its distribution across genres and dialects. Results suggest that the NPP and the historical present arose around the same time and often appeared in similar genres, supporting the hypothesis that the historical present may have influenced the rise of the NPP under favorable grammatical conditions. Its primary function was to modulate the pace of a narrative, enabled by the aspectual features of the present perfect. While the influence of the Old French *passé composé* cannot be entirely excluded, the findings point to internal developments within the Middle English tense-aspect system as the main driver of NPP usage. These results align with Steadman's observations on narrative functions of the historical present.

Keywords: Narrative present perfect, preterit, tense variation, pragmatics, Middle English.

EL PRETÉRITO PERFECTO NARRATIVO REVISITADO: UN ESTUDIO DE TEXTOS DEL INGLÉS MEDIO

RESUMEN. Este artículo explora la aparición y las funciones del pretérito perfecto narrativo (PPN) en el inglés medio, utilizando datos del *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*. El estudio compara el PPN con el presente histórico, basándose en los hallazgos de Steadman, y examina su distribución a través de géneros y dialectos. Los resultados sugieren que el PPN y el presente histórico surgieron aproximadamente en la misma época y aparecieron con frecuencia en géneros similares, lo que respalda la hipótesis de que el presente histórico pudo haber influido en la aparición del PPN bajo condiciones gramaticales favorables. Su función principal consistía en modular el ritmo del relato, gracias a las propiedades aspectuales del pretérito perfecto. Aunque no puede descartarse por completo la influencia del *passé composé* del francés antiguo, los resultados apuntan a desarrollos internos del sistema de tiempo y aspecto del inglés medio como principal factor que motivó el uso del PPN. Estos resultados coinciden con las observaciones de Steadman sobre las funciones narrativas del presente histórico.

Palabras clave: pretérito perfecto narrativo, pretérito, variación temporal, pragmática, inglés medio.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The periphrastic construction of the possessive verb *have* and a past participle can be broadly classified into two categories across European languages: those that allow its use with definite past time adverbials and in past time narrative sequences (e.g., German, French), and those in which such usage is typically disfavored (e.g., English, the Scandinavian languages). Historically, the use of the German *Perfekt* in past time contexts, alternating with preterits, is first documented in Middle High German texts, such as Gottfried's *Tristan* (thirteenth century). A few centuries later, during the sixteenth century, instances of this usage expand dramatically, as observed in *Fortunatus* (Kuroda 67, 69). This practice becomes widespread across various genres where it had previously been absent, especially in chronicles:

(1) *So* **liessen** *die Moscouiter aufblasen/vnd* **griffen** *die Littischen an/die Litten hinwider/vnd wann dann der ain thail den andern* **jagte/hat** *jeder thail die seinigen* **ersetzt***/Die Littische* **haben** *mit vernunfft offt* **gewichen***/denen die Moscouiter mit grosser begierd* **nachgeuolgt***/vnnd als ain thail den andern hin vnd wider* **jagte***/zu letst* **fliehen** *die Litten an das ort* (*Das Bonner Frühneuhochdeutschkorpus*, Herberstein, Text 115, Bl. C3r, 40-44)

So the Muscovites **had the trumpets sounded** and **attacked** the Lithuanians, the Lithuanians **fought back**. Whenever one part **chased** the

other, each side **relieved** their own troops. The Lithuanians often **withdrew** wisely, whom the Muscovites **pursued** with great eagerness. And as one part **chased** the other back and forth, at last the Lithuanians **fled** to that place. (Translation mine)

(2) *Jm Jahr Christi 1602.da der Liechtmeßtag auff einen Afftermontag **fiel/wurde** der Wochenmarckt **verlegt**/vnd drey Predigen in S. Martins Kirchen **gehalten**/welches zuvor nie **geschahe**/**im Jahr 1532**. **hat** man jhn gar nicht **gefeyret**/ jetzunder aber **hat** man drey Predigen* (*Das Bonner Frühneuhochdeutschkorpus*, Schorer, Text 227, S. 14, 9-14)

In the year of Christ 1602, when Candlemas **fell** on a Tuesday, the weekly market **was moved**, and three sermons **were held** in St. Martin's Church, which **had never happened** before. **In the year 1532**, it **was not celebrated** at all; but now three sermons **are held**. (Translation mine)

A broader comparison of earlier chronicles such as the thirteenth-century *Sächsische Weltchronik*–which consistently employs preterits and contains no present perfects in narrative contexts–with example (1), drawn from the sixteenth-century *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii* (*Notes on Muscovite Affairs*, 1549) by Sigismund von Herberstein, reveals a significant diachronic shift: present perfect forms can now occur alongside preterits in past time narrative sequences. Thus, in example (1), the German *Perfekt* forms *hat ersetzt* and *haben gewichen* are embedded within a passage where events are expressed by preterits (e.g., *liessen*, *griffen*, *jagte*) and even the bare infinitive (e.g., *fliehen*). Example (2), from another seventeenth-century chronicle, *Memminger Chronik* (Ulm, 1660) by Christoph Schorer, also witnesses *Perfekt* in past time contexts; here, however, the *Perfekt* not only alternates with preterits but is used with the definite past time adverbial. As Kuroda notes, this usage is not significantly different from the modern German application of the *Perfekt* (69).

In varieties of Present Day English occurrences of the present perfect with definite past time adverbials and in past time narrative sequences appear to be possible, similar to the above examples from Early New High German (see e.g., Rastall 80-81; Miller 234-235; Levey 135-38; Elsness 92-93; Walker 22-25; Ritz 3406), though in Standard English such usage is considered ungrammatical. In British English the present perfect in past time narrative sequences can be traced back to as early as Middle English, similar to what is observed in the history of the German *Perfekt*. Denison, for instance, provides examples of the present perfect in past time contexts and argues that the preterit and present perfect were to a large extent interchangeable in Middle English (353). A related observation is made in *Middle English Syntax* by Mustanoja, who refers to the use of the present perfect in past time narrative sequences as the historical perfect (506-507):

(3) *Up **stirten** thanne the yonge folk atones, and the mooste partie of that compaignye **han scorned** this olde wise man, and **bigonnen** to make*

> *noyse, and* ***seyden*** *that right so as, whil that iren is hoot, men sholden smyte, right so men sholde wreken hir wronges whil that they been fresshe and newe* (*CMEPV*, Chaucer, *The Tale of Malibee*, 1035-1036)
>
> Then the young folk **rose up** at once, and most of that company **mocked** the old wise man and **began** to make noise, and **said** that just as, when the iron is hot, one should strike, so too should one avenge their wrongs while they are fresh and new. (Translation mine)

In example (3), the present perfect *han scorned* appears in a syntactic environment surrounded by preterits (*stirten*, *bigonnen*, *seyden*), which does not typically align with its standard function. In this study, instances like *han scorned* in (3) will be referred to as the Narrative Present Perfect (NPP), as this construction is used within past time narrative sequences. Although in *Middle English Syntax* the NPP is not analyzed in detail, several key aspects are highlighted: first, it is a function of the present perfect in narrative style (rather literary than popular style); second, its use adds vividness to the narration by highlighting the main line of action, drawing attention to events, and eliciting emotional responses in the reader; third, its development is likely influenced, at least in part, by French; finally, in some cases, the use of the present perfect instead of the preterit may be attributed to metrical considerations (Mustanoja 506-507).

