

Shizen and Nature: An investigation into the Middle English *kynde*

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Abstract

The difference between the English concept of nature and its Japanese translation, 'shizen' [自然] will be pursued here. Two kinds of words existed in the Middle English period for what we now assign the word 'nature.' One was the Anglo-Saxon derived word, 'kynde' (also spelt as 'cunde' or 'kinde'), and the other was Latinate 'nature', which was introduced through French into the English language around the mid 13th century. Throughout the Middle English period, the use and the meaning of these two words were confused, and 'kynde' and 'nature' were used indiscriminately with a variety of meanings. This paper examines in detail the works of fourteenth-century writers, seeking to clarify the conceptual differences lying between the English / Latinate words and their Japanese translation.

Keywords

Man and Nature, A Comparative Study of Japanese and English Word 'Nature'

Introduction

The English word *nature* was first used as a translation for *shizen* during the Meiji period of Japanese history (1868-1912). However, it is well known that, at that time, the meanings of the two words melded, which invited literary confusion¹. Indeed, the Japanese-Japanese Dictionary *Koujien* distinguishes between *shizen* in the traditional sense, and *shizen* as the translation for *nature*. Yanabu Akira cites this schism and, regarding whether or not this difference in meaning is in human agency, says:

The [Japanese language] traditional *shizen* is the antithesis of human artifice; they are not alike. In other words, that which is *shizen* is not artificial. On the other hand, *nature* both opposes and conforms with human art (*Kunst*), indeed, the two concepts complement each other.²

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If this explanation is correct, it seems likely that the following definitions given for the modern Japanese *shizen* stem from the traditional Japanese sense and the English word *nature*, respectively: (1) ‘Mountains, rivers, grass, trees, the world of all those things which do not include humans and those things which humans have made.’ (2) ‘Everything between heaven and earth, including humans. The cosmos.’ (*Daijisen* Dictionary, First Edition, 1998, emphasis added).

Before *shizen* came to be the translation for *nature*, the word *zouka* was used to indicate all of creation. *Zouka* means ‘the power to create the universe’ as well as ‘to create and nurture all that which exists,’ and can be considered to be very close to the ancient Greek term *physis* and its Latin counterpart *nātūra*³. These Ancient/Classical notions of nature were influenced by the Christianity-dominated Middle Ages, followed by the perspective of nature formulated in the 17th century scientific revolution and the later reaction in the form of the Romantic movement. However, in this paper, I wish to investigate using as the focal point the Middle English period with its Ancient/Classical European heritage. I will take as the target of the investigation the 14th-century *Piers Plowman* (c. 1380) written by the Anglo-Saxon-influenced William Langland, and the works of his contemporary, the continentally influenced Geoffrey Chaucer, and analyse the meaning of the words which translate to *shizen*, namely, *nature* and *kynde*, using the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), and various dictionaries and concordances.

I. The Middle English words *Nature* and *Kynde*

Although Middle English had two words *kynde* and *nature* which meant *shizen*; *kynde* has Germanic roots, while *nature* entered English from Latin by way of French. According to the *OED*, *nature* is only rarely seen before the 14th century. On the other hand, after King Alfred's 9th century translations of Boethius in which *kynde* was used to mean ‘the world of nature’ and ‘innate character’, during the Middle English period it came to acquire many definitions and was frequently used. From the *OED*, the *MED* and various concordances, we can see that in the latter half of the 14th century, *kynde* and *nature* had significantly overlapping definitions, after which time *nature* gradually supplanted *kynde*. In *Boece* — Chaucer’s English translation of an originally Latin work of Boethius — *nature* in the sense of ‘the innate character of people and things’ frequently appears. Furthermore, the word *nātūra* in Alain de Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae*⁴ and *Nature* from the originally French *Le Roman de la Rose* were translated into English as ‘Goddess Nature’, attributing ‘reproduction’ and ‘natural procreative activities’ to the female form. On the other hand, Chaucer uses both the words *nature* and *kynde* to signify ‘the natural world’ and ‘the cosmos’, while Langland solely uses *kynde* to signify ‘innate nature’ and ‘the natural world’.⁵ In contrast to *nature*’s Latin

derivation, *kynde* entered Middle English through the removal of the *ge* prefix from the Old English *ġecynd*. Therefore, the former, based in Latinate and Francophone cultures, differs from the latter with its Anglo-Saxon origin. Chaucer's use of both *nature* and *kynde* and Langland's exclusive use of *kynde* reflects the difference between Chaucer who was steeped in the romance language poetry of the continent, and Langland who, with his use of the traditional Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, remained in that cultural sphere of influence.