While Mustanoja provides a valuable analysis of the NPP in Middle English, several important questions remain unanswered. Among them are: When was the NPP first documented? In which genres/texts and dialects was it prevalent? To what extent did French influence the development of this function in Middle English? Equally intriguing is the relationship between the NPP and the historical present, both of which emerge in Middle English. Building on the above, this paper aims to explore the rise of the NPP in English, using the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse (CMEPV)*. Accordingly, the study addresses the following key areas:

- A comparison of the NPP with the historical present in selected corpus texts;
- A description of the distribution of the NPP in terms of date, genre, and dialect;
- An investigation into the causes of the emergence of the NPP;
- An analysis of the functions of the NPP.

2. CORPUS SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The corpus selected for this study is the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse(CMEPV)*, a comprehensive digital repository of Middle English texts. Given the scope of the corpus, the texts span a variety of genres, regions, time periods, and dialectal features offering a representative basis for examining variation in tense and aspect usage. Importantly, while the grammatical and stylistic conventions of

verse may differ from those in prose, verse texts are included in this analysis because many Middle English genres are represented in verse. Another reason for including verse in the analysis is that the NPP in Old French is believed to have first emerged in verse (Worthington; Caudal). Therefore, instances of the NPP in verse are crucial for comparing this phenomenon in Middle English translations with their Old French originals. However, the metrical considerations–namely, the possibility that the present perfect might occasionally have been preferred over the preterit to satisfy poetic meter, as suggested by Mustanoja (506-507)–lie beyond the scope of this study, as they require a separate detailed investigation and thus could be the focus of future research.

Since the corpus lacks annotation for automated searches, examples were manually retrieved, focusing specifically on instances of *have* + past participle used in narrative passages recounting past events. Although instances involving *be* + past participle may also be relevant, a comprehensive manual search for these forms would be significantly more challenging due to the variability of auxiliary usage in Middle English. As such, this aspect remains beyond the practical scope of the current study, but could also be addressed in future research.

It is important to emphasize that this study takes a qualitative, interpretative approach since the main aim is to explore usage tendencies, functional characteristics, and discourse effects of the NPP within narrative contexts, rather than to produce exhaustive frequency-based generalizations. Although token counts are provided in Table 2 to show the distribution of the NPP across genres, dates, and dialects, with a total of 125 NPP tokens, the focus remains on interpretative patterns. Texts for Table 2 were selected from the corpus without applying specific textual criteria to ensure varied coverage across genres, periods, and dialects. Table 1, by contrast, records only the presence or absence of the NPP in individual texts to facilitate a broader distributional comparison with the historical present, as exemplified in Steadman's analysis. This dual selection approach balances historical comparability with representational breadth in the dataset. Given the relatively low frequency and sporadic nature of the NPP across texts and genres, no statistical testing is applied.

Moreover, comparative analysis extends to investigating potential French influence on the Middle English NPP. For texts that are translations from French, instances of the NPP in the Middle English versions are compared with their counterparts in the original Old French, particularly focusing on the use of the *passé composé*:

(4) *Tant li* ***preierent*** *li meillur Sarrazin / Qu'el' faldestoel* ***s'est*** *Marsilies* ***asis.***

The best Saracens **begged** Marsile so much / That upon his throne he **sat down**. (Caudal 178)

Instances of the *passé composé*, as in example (4), are well documented in Old French (Foulet; Sutherland; Worthington; Caudal). The compound past *s'est asis* is

used in a past time narrative sequence and functions as an instance of the NPP. Comparing such uses with their renderings in Middle English translations helps determine whether the Middle English NPP mirrors the syntax of the originals or constitutes an independent usage.

Since Middle English texts include a wide range of genres, such as chronicles, romances, private letters etc., to capture this diversity, the definition of narrative provided in the *Dictionary of Narratology* is adopted (Prince 58-61). Narrative is understood primarily as a form of verbal presentation involving the linguistic *recounting* or *telling* of events. To distinguish narrative from simple event description, it is defined as the representation of at least two real or fictive events (or one state and one event), where neither event logically presupposes or entails the other. Furthermore, narrative is distinguished from a random series of situations or events by the presence of a continuant subject, meaning a consistent perspective or agent through which the story is told, and by constituting a coherent whole (Prince 58). This distinction is methodologically important, as it ensures that the analysis focuses on structurally coherent narrative passages rather than descriptive or enumerative sequences that do not engage the discourse functions under investigation.

Our analysis of the functions of the NPP in Middle English texts is conducted following Fludernik's theory of natural narratology. Central to this theory is the idea that narratives are shaped by human experience and temporal perception, with events represented not just in chronological order but as meaningful or significant to the narrating subject. Fludernik's concept of *experientiality* highlights how tense and aspect choices reflect a narrator's subjective experience of events, including their timing, duration, and impact within the narrative world (9 et passim). This means that tense usage is not merely a grammatical marker of time but a tool that conveys how events are experienced and framed by the narrator. Applying this framework to the NPP enables an understanding of how the present perfect in Middle English can function within past time narrative sequences–not simply as a temporal reference but as a means to highlight the experiential or consequential relevance of events within the storytelling process.

3. HISTORICAL PRESENT AND THE NPP: DISTRIBUTION AND TRENDS

While the development of the historical present in English has been extensively studied, it remains a contested topic, covering many of the same problematic areas as those we have identified in relation to the NPP–particularly regarding its emergence in English and its primary functional characteristics. Fischer provides a concise yet comprehensive review of various perspectives on this issue. She notes, for instance, that both arguments for and against Old French influence on the historical present in Middle English hold merit, pointing out that this influence is difficult to either prove or disprove (Fischer 242-45). However, an alternative hypothesis, advanced in a detailed study by Steadman, is particularly noteworthy. Steadman suggests that the historical present is not the result of borrowing from Old

French or Latin but rather developed as a stylistic device enabled by changes in the tense-aspect system of the language during the transition from late Old English to early Middle English (44). The investigation highlights several key findings, summarized as follows: the historical present was absent in Old English, emerging only at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and then rapidly expanding throughout the century until it became a widespread phenomenon by the late fourteenth century. Remarkably, Old English texts translated from Latin consistently avoided replicating the *praesens historicum* (Steadman 21, 44). Regarding the factors that may account for this development, the author links the use of the present tense in past time contexts to the weakening and eventual disappearance of the distinction between imperfective and perfective verbs. Steadman argues that "the present of a perfective verb could not be used to express a past action, because the present form of such a verb generally expressed future action" (31). It was only later, with the development of a periphrastic future tense in English, that this functional restriction was lifted, enabling the present tense to convey past actions (Steadman 31-32).

Given the overlap in the problematic areas surrounding the emergence and functional characteristics of both the historical present and the NPP, a comparison of their development may offer valuable insights. Steadman's study provides a useful perspective on the timeline and driving factors behind the rise of the historical present in Middle English. By comparing the timeline of the historical present with our data on the NPP, we can investigate whether the two forms show parallel patterns of emergence and expansion. This comparison could provide a clearer understanding of whether both constructions might have arisen in response to broader systemic changes in the tense-aspect system of Middle English, particularly the development of the present perfect during the period in question.

Thus, using the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse (CMEPV)*, we have selected the same texts analyzed in Steadman in order to examine them from the perspective of the use of the NPP. This alignment is intentional, as our goal is to determine whether the emergence and distribution of the NPP correlate with that of the historical present in the same textual environment. Since Steadman organizes the works chronologically and sometimes examines multiple manuscripts for a single text, we adopt a similar approach for consistency.