Such is the Middle English *kynde*. The *MED* lists the following definitions under the headword *kynde*: 'Inherent qualities or properties', 'the natural disposition or temperament of a person or animal' 'Natural constitution of a person, man's physical strength' 'the natural form, shape, etc.' 'Action natural, habitual or customary; the natural or proper manner of doing something' 'the universe, creation; the physical world; natural physical phenomena' 'nature as a source of living thing or a regulative force operating in the material world; God, the Creator' 'A tribe; clan, family' 'Parentage, lineage, ancestry, stock; birth' 'the station or rank one is born into; territory or possessions by right of inheritance, rightful heritage; hereditary possession' 'Progeny, descendants; an offspring' 'sex'. According to an etymological dictionary, *kynde* is related to the Old English *cynn* (Modern English 'kin')⁶ which denotes the blood relationships 'clan', 'tribe', and 'descendants'. *Cynn* derives from the Indo-European root **gen-* which, similarly to *nātūra*, means 'to flourish and produce offspring' and is in the same word family as the Latin word *genus* which denotes 'posterity' and 'birth'. If we exclude the definitions which *kynde* inherited from the Old English *cynn*, the remaining definitions generally overlap with those of the Modern English *nature*. The antithesis of man-made artifacts and nature is based in the Christian hierarchical valuation of God-Man-Nature, which itself is the basis of the idea of nature created so that humans could utilise it. If we sort the meanings of *kynde* based on the three categories of God, humans, and nature, we obtain the groups: 1) 'nature/ the creator/ God who brings forth life', 2) 'the natural disposition or temperament of a person, habitual action, and man's physical strength' and 'the natural instincts and desires of mankind' and 3) 'the universe, creation, and natural phenomena'. We will now investigate the relationship that Chaucer and Langland had with these three categories, and see if their usage of *kynde* and *nature* includes or excludes humans.

II. *Kynde* in *Piers Plowman*

In *Piers Plowman*, *Kynde* and *kynde* signify the Creator of the Universe and all his works.⁷ One can say that this view of *kynde* as God is a more advanced view than *nātūra*⁸ indicating that which is under God. Let us examine the story in sequence. As the protagonist Will wanders in search of the answer to his question "How can the soul

be saved?” he encounters a variety of abstract ideas as characters. In *Passus* 9 of the B-text, in response to Will’s question, “Where lies the ‘benevolence’ that is necessary for the soul to be saved?” Wit responds, “It lives within humans, which Kynde has made with the four elements (wind, water, fire and earth).” In other words, Kynde caused the soul to dwell therein, and Wit is explaining the nature of Kynde, the creator who furnished humans with body and soul. Furthermore, when Will asks, “Who is Kynde?” Wit replies, “Kynde is the creator of all things, God.”

What kynnes þyng is kynde?’ quod I. ‘Kanstow me telle?’
‘Kynde,’ quod Wit, ‘is creatour of alle kynnes þynges,
Fader and famour of al þat euere was maked —
And þat is þe grete God þat gynnyng hadde neuere,
(underline added for emphasis, B.9.25-28)⁹

“What kind of being is Kind?” I asked. ‘Can you tell me?’ ‘Kind’, replied Wit, ‘is the one who created every kind of thing in the world. He is the father and shaper of everything ever made.

He is the mighty God, who never had a beginning,...

In a dream, Kynde takes Will to a mountain called Middle Earth (the present world),¹⁰ and from its summit shows him a panoramic view of the natural world. There, animals of many kinds and colours are paired with a companion (‘make’, B.11.327), and through the ‘course of nature’ (‘a cours of kynde’) (B.3.56), the species were maintained.

I seiz þe sonne and þe see and þe sond after,
And where þat brides and beestes by hir make þei yeden,
Wilde wormes in wodes, and wonderful foweles
Wiþ fleckede feþeres and of fele colours. (B.11.326-29)

I saw the sun, and the sea, and the land, and the places where birds and animals went with their mates, wild serpents in the woods, and astonishing birds with spotted plumage of variegated hues.

The world of Middle Earth as depicted in *Passus* 11-13 is a marvellous, miraculous world of nature created by a god called Kynde,¹¹ who as the source of all life pours out his love and indeed is love itself (“Kynde...is loue”) (C.10.168-69). Kynde here has the meanings of the essential nature granted by God to all of existence (including humans)

and of natural instinct including sexual desire.