Table 1 below, therefore, follows Steadman's textual selections as closely as possible, including specific works such as *Piers Plowman*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Cursor Mundi*, and others. In cases where Steadman mentions authors or collections more generally–as with Chaucer–we have selected representative texts for our own qualitative analysis. For example, while Steadman refers broadly to Chaucer's frequent use of the historical present, he does not provide detailed examples; accordingly, we selected *The Tale of Melibee* to serve as a manageable and representative *Fiction* text for evaluating NPP usage. This tale is particularly suitable, as it contains extended embedded narrative stretches, allowing for sustained observation of tense usage. It was not our aim to survey the entire Chaucerian corpus quantitatively.

As for the three works that constitute the so-called *Katherine Group*–namely, *St. Katherine of Alexandria*, *St. Juliana of Nicomedia*, and *St. Margaret of Antioch*–only the first two were examined, and neither revealed instances of the NPP.

Additionally, there is some uncertainty surrounding the specific texts referred to under the title *Twelfth Century Homilies*. If these texts correspond to those catalogued in the corpus as *Old English Homilies of the Twelfth Century: From the Unique Ms. B. 14. 52 in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge*, then it can be stated that neither the historical present nor the NPP is found within these works.

The only instance attested for *The Early South-English Legendary or Lives of Saints* seems to be uncertain, as the text employs the past perfect *hadde i-founde*, whereas the original manuscript uses *hath*:

(5) *And þo he ne sai3 hire nonmore: weopinde he gan hom teo;*

Þo he cam hom, in penaunce: clene lijf he gan lede;

Of al þat he **hadde** *[orig.* **hath***]* *oute* **i-founde***: no-þing he ne sede (CMEPV, 232-234)*

And though he saw her no more, weeping, he went home;

When he came home, in penance, he began to lead a pure life;

Of all that he **had found**, he said nothing. (Translation mine)

Table 1 presents data on the comparative distribution of both the historical present and the NPP across selected Middle English texts, with presence marked by '+' and absence by '–'.

What trends can we infer from the data presented in Table 1? In contrast to the historical present, the NPP appears to be less widespread and more sporadic across the examined texts. Its earliest attestations, though, occur alongside the historical present in *Layamon's Brut* (c. 1200-1225) and *Genesis and Exodus* (c. 1250). This suggests that, based on the available data, both the historical present and the NPP began to emerge in the first half of the thirteenth century. All the texts listed in Table 1 prior to *Layamon's Brut*, which date back to the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, consistently show the absence of both the historical present and the NPP, with *Saint Katherine* being the sole exception, where only a single instance of the historical present is attested (Steadman 14). Overall, in the early thirteenth-century texts that do not exhibit any instances of the NPP, the use of the historical present is limited. For example, in the *King Horn* Cambridge manuscript, there is no attestation of the historical present, while the *Harl. MS* and *Laud MS* manuscripts contain 4 and 2 instances, respectively; in *Havelok*, only 3 examples are found (Steadman 16). This suggests that, in the early stages of the development of both the historical present and the NPP, the latter was slightly lagging behind in time and distribution. The NPP appears to have been less commonly attested and was not used at all in texts where, for various reasons, the historical present was employed

sparingly, with occurrences limited to 3-4 instances. The overall trend is that the NPP begins to emerge in texts that extensively use the historical present tense. Yet, it remains largely absent from a range of texts throughout the thirteenth century.

Table 1. Comparison of the Distribution of Historical Present and NPP in Middle English Texts.

Text	Date	Historical present	Narrative Present Perfect	Lines in the texts (NPP)
History of the Holy Rood Tree	12th c.	-	-	-
Saint Katherine	c. 1190-1225	+	-	-
Saint Juliana	c. 1190-1225	-	-	-
Hali Meidenhad	c. 1220s	-	-	-
Poema Morale	c. 1175	-	-	-
Layamon's Brut (British Museum Ms. Cotton Caligula A.IX)	c. 1200-1225	+	+	2626
The Ormulum	c.1200	-	-	-
Floris and Blauncheflur:				
MS Cott Vitell	ca. 1250-1300	+	+	223
MS Cambridge Gg 4.27.2	c. 1300	+	+	20, 191
MS Trentham	c. 1440	+	+	128, 189, 385, 444
King Horn				
Cambridge MS	c. 1250	-	-	-
Harl. MS	c.1300-1325	+	-	
Laud MS	c. 1300-1325	+	-	
Genesis and Exodus	c.1250	+	+	-
Havelok	c.1280	+	-	-
The Early South-English Legendary; or, Lives of saints	c.1285-1295	+	+(?)	234
Cursor Mundi	c.1300-1350	+	+	1758, 3932
The Debate of the Body and Soul	c.1200-1275	+	-	-
The Prick of Conscience	c. 1325-1350	-	-	-
Libeaus Desconus	1325-1350	+	-	-
The Pearl	1360-1400	+	-	-
Piers Plowman	c. 1370–1386	+	+	81, 163
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight	c. 1350-1400	+	+	folio 101v
Chaucer's The Tale of Melibee	second half of the 14th c.	+	+	§2

Nonetheless, the NPP becomes more consistently attested in fourteenth-century works. Texts such as *Piers Plowman*, *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300-1350), and Chaucer's works regularly employ both the historical present and the NPP. Despite a wider textual presence of the NPP, its diffusion is not a straightforward process. Even during this later period, certain texts do not attest it, despite the presence of the historical present. An indicative example of such texts is *The Pearl.* As Steadman notes, the historical present is uncommon in *The Pearl*, likely because its extensive use is precluded by the nature of the text (19). Steadman identifies 14 instances of the historical present, five of which occur in rhyme (19).

Interestingly, several Middle English texts demonstrate a marked absence of both the historical present and the NPP. For example, in *The History of the Holy Rood Tree* (twelfth century), *Saint Juliana* (c. 1190-1225), and *The Prick of Conscience* (c. 1325-1350), neither construction is attested. These texts, which largely belong to the religious and didactic genres, suggest that certain genres may have resisted the stylistic innovations associated with the historical present and the NPP. The issue of genre influence on the use of the NPP will be addressed in detail in the following section.

From the observations above, we draw the following preliminary conclusions regarding the chronological development and distribution of the two constructions:

- Earlier texts (before the mid-thirteenth century) tend to **not use either construction** (e.g., ***The Ormulum***, ***Poema Morale***);
- From **c. 1200-1300**, we start attesting both constructions, with some texts like ***Layamon's Brut*** and ***Genesis and Exodus*** using both;
- By the **late fourteenth century**, both the historical present and the NPP are attested across a wider range of texts.

These conclusions suggest that the emergence of the NPP in Middle English is closely parallel to the development of the historical present.

4. DISCUSSION: INFLUENCES ON THE NPP AND ITS FUNCTIONS

4.1. Influence of genre, date, and dialect

In Section 3, we suggested, based on certain patterns in Table 1, that genre may have played a crucial role in shaping the distribution of the NPP. In particular, we can assert that early texts from the twelftthth century, as well as certain religious works such as *The Prick of Conscience*, consistently avoided the NPP. To further investigate the potential impact of factors such as date, genre, and dialect on the use of the NPP, we selected pertinent texts according to these three criteria, following the classification framework proposed in the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English 2*. This framework includes four periods of Middle English (ME)–Period ME1 (1150-1250), Period ME2 (1250-1350), Period ME3 (1350-1420), and Period ME4 (1420-1500)–and five dialects: East Midland, West Midland, Northern, Southern, and Kentish.

Table 2 below highlights the patterns in the use of the NPP across Middle English texts from various genres, time periods, and dialects. A dash (–) indicates that no tokens of the NPP were found in the respective text.

Table 2. NPP Usage across Middle English Texts by Genre, Date, and Dialect.

Genre	Text	Date	Dialect	Number of NPP tokens
Document (Laws, Charters)	The Proclamation of Henry III	ME2	East Midlands	-
	The English register of Godstow nunnery	ME3	West Midlands	-
	Petitions, wills, charters: - An anthology of Chancery English (87 petitions); - Fifty earliest English wills in the Court of Probate, London: A. D. 1387-1439; - The English register of Oseney abbey / by Oxford, written about 1460 (32 charters)	ME3-ME4	East Midland	-
Science (Astronomy, Medicine)	Medical treatise (rhymed)	ME2	East Midlands	-
	A Treatise on the Astrolabe	ME3	East Midlands	-
	Medical works of the fourteenth century: anonymous collections of herbals, surgical treatises, recipes, and remedies	ME3	Northern	-
Philosophy	Boethius by Chaucer	ME3	East Midlands	-
Homily and Sermon	Trinity homilies	ME1	East Midlands	-
	Sawles warde	ME1	West Midlands	-
	The Ormulum	ME1	East Midlands	-
	Kentish sermons	ME2	Kentish	-
Religious Treatise	Vices and virtues	ME1	East Midlands	-
	The Ancrene Wisse	ME1	West Midlands	-
	Hali Meidhad	ME1	West Midlands	-
	The Ayenbite of Inwyt	ME2	Kentish	-
	Bestiary	ME2	Northern	-
	Prick of conscience	ME3	East Midlands	-
	English prose treatises of Richard Rolle de Hampole	ME4	Northern	-
Rule	The Benedictine Rule	ME3	Southern	-
	The Northern Prose Version of the Rule of St. Benet	ME3	Northern	-
	The Northern Metrical Version of the Rule of St. Benet	ME3	Northern	-

History/Chronicles	Peterborough chronicle	ME1	East Midlands	-
	Layamon's Brut	ME1	East Midlands	1
	Cursor Mundi	ME3	West Midland	20
	A chronicle of London	ME4	Northern	-
	A short English chronicle from Lambeth MS. 306	ME4	East Midlands	-
	Alredi Abbatis monasterij de Rieualle	ME4	East Midlands	-
	An English chronicle of the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI	ME4	East Midlands	-
	Historie of the arrivall of Edward IV	ME4	East Midlands	3
Travelogue	Mandeville's Travels	ME3	East Midlands	5
Biography, Life of Saint	Katherine	ME1	West Midlands	-
	Juliane	ME1	West Midlands	-
	South English Legendary	ME2	Southern	1
	St Brandan	ME2	Southern (?)	-
Fiction	Dame Sirith and Interlude	ME2	Southern, East Midlands	-
	The Fox and Wolf	ME2	South or West Midlands (?)	-
	The Tale of Melibee	ME3	East Midlands	7
	Reynard the fox	ME4	East Midlands	2
	The wright's chaste wife	ME4	Northern	2
	Iak and his step dame	ME4	Northern	-
Romance	Havelok	ME2	Northern	-
	King Horn	ME2	Southeast	-
	Beues of Hamtoun	ME2	East Midlands	20
	The Romaunt of the Rose	ME3	East Midlands	7
	Sir Gawain and the Green Knight	ME3	West Midlands	3
	Death of Arthur	ME4	West Midlands	17
	The siege of Jerusalem	ME4	West Midlands	7
	Arthur; a short sketch	ME4	Southern	1
	Robert Henryson's Orpheus and Eurydice	ME4	Northern	1
Biblical narrative	Genesis and Exodus	ME1	West Midlands	11
	Prose Psalter	ME2	East Midlands	-
	Wycliffe's Bible (Genesis and Exodus)	ME3	East Midlands and Southern	3
Plays	The Townely plays	ME4	Northern	1
	The York plays	ME4	Northern	1
	Everyman	ME4	East Midlands	-
Private Letters	The Paston Letters	ME 4	East Midlands	9
	The Stoner Letters	ME4	East Midlands	3

What Table 2 demonstrates is that a notable number of texts across different genres do not use the NPP. These include *Legal Documents*, *Religious Treatises*, *Rules*, *Homilies/Sermons*, and *Scientific* and *Philosophical* works, which, as explained below, generally avoid the NPP due to their non-narrative nature. However, *Biblical Narratives*, another religious genre, exhibit instances of the NPP. Certain other genres, including *Fiction*, *Romance*, and *Private Letters*, also show NPP usage, though some, like *Biographical Texts*, contain only isolated occurrences.

While NPP usage becomes more prominent in some genres during the later Middle English periods (ME3 and ME4), this pattern is neither uniform nor linear across all genres. For example, in *History/Chronicles*, the majority of tokens appear in ME3, notably 20 tokens in *Cursor Mundi*, with a marked decline to only 3 tokens in ME4. Conversely, *Romance* texts show a substantial increase in ME4 (26 tokens), following a dip in ME3 (10 tokens) after relatively high usage in ME2 (20 tokens).

The data from Table 2 corroborates the findings from Table 1, showing that early texts (ME1) across most genres tend not to use the NPP. Even genres like *Fiction* and *Romance*, which exhibit a considerable use of the NPP starting from ME2 and continuing into later periods (ME3 and ME4), tend to avoid it at the earliest stage (ME1). From the ME3 period onward, the NPP becomes more common, expanding across a broader range of genres: *Plays*, *Private Letters*, *Fiction, and Travelogue*.

The type of dialect seems to influence whether the NPP is present or absent in various texts. Thus, the East Midlands dialect is prominently represented in texts across multiple genres. However, the use of the NPP in East Midlands texts is inconsistent. Some, like *The Tale of Melibee*, employ the NPP, while others, such as *The Proclamation of Henry III and Trinity Homilies*, do not. The Northern dialect displays NPP usage exclusively in the ME4 period, with only a few isolated tokens found in *Fiction*, *Romance*, and *Plays*. Texts such as *Religious Treatises*, *Rules*, *Homilies/Sermons*, *Legal Documents*, *Scientific* and *Philosophical writings* consistently avoid the NPP, regardless of the time period or dialect. Conversely, genres like *Romance* and *Fiction* show a more regular use of the NPP across dialects, though this pattern is largely concentrated in later periods (ME3 and ME4) and is not equally represented in all dialects.

The data from Tables 1 and 2 suggest that the NPP emerged sporadically in Early Middle English (ME1), with isolated attestations in both East and West Midlands texts such as *Layamon's Brut* and *Genesis and Exodus*. During this period, its use appears highly limited and uneven across both genres and dialects. By ME3, the NPP becomes more clearly attested, particularly in narrative genres such as *Fiction*, *Romance*, *History/Chronicles*, and *Travelogues*, concentrated in the East and West Midlands. These regions thus appear to have served as likely early centers of innovation. In ME4, the NPP shows broader–though still uneven–geographical diffusion, appearing in Northern texts (e.g., *York Plays*, *The Wright's Chaste Wife*) and Southern texts (e.g., *Arthur; a short sketch*). Based on these patterns, we tentatively propose three stages of NPP development: 1. sporadic emergence in ME1; 2. initial consolidation and genre

expansion in ME2-ME3 centered in the East/West Midlands, and 3. broader diffusion in ME4 toward northern and southern dialect areas.