However, in Middle Earth, also seen are humans who live a questionable existence separated from the animals with their natural reproductive process. Although they live alongside the other living things in Middle Earth, the humans are separated from them for the reason that “they lack the sense to act in a natural manner” (11.369-70).¹² During the conversation with the embodiment of the transcendental order of the universe, Reason, when Will asks, “Why does evil exist in the natural world?” Reason explains that humans are made to obey their true ‘nature’ (*kynde*) and they cannot escape that. Within this phenomenal world which is constantly in flux, the decrees of humans are uncertain at best. This point is stressed in the last section, *passus* 20, in which the army of the antichrist attacks mankind at the end of the world. Let us take a closer look at this attack on humanity. *Kynde* arrives accompanied by Disease, Old Age, and Death, and indiscriminately slaughters great numbers of people. Faced with the rapidly approaching Old Age and Death, Will entreats *Kynde* to extend a saving hand. At this point *Kynde* approaches and admonishes Will, ‘Just learn the art of love,’ thus pointing him towards virtue. *Kynde* says to Will that since death is inevitable to humans, in order to accept it as a natural process, one must patiently learn the art of love as there is no other path than to devote oneself to nature / God. When *Kynde* points out the inevitability of death, he is pointing out how reproduction, birth, propagation, and fertility which are aspects of growth and generation, as well as old age, illness and death, are all facets of nature.

There are multiple bases for Langland's notion of *Kynde* and *kynde*. The ancient Latin world *Nātūra* which ‘gives birth to, fattens, and rears’ creation was inherited by the Middle Ages and was the world of Goddess Nature as developed by the aforementioned Alain de Lille. However, it is simultaneously a pantheistic *nature* and neo-Platonic universe as created by the Christian God, filled with His energy, and in which He dwells. In this world, the main point is that God, humans, and nature are linked in the ‘chain of existence’. Furthermore, both the natural world of *Nātūra* and the heaven and earth created by the Christian God are filled with species. In the latter half of the 14th century, of these concepts, *kynde* was absorbed into *nature*. As its name suggests, Middle Earth is the realm of real life existing between the heavens and the earth. This includes all species, and is the world of *Kynde* which encompasses the creation of the universe, growth and decay, good and evil. Within, humans and their erring deeds are given permission to exist as one facet of nature.

III. *Kynde* and *nature* in Chaucer

As mentioned earlier, Chaucer uses both *kynde* and *nature* to signify the cosmos and the natural world. In the following example, *kynde* is used to mean the cosmos.

“O God···that madest kynde,
Shal I noon other weyes dye?

‘God,’ I thought, ‘Who made all beings of every sort! Is there no other way to die?
(emphasis added, *House of Fame*, 584-5)¹³

In *kynde* (=universe) as depicted by Chaucer in *Boece*, humans, as in *Piers Plowman*, are fashioned from the four elements, and are tinged with the planets associated with each. This is the neo-Platonic concept of the universe which was dominant in the Middle Ages. This is also an ancient/classical pagan world where creation is linked by a “bond of Love” (*Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1765-67). This *nature* has its origin in an unchanging mover, and is corrupted and destroyed in its extremities.¹⁴

For nature hath nat taken his bigynnyng
Of no partie or cantel of a thyng,
But of a thyng that parfit is and stable,
Descendynge so til it be corrupable.

(emphasis added, *Knight's Tale*, 3007-3010)

The passage means ‘Nature does not simply have its beginning as part of a thing, but has its beginning in an unchanging source which in the end rots away.’¹⁵ In the neo-Platonic Universe, humans exist in the chain of existence from God. In the abundant nature of the park in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, medicinal herbs and other beneficial species are abundantly portrayed (ll. 176-82), and we perceive that the human point of view is included.¹⁶ This natural world has the meaning of Nātūra from *De Planctu Naturae*, as an anthropomorphic being of the hierarchy of nature (*scala naturae*) brimming with every species and including humans and human deeds. Nature as a goddess rules, and within the lush green world there is a timeless enclosed garden of paradise which is contrasted with the outside world which is subject to time. In the garden is the hall of Venus, wherein the captivating goddess herself reclines *au nature* / upon a bed, and one of the walls is covered with the stories of men and women in the last moments of their untimely deaths. The hall of Venus points out the ideal form of a man-made building and the female form, and the enclosed garden points out the idealised, still tableaux. The former represents the mutability of human beauty and love, while the latter represents the immutable and unchanging world of *nature* that is the garden of Creation. Although the unfruitful, barren love of the men and women described on the wall of the hall of Venus is contrasted with the reproductive love of birds spread across the fields of nature, as the location of the hall of Venus inside the

garden suggests, this captures only one aspect of nature. In other words, whether or not Chaucer's 'natural world' is idealised, it nonetheless includes humans and human actions. Although the state of human reproductive activities separates them from other living things, they are yet a part of nature.