The above stages suggest that the East and West Midlands were likely the focal centers of the development and early diffusion of the NPP. From there, the construction seems to have diffused northward and southward by ME4, with narrative genres (especially *Romance*, *Fiction*, *History/Chronicles*, and *Biblical narratives*) serving as likely vehicles for its spread. However, this hypothesis requires further corroboration through analysis of a larger dataset of NPP usage.

How can we account for the relationship between the rise of the NPP and genre type? A definition of narrative provided in Section 2, drawing on Fludernik's notion of experientiality, makes it clear that narrative involves structured storytelling characterized by a sequence of connected events, presented from a coherent narrative perspective, and framed as meaningful experiences. These structural and functional elements are typically absent in genres such as cookery books, legal documents, and scientific (example 6) or philosophical texts (example 7). For instance, the cookery recipe in example (6) provides procedural instructions without event sequencing or narrative coherence, while the philosophical text in example (7) is a reflective discourse that, although it refers to personal transformation over time, does not present this change as a sequence of discrete, foregrounded events. Crucially, the perspective of recounting centers on general life conditions rather than on specific, narratable past events. Since the NPP is functionally not tied to such contexts, its absence in these genres is thus expected. The following extracts from texts in these genres illustrate this point:

(6) *Who-so* ***hauyþ y-dronke*** *poyson oþer venym. – Take dragannce oþer gladyne and mynte, of alle y-lyche moche and stampe hym and tempere hym wiþ wyn and drynke hit* (*CMEPV, Medical works*, 14th century, 166)

Whoever **has drunk** poison or venom – take dragonwort or gladdon and mint, all in equal amounts, and pound them, and mix them with wine, and drink it. (Translation mine)

(7) *þei þat* ***weren*** *glorie of my you3th whilom weleful and grene conforten now þe sorouful werdes of me olde man. for elde* ***is comen*** *vnwarly vpon me hasted by þe harmes þat I haue. and sorou* ***haþ comaunded*** *his age to be in me.* (*CMEPV,* Chaucer's translation of *Boethius*, fol. 3b, 4)

They who **were** the glory of my youth, once joyful and green, now comfort the sorrowful words of me, an old man. For old age **has come** upon me suddenly, hastened by the troubles that I have. And sorrow **has commanded** its age to be within me. (Translation mine)

A more intriguing case involves genres that show fluctuation in NPP usage across time and dialects, such as *History/Chronicles* and *Biblical narratives*. Regarding chronicles, Fludernik provides valuable insights, arguing that early historical texts, like medieval chronicles, typically do not qualify as full-fledged narratives because they lack experientiality and coherence–key components of narrative structure. These texts often consist of event listings or annalistic entries (e.g., "In year X, this happened...") and are devoid of causal connections, character development, or a sense of lived experience (Fludernik 17–18). This absence of narrative elements helps explain why the NPP is not used in early Middle English texts like the *Peterborough Chronicle*, though we should not forget that the underdeveloped categorial characteristics of the present perfect at this stage may have also played a role. Over time, however, historical writing evolved, with authors increasingly incorporating narrative features such as motivations, consequences, and more complex temporal structures that made the texts more story-like. Fludernik suggests that this shift reflects a broader move toward narrative conventions that better align with how humans naturally process real-life experiences (18). As a result, later chronicles show an increasing use of the NPP, although more traditional, non-narrative accounts, lacking both narrative structure and the NPP, remain a stylistic option for chroniclers.

As shown in Table 2, none of the religious texts (e.g., homilies, sermons, and treatises) contain instances of the NPP. This absence is consistent with their generally non-narrative nature, as these texts typically emphasize doctrinal exposition or moral instruction rather than event-based storytelling. In contrast, *Biblical narratives*, which involve more explicit, event-focused storytelling, do exhibit the NPP, as seen in texts like *Genesis* and *Exodus* (ME1) and Wycliffe's *Bible* (ME3), while it is absent from the *Prose Psalter* (ME2), which features a meditative, liturgical style with minimum narrative sequencing:

(8) *Oc ðe breðere* ***ne wisten*** *it nogt. Hu ðis dede* ***wurðe wrogt****. Oc alle he* ***weren*** *ouer ðogt. And* ***hauen*** *it so to iacob* ***brogt****. And* ***tolden*** *him so of here sped* (*CMEPV, Genesis and Exodus*, 205, 271-75)

But the brothers **did not know** it, how this deed **was done**. But they **were** all too troubled. And they **brought** it thus to Jacob. And **told** him of their news. (Translation mine)

(9) *And thei* ***turneden*** *ayen, and* ***camen*** *til to the welle Mesphath; thilke is Cades. And thei* ***han smyte*** *al the cuntre of men of Amalec, and Amorrei, that* ***dwellide*** *in Asason Thamar* (*CMEPV,* Wycliffe, *Genesis 14:7*)

And they **turned** back and **came** to the well of Mesphath; that is Kadesh. And they **smote** all the people of Amalek and the Amorites who **dwelled** in Hazazon Tamar. (Translation mine)

The situation with Wycliffe's translation is more complex. Firstly, we observe the NPP only in *Genesis* (example 9), as no instances of the NPP were found in *Exodus*. Secondly, there is a probability that the Latin *Vulgate*, from which Wycliffe translated the *Bible*, influenced the choice of verbs regarding tense and aspect. For instance, in example (9), *han smyte* translates the Latin synthetic present perfect *percusserunt*.

However, two counterarguments can be made against the influence of Latin. On the one hand, the translation is not entirely straightforward, as the text contains numerous instances where the Latin synthetic perfect is rendered as the Middle English preterit. For example, in *Genesis 18:07*, the Latin perfects *cucurrit*, *tulit*, and *dedit* are translated into Middle English preterits *ran*, *took*, and *yaf*. On the other hand, in Luther's translation, all instances where Wycliffe employs the present perfect in sequences of past events exclusively use preterits. This suggests that Wycliffe is guided more by the stylistic potential of the NPP rather than strictly adhering to grammatical rules to align with the Latin original–an approach that Luther seems to have taken in a different manner. It is important to note that examples (1) and (2) indicate that by the sixteenth century, the NPP was well established and widely used in New Early High German. Thus, translated biblical texts suggest that the use of the NPP can be a matter of style and the intended effect on the reader rather than merely a rigid adherence to the Latin original.

As Middle English texts evolved from ME1-ME2 to ME3-ME4, there was a noticeable increase in texts belonging to genres where experientiality plays a crucial role in narrative structure. In genres like *Romance* and *Fiction*, narratives allow readers to emotionally and cognitively engage with events, making the story more vivid and relatable and reflecting how humans experience the world. This shift demands more complex tense-aspect constructions. For instance, the use of the NPP in the *Romance* genre, as seen in example (10), allows for greater syntactic flexibility, enabling authors to convey complex relationships and descriptions by combining the NPP with preterits in a past time context:

(10) *ȝhe* ***wende*** *be ded. Þat erl for hire* ***haþ sorwe ikaȝt*** *And* ***askede****, ȝif ȝhe* ***disired*** *aȝt, Þat* ***miȝte*** *hire freure* (*CMEPV*, *Beues of Hamtoun*, 180-83)

She **was thought** to be dead. The earl **was** deeply **grieved** for her and **asked** if she **desired** anything that **might** comfort her. (Translation mine)

Overall, the specific narrative characteristics of different genres significantly influence NPP usage. In this sense, the use of the NPP can be interpreted as a linguistic reflection of genre-specific narrative features. In light of this, our data suggests that Mustanoja's claim that the historical perfect is confined to literary style is at best incomplete. While it is true that the NPP appears predominantly in literary texts (and most surviving Middle English texts do not represent popular style), evidence from ME4 shows that private letters, which reflect more colloquial usage, also contain instances of the NPP. These letters demonstrate how the NPP could be

used to describe past events even in less elaborate, non-literary contexts, such as personal correspondence, in contrast to more stylized genres like *Romance*:

(11) *Right wurshipfull syr, and my good Maister, y Recommaunde me to yow: and please hyt your Maistershyppe to wete that the Sonday next after my departynge fro yow I* **come** *to Hendeley at vij of the clocke in the mornynge, and whan I* **had herde** *masse John Mathew* **come** *to me fro my lady youre syster, and* **told** *me that there* **had be** *certain persones at my place at Falley and* **have take** *a distresse thre horses of my tenauntes, whiles that he* **was** *at the Chyrche at matyns and* **have caried** *hem away* (*CMEPV*, Elmes to Thomas Stonor, 1457, 53)

'Right worshipful sir, and my good master, I commend myself to you. Please allow your Lordship to know that on the Sunday following my departure from you, I **came** to Hendeley at seven o'clock in the morning. When I **had heard** Mass, John Mathew **came** to me from my lady your sister, and **told** me that certain persons **had been** at my place at Falley and **had taken** by distress three horses of my tenants while he **was** at church at matins, and **had carried** them away.' (Translation mine)

In example (11), John Elmes recounts a vivid and concrete event: while attending church, three horses belonging to his tenants were stolen from his estate. The letter details the timing and circumstances of the theft, providing a clear narrative of the past incident. This example is representative of the broader pattern found in the private letters analyzed, where the NPP typically appears in passages involving vivid narration of specific past events. Such usage suggests that, even in informal and non-literary texts, the NPP is employed primarily when recounting detailed and event-focused stories.

Ultimately, it is not the register–whether literary or colloquial–but rather the narrative characteristics of the genre that play a more crucial role in determining the use of the NPP. However, linguistic influence cannot be entirely dismissed. In our data, there are instances of the NPP in texts that are influenced by Old French (e.g., *Floris and Blauncheflur*), while texts with minimal French influence, like the *Ormulum*, show no examples of the NPP. Does this suggest that Old French may have played a role in the emergence and use of the NPP? We will explore this issue further in the next section.

4.2. French influence on the NPP in Middle English

It is undeniable that French dramatically transformed the linguistic landscape of English following the Norman Conquest. This influence manifested primarily in the extensive borrowing of vocabulary and the introduction of new morphological patterns and suffixes. Syntax, too, did not escape French influence. For example, the use of prepositional phrases (such as "of" for genitive constructions) and modal

perfect constructions with auxiliary verbs like *have* in counterfactual modals (e.g., "could have done") can be traced to Old French influences (Ingham 18). This influence was facilitated by widespread bilingualism, particularly among the professional classes in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. However, despite the prestige of Old French (Anglo-Norman) as a language of culture and authority, it did not radically alter English morphology or syntax beyond certain functional and syntactic replications, primarily through the introduction of function words and constructions, rather than significant changes in word order or inflections (Ingham 19-20).

In light of the actual diglossia existing in England at that time, a pertinent question arises: to what extent can the emergence of the NPP in Middle English be attributed to the influence of Old French (Anglo-Norman)? First of all, there is evidence that the earliest uses of the present perfect functioning as the NPP appear in Old French during the latter half of the twelfth century. Thus Caudal analyzed two medieval French texts: *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, a twelfth-century verse narrative, and *La Queste del Saint Graal*, a thirteenth-century prose narrative, focusing on the usage of the *passé composé* (see example 4) within past narrative sequences of events (187). As a result, although the *passé composé* was found in narrative contexts, its occurrence was relatively rare, comprising approximately 1% of verb instances in these texts. In contrast, the historical present was employed to indicate sequences of past events over ten times more frequently, accounting for around 10.4% and 10.7% of verb occurrences, respectively. The *passé simple* remained the predominant tense for past time sequences in these narratives (Caudal 187).

Another important observation regarding the use of the *passé composé* in Old French in past time narrative sequences is that, during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, it was primarily used in verse (e.g., *chanson de geste*) and very rarely in prose (Worthington 400). A comparison of the Old French *passé composé* data discussed by Caudal and Worthington with the Middle English data from Tables 1 and 2 shows that early adaptations of French romances, such as *Floris and Blauncheflur,* which in many parts closely follow the so-called *Aristocratic* version of the original, retaining even the original rhymes (Taylor 20), do indeed exhibit the use of the NPP. In contrast, romances such as *Havelok* and *King Horn do not use the NPP. Havelok's* origin is disputed, being variously ascribed to an adaptation of an Anglo-Norman text or viewed as "contamination from a French literary version" (Bradbury 117). *King Horn* likewise appears to be an adaptation of an Anglo-Norman story, sometimes close in phraseology but markedly different in style (Lumby and McKnight x-xi). It should be noted, however, that many Middle English translations from Anglo-Norman were primarily paraphrases or adaptations, meaning they often reinterpreted the original texts, focusing on conveying the essence and themes rather than providing a direct translation. As Barron notes, "the earliest English romances are clearly not experiments in a new form but versions of Anglo-Norman originals" (53). Therefore, French influence may have contributed to the emergence of the NPP in Middle English, but it was not the sole or deterministic factor. This conclusion is further reinforced by evidence from our data: early texts from other genres, particularly

Layamon's Brut and *Genesis and Exodus,* also exhibit the use of the NPP. Both *Layamon's Brut* and *Genesis and Exodus* may reflect the broader cultural influence of Old French (Anglo-Norman) literature, particularly in their themes, though their linguistic features often remain rooted in native English tradition.

Before examining the tenses used to convey the Old French *passé composé* in texts influenced by French originals, we once again refer to Steadman's study, which also analyzes the influence of French on the emergence of the historical present in the history of English. In particular, the author takes an example of *Havelok* that has four instances of the historical present. Steadman notes that in passages of *Havelok* closest to the French original, a preterit is consistently used to translate the French historical present. For example, French lines 89, 217, and 843 (*fet*) and line 719 (*vint*) correspond to the Middle English preterits *garte*, *graythede*, *cam*, and *dide* (Steadman 19). To demonstrate that the evidence of the historical present in Middle English is insufficient to support the theory of French influence, the author divides the texts into two groups. The first group includes texts influenced by Latin (e.g., *Homilies*, *The Holy Rood Tree*, *Saint Katherine*, *Saint Marherete*, *Saint Juliana*, *Hali Meidenhad*, *The Legendary*, and *Genesis and Exodus*), while the second group consists of texts influenced by French (e.g., *The Brut*, *Floris and Blauncheflur*, *Havelok*, and *Horn*). Steadman argues that the distribution of historical presents in these two groups is not "great enough … to serve as a basis of an argument" (23). Moreover, the author contends that if we were to attribute this feature to borrowing, we would have to assume that each Germanic language borrowed the historical present from another language–much like Sweet's theory, which suggests that Old Norse borrowed the historical present from Old Irish. The main conclusion, however, is that French influence does not account for both the absence of the historical present in Old English and its emergence in Middle English (Steadman 23–24). Interestingly, Steadman's test applies to our data as well. In both of the above text groups, we find texts that either include or lack the NPP, suggesting that the mere presence of the NPP in certain texts–regardless of whether they were influenced by other languages–does not provide sufficient evidence that the NPP was adopted as a result of the external influence.