Although Chaucer translates the goddess of nature as 'Plaint of *Kynde*' (emphasis added), this *Kynde* has the meaning of 'the natural instinct with which all humans, animals, and plants are furnished', especially 'reproduction' (*MED*, 5a), and as the symbol of such, she stimulates the reproductive love of all the kinds of birds. This meaning of *kynde*, especially the natural activities of the birds and beasts, was used in the obscene imitations of the French literary genre *fabrioux*, which were put on stage. For example, in *The Miller's Tale*, two lusty men attempt to carry out their urges on the beautiful wife of an old carpenter, but their actions based in animal instinct are extremely vulgar. The motive for the two young men is the instinctual sexual desire that animals are furnished with. In this sense of *Kynde/kynde* as well, humans and animals are not distinguished.

As seen above, Chaucer's *nature* and *kynde* are influenced by Boethius' 'cosmos'. On the Earth, one of the numerous planets in the Universe, mankind is at the head of the 'chain of being' which is brimming with all the species of the world of nature. Either way, humans cannot be separated from nature.

IV. Natural law and Humans

The Japanese word *shizenhou* (=the law of nature) is defined as:

Based in the essential nature or reason of humans, the law which, as the unchanging law passed through every era and which had ought to be universally upheld, transcends positive law.¹⁷

This is a concept imported from of the Western idea of 'natural law'. Natural law in modern English is, in contrast to the positive law made by humans, the order of nature, and it includes both the law governing nature and the law governing human society.¹⁸ This definition goes back to the Roman era *ius naturale*¹⁹ which was expressed as *law of kynde* in Middle English and came to mean 'the various laws that govern the natural world' (*MED*, 7c), and further came to mean 'based in nature and reason, the ethically binding law in society' (*MED*, 5b), which became the modern English terms 'the law(s) of nature' and 'natural law'. Following the above indicted definitions from the *MED*, the law of *kynde* in *Piers Plowman* is governed by reason. Anima is described as being "against heavenly reason for mankind, save Christ, to know everything."

'It were *ayeins kynde*,... and *alle kynnes reson*'

That any creature sholde konne al, except Crist oone.

(emphasis added, B.15.52-53)

That it would be completely *contrary to nature*, and *totally at variance with reason*, for anyone other than God to know everything!

Langland uses the phrase *law of kynde* in this sense twice in the B-text and four times in the C-text, whereas Chaucer uses it twice in his collected works. In either case, it has the meaning of the earlier discussed 'natural moral law'. Since the definition of 'law of nature' in the *OED* is given 'as implanted by nature in the human mind, or as capable of being demonstrated by reason',²⁰ it can be seen as the 'reason' which governs the cosmos, the natural world, and the human body and mind. The 'microcosmos' of humans mirrors the ordered 'macrocosmos' of the universe and the natural world and is governed by them.

The idea of Langland's *law of Nature (Kynde)* is considered to have derived from the writings of Giles of Rome and Thomas Aquinas which were well read at that time.²¹ They believed that the divine order of the natural world should be emulated by humans, and considered it a technique of governance. In the same tradition as *Piers Plowman is Mum and the Sothsegger*, in which the poet sees the flowers blooming in profusion, the grain ripening abundantly, and the natural world overflowing with animals, and says:

A swete sight for souurrayns, so me God help. (931) ²²

A sweet sight for sovereigns, so help me God.

Chaucer's *law of kynde (Book of the Duchess, 56)* is again the ethical system of the 'golden era' dawn of civilisation which was followed naturally rather than through coercion.