The manner in which the Old French *passé composé* in past time narrative sequences was conveyed in Middle English translations further supports the idea that there was no direct one-to-one correspondence of the NPP between the two languages.

In *Libeaus Desconus*, which is based on the Old French *Li Biaus Descouneüs* by Renaud de Beaujeu, the following example of the *passé composé* is translated using the preterit:

(12) (OF) *Quant* ***ont lavé****, si* ***sont asis*** *(de Beaujeu, 2, 59)*

(ME) ***Wesch*** *and* ***jede*** *to mete* (*CMPV*, *Libeaus Desconus*, 10, 111)

Washed and **went** to eat. (Translation mine)

In *Romances* with more frequent use of the NPP, such as *The Romaunt of the Rose*, the situation with the NPP is more complicated. Firstly, it appears in instances where it is absent in the French original:

(13) (OF) *Quant Amors me vit aprimer.*
Il traist a moi, senz menacier,
La floiche, ou n'ot fer ne acier,
Si que par l'ueil oucuer ***m'entra*** *(CMEPV, Le Roman de la Rose, 102, 1730-1734)*

(ME) *And shette at me with alł his might*
So that this arowe anoon right
Thourgh out eigh as it ***was founde***
Into myn herte ***hath maad*** *a wounde* (*CMEPV*, *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 103, 1777-1780)

And he shot at me with all his might,
so that this arrow immediately right
through the eye, as it **was aimed**,
made a wound in my heart. (Translation mine)

There is an instance where the NPP in the French original is translated into Middle English using a past resultative construction, where the simple past of *have* (*hadde*) combines with a direct object (*hym*) and a past participle (*bent*) to express that the subject caused or brought about a certain state or condition in the object:

(14) (OF) *L'arc li* ***a comandé*** *a tender (CMEPV, Le Roman de la Rose, 78, 1300)*

(ME) *He* ***hadde*** *hym* ***bent*** *anoon right* (*CMEPV*, *The Romaunt of the Rose, 79, 1334*)

He **bent** it at once. (Translation mine)

Another instance demonstrates a pluperfect in the French text, which is translated using the NPP in the Middle English text:

(15) (OF) *Tant* ***a voit fait*** *par son bel don*

(ME) *So wel with yiftes* ***hath*** *she* ***wrought*** *CMEPV*, *The Romaunt of the Rose, 69, 1164*)

She **worked** with gifts so well. (Translation mine)

The variation in translation strategies underscores that the relationship between Old French (Anglo-Norman) and Middle English with respect to the use of the NPP

is not one of direct correspondence. In texts such as *Libeaus Desconus* and *The Romaunt of the Rose*, the NPP occurs even where it is absent in the French originals, while in other cases, the preterit is employed consistently to convey meanings found in the source texts. These observations suggest that, while French influence on the emergence and adoption of the NPP in Middle English cannot be ruled out, its usage was not mechanically or systematically transferred from French original texts.

The following section will examine the core functions of the NPP in Middle English.

4.3. Functions of the NPP in Middle English texts

When analyzing the use of the NPP in past time narrative sequences in Middle English, Mustanoja notes that it "is used to emphasize the importance, dreadfulness, pathetic quality, etc., of the event or situation" (506-07). Similarly, Sutherland highlights the special narrative value of the French *passé composé*, where "its double aspect, descriptive of a present state or indicating an action completed in the past, enables the author to maintain a constant connection between past and present, to change his point of vantage according to the needs of the narrative" (333).

Furthermore, in his analysis of the historical perfect, Mustanoja draws attention to the similarities between the historical present and the historical perfect. He notes that the instances where the historical perfect is employed are "strikingly parallel to those where the historical present is used" (Mustanoja 506). Indeed, our data also contains such examples:

(16) *Þat alle* **ouerwalte** *þer he* **went** *& wyes an hundred Wer ded of þat dynt & in þe diche* **lyȝten** *Þan Tytus* **heueþ** *up þe honde & heuen kyng* **þonkeþ** *Þat þey þe dukes deþ* **han** *so der* **bouȝte** (*CMEPV*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, 71, 1206-1210)

That all **were overwhelmed** wherever he **went**, and a hundred men **were** dead from that blow and **lay** in the ditch. Then Titus **raises** his hand and **thanks** the heavenly king that they **paid** so dearly for the duke's death. (Translation mine)

In example (16), the past time narrative sequence is represented by various tenses: it begins with the preterits *ouerwalte*, *went*, and *lyȝten*, followed by the historical present forms *heueþ* and *þonkeþ*, as well as the NPP *han bouȝte*. The parallel use of these tenses in strikingly similar contexts within past time narrative sequences is not merely coincidental; rather, it indicates their functional congruity. This assumption is further supported by the observations made in Section 3, where Table 1 illustrates a notable parallel use of both the historical present and the NPP. Generally, the switch to the historical present serves to maintain audience engagement by breaking the monotony of past tense narration and highlighting or foregrounding key moments in a narrative. Consequently, it is not surprising that

the NPP can also be used to achieve certain narrative effects. By shifting to the present narrative plane–whether through the present tense or the present perfect tense–the speaker can draw attention to certain actions or events as if they are occurring in real time, thereby making them more engaging for the listener or reader.

In *Tense and Narrativity*, Fleischman points to the fact that the present perfect is closely tied to subjectivity, that is, "it marks the discourse of a speaker-observer whose psychological center permeates that discourse" (31). It is this subjective quality that gives the present perfect narrative potential: it allows storytellers to highlight certain events, makes them feel more immediate or significant, and shapes how the audience perceives their importance. This potential enables tense switching, which "originates as a pragmatic device of spontaneous oral narration" (Fleischman 79). By adopting Fleischman's view on the present perfect and origins of tense switching alongside Steadman's hypothesis regarding the emergence of the historical present in Middle English, we can argue that the emergence of the NPP in Middle English was largely supported by the development of the aspectual characteristics of the present perfect.

Indeed, the absence of the historical present in Old English can be attributed to the limited means of expressing futurity beyond the present tense, as well as the lack of distinction between imperfective and perfective verbs. Similarly, the present perfect was underdeveloped as a tense-aspect category in Old English, exhibiting many features of a state-resultant construction and only becoming a full-fledged tense category at the beginning of Middle English (Mustanoja 504; Carey 47-76). This may explain why the *habban + PP* construction in Old English was absent in past time narrative sequences in contrast to the Middle English ones. For example, in the translation of *Orosius*, which primarily recounts past events, only preterit forms and/or the construction *hæfd(e) + PP* are employed. Once the language overcame linguistic constraints within the functional sphere of tenses and the *habban + PP* construction became more grammaticalized, the potential for the present perfect to function as the NPP emerged. Our data tentatively suggests that the historical present emerged first as a pragmatic narrative device, paving the way for the later integration of the NPP, once the present perfect had become a grammaticalized and functionally distinct category. This is supported by the distributional evidence in Tables 1 and 2, which shows that earlier Middle English texts such as *Saint Katherine* (c. 1190-1225) employ the historical present but lack NPP usage, while later texts like *Layamon's Brut* (c. 1200-1225) and *Floris and Blauncheflur* (c. 1250-1440) display both the historical present and the NPP. This chronological progression suggests that the historical present was well-established before the NPP became prominent. Further, the data from Table 2 reveals that NPP tokens predominantly appear in later Middle English texts across diverse genres, such as *History/Chronicles*, *Fiction*, *Romance*, *Plays*, and *Private Letters*, predominantly from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, indicating the gradual functional differentiation of the present perfect in narrative contexts.

When we assert that the NPP highlights key actions or is used to emphasize certain emotions, it seems we do so with prior knowledge of the special function of

the perfect, rather than logically deducing the importance of those emotions and then discovering that they are expressed through specific tense forms. In example (3), it would be challenging to demonstrate that it is specifically the word *scorn* and the emotions it evokes, rather than the actions conveyed by other verbs, that need emphasis.

In the following extract from Chaucer's *The Tale of Melibee*, the present perfect is used alongside preterits in a past time narrative sequence:

(17) *His wyf and eek his doghter* **hath** *he* **left** *inwith his hous, of which the dores* **weren** *faste* **yshette**. *Thre of his olde foes* **han** *it* **espyed**, *and* **setten** *laddres to the walles of his hous, and by wyndowes* **been entred**, *and* **betten** *his wyf, and* **wounded** *his doghter with fyve mortal woundes in fyve sondry places, this is to seyn, in hir feet, in hire handes, in hir erys, in hir nose, and in hire mouth, and* **lefte**n *hire for deed, and* **wenten** *awey* (*CMEPV*, *The Tale of Melibee*, 167, 969-973)

He **left** his wife and also his daughter inside his house, where the doors **were** firmly **shut**. Three of his old foes **spied** this, and they **set** ladders against the walls of his house, **entered** through the windows, and **beat** his wife, and **inflicted** five mortal wounds on his daughter in five different places, that is to say, in her feet, in her hands, in her ears, in her nose, and in her mouth, and they **left** her for dead and **went** away.

(Translation mine)

Undoubtedly, the NPP in example (17) functions to highlight actions. But what function of the NPP could serve as a common denominator across all instances of its usage? Based on the instances from our corpus, we claim that it is the effects that are achieved primarily through the aspectual characteristic of the perfect: the actions are completed, and the perfect brings these actions into sharp focus, almost like a close-up. Hence, tense-switching, based on the aspectual properties of the perfect, can affect the narrative tempo. By employing the present perfect, the narrator not only slows the pace but also encourages the reader or listener to dwell on the completed actions, their resultant states, and ensuing consequences. This leads to the effect of a foregrounded action that automatically emphasizes any emotions that the highlighted verbs express. If this approach is correct, it helps explain why, in example (18), Old French employs a chain of present perfects in past time narrative sequences, while the Middle English translation relies on simple preterits and includes only one instance of the past perfect–*"nadde ysete"* (from *ne hadde ysete* = *had not sat*)–which cannot be considered an instance of the NPP. The French original meticulously depicts a moment at a royal court, where the characters engage in a formal dining ritual. First, the narrator describes the people present at the court, but then the narrative tempo slows down as the focus shifts from general scene-setting to a detailed account of successive actions–a deceleration in which the *passé*

composé plays an active role by foregrounding each event as a discrete, significant moment in the progression toward the feast:

(18) *Guinlains i fu de Tintaguel,*
Qui onques n'ot ire ne deull;
Kes li senescals i estoit,
Qui por laver crier faisoit.
Tant en i ot, nes puis conter,
Ne les dames ne puis nonmer.
A la cort ***ont*** *l'auge* ***criee****,*
Et li vallet ***l'ont aportee****.*

Quant ***ont lavé****; si* ***sont asis****,*
Detriers la table, ce m'est vis.
Beduiers ***a*** *la cope* ***prise****,*
Devant le roi ***fait*** *son servisse,*
Et Kes reservoit dou mangier

(de Beaujeu, 2, 51-63*)*

Gawain was there, from Tintagel,
Who never knew ire or sorrow;
And Kay the seneschal was also there,
Who had the washing water called for.
There were so many present, I cannot count them,
Nor can I name all the ladies.
They **had** the basin **brought** to court,
And the valets brought it forth.

When they **had washed**, they **sat down**,
Behind the table, as I see.
Bedevere **took** the cup,
And **serves** before the king,
While Kay oversaw the food.

(Translation mine)

In contrast, the Middle English adaptation in example (19) provides a brief account, noting that the nobility merely washed and prepared to eat:

(19) *Wip oute more resoun no Duk, erl and baroun*

Wesch *and* ***jede*** *to mete. Of all manere fusoun,*

As lordes of renoun,

Y-nouj they ***hadde*** *to ete.*

Na dde *Arthour bot a while,*

Þe mountaunce of a mile,

At his table ***y-sete****:*

Þer ***com*** *a maide in ride*

(*CMPV*, *Libeaus Desconus*, 10, 111-18)

Without further ceremony, dukes, earls, and barons

Washed and **went** to the meal. Of all kinds of dishes,

As lords of renown,

They **had** enough to eat.

Arthur **had** not but a while,

The distance of a mile,

Been seated at his table:

There **came** a maiden riding.

(Translation mine)

Consequently, there are fewer events in the Middle English version, which unfold quickly, reducing the necessity to slow down the narrative tempo and emphasize specific events, unlike in the French original.

5. CONCLUSION

This analysis of the NPP in Middle English shows that, overall, it played a more limited but still crucial role in Middle English texts compared to other narrative tenses, such as the preterit or historical present. The findings indicate that the NPP emerged gradually, with its earliest examples appearing in the thirteenth century, alongside the historical present. Although the French influence is not discarded, it is argued that the NPP seems to have developed in response to changes in the tense-aspect system of Middle English, particularly as the present perfect became a full-fledged tense.

A key contribution of this study is the detailed comparison between the NPP and the historical present. A hypothesis was proposed that the historical present may have played a role in triggering the use of the NPP in English once its tense-aspect characteristics were fully developed. Co-occurrences of these forms in Middle English texts suggest that the historical present, by allowing a more vivid narration, created a functional pattern that the NPP could follow as a complementary narrative device. The primary function of the NPP was that of slowing down the tempo of narration achieved through aspectual characteristics of the present perfect. The

emotional emphasis and vividness of the narration thus seem to derive from this primary function of the NPP.

The use of the NPP across Middle English texts depended not only on the period of composition but also on the genre and dialect. It was especially favored in genres with elaborate narrative storytelling, such as *Romance*, *Fiction*, *History/Chronicle*, and *Biblical narratives*–a distribution that can be explained in light of Fludernik's theory of narrative experientiality, which posits that narrative is grounded in the evocation of lived experience rather than merely chronological event-reporting. In these genres, the NPP appears to enhance experientiality by foregrounding the narrator's or character's perspective and by slowing the narrative tempo, thereby drawing the reader into the immediacy of the moment being recounted. This supports the view that the NPP functioned not only as a temporal marker but also as a discourse strategy for intensifying narrative vividness and emotional involvement. Additional support for this view comes from the attestation of the NPP in later-period genres that reflect spoken language, such as *Private Letters*.

Several promising avenues remain open for further research. One key area would be a comparative analysis between the emergence of the NPP in Middle English and its counterpart, the *Perfekt*, in German. Investigating how and why the NPP in Middle English paralleled the development of the *Perfekt* in German could yield valuable insights into the cross-linguistic factors that shaped distinctions between the English present perfect and German *Perfekt*. Additionally, further research could focus on NPP usage in the later stages of English. This would involve examining whether the NPP continued to be used in specific genres and whether its usage is linked to the trend in spoken language of employing the present perfect in contexts with definite past time adverbials–both of which may signal further grammaticalization of the present perfect in English.

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