Next, let us consider phrases which begin with *kynde* (with the meaning of law of *kynde*) as an adjective. In the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, the phrase '*kynde wit*' is used 25 times, and '*kynde knowing*' is used 6 times. *Kynde wit* is the non-rational 'intuitive intelligence', and *kynde knowing* is 'intuitive capacity for comprehension'. In particular, they refer to the intuitive ability to understand the true essence of things.²³ In the 14th century, *kynde wit* was considered to be the especially important factor which maintained the community and protected the common good. We might guess that this was the case in the prologue which depicted a political community, where Langland, through his narrator, holds *kynde wit* in great importance for training intelligent advisers to the king.

Conclusion

From the previous investigation, we understand that in the meanings of *kynde*, *nature* and *law of Nature (Kynde)* as used by Chaucer and Langland, mankind is governed by *kynde*, and as a sub-portion thereof is connected to it. During the 14th-century roots of the word *nature* as used by Chaucer and Langland, although there was the idea of nature being used by and benefitting humankind, as Yanabu points out, human works were still part of the same idea. In modern English, though there are expressions like ‘preserve nature’ and ‘a struggle against nature’ which clearly pit humans and nature in a subject versus object relationship, outside of Christianity, the ideas of *Nātūra*, the pantheistic view of nature and neo-Platonism were also absorbed by the Middle English *Kynde*, *kynde*, and *nature*, wherein even if humans and nature are at odds, they still complement each other to create a whole-world concept.

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〈Notes〉

- ¹ Yanabu Akira, *The Philosophy of Translation: Shizen and Nature* (Heibonsha, 1977); *Honyakugo Seiritsu Jijou* (Iwanami Shoten, 1982), pp. 127-48.
- ² *Koujien* 6th edn (Iwanamishoten, 2008); Yanabu Akira, *Honyakugo Seiritsu Jijou*, pp. 127-48.
- ³ The Greek word *physis* was translated into Latin as *nātūra*, and the particulars of how this was transmitted to the modern *nature* are found in Ito Shuntaro’s *Shizen* (Sansendo, 1999) pp.9-29. The meaning of *physis* is in *ibid.* pp.9-18. The meaning of *nātūra* is from E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans., W. R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 106-13. The similarity between the Japanese *zouka* and the Roman *nātūra* is according to Kurita Isamu, *Setsugetsuka no Kokoro* (Shodensha, 1987), p. 30.
- ⁴ Chaucer translated Alain’s *Nātūra* as ‘Goddess Nature’. However, he rendered the *Nātūra* in the title *De Planctu Naturae* as *Kynde*, the whole title being *Plaint of Kynde*.
- ⁵ Honaga Miwako, ‘On the meaning of *kynde* which signifies *shizen*.’ *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature*, Volume 18 (2003), p.87.
- ⁶ The *OED* and *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*.
- ⁷ To clarify the distinction between these two ideas, he translates the idea of God to *Kynd* and the phenomenal world to Nature. G. Economou, trans., *William Langland’s Piers Plowman: the C version: a verse translation* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p.259.
- ⁸ Alain’s *Nātūra* receives the spirit of God, and has the role of preserving the order and harmony of the spheres, as well as acting as God’s assistant representative for maintaining the fertility of the species.
- ⁹ This paper uses the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, supplemented by the C-text. A.V. C. Schmidt (ed.), *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C And Z Versions* (London and New York: Longman, 1995). The modern English translation is from A. V. C. Schimidt (trans.), *Piers*

Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text (Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

¹⁰ In *Passus* 13 of the C-text, we look into the mirror called 'the real world'.

¹¹ 'kinde' *MED*, 8(c).

¹² According to Alford, the meaning of the anthropomorphic character Reason in *Piers Plowman* means 1) *ratio* and 2) *quod natura omnia animalia docuit*. 2) is according to the Roman Ulpian's definition for *lex naturalis*. John A. Alford, *The Idea of Reason in Piers Plowman*, pp. 210-211.

¹³ All the quotations from Chaucer are drawn from J. H. Fisher (ed.), *Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*. 2nd edition (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1989).

¹⁴ In the neo-Platonic cosmology, there was a hierarchy of existence of the prime mover (God) — Mind — Soul — Nature — the Elements — the Earthly Existence (Humans, Animals, Plants, Minerals).

¹⁵ I used Masui Michio's translation of *The Canterbury Tales* (Iwanami Bunko, 1995).

¹⁶ For further details on 'nature as expressed by mankind', see Matsuda Takami's 'Nature as Property — Nature, Environment, Scenery in the Literature of the European Middle Ages,' *Nature and Literature* (Keio University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ *Daijisen* (a large Japanese-Japanese Dictionary) (Shogakukan, 1995).

¹⁸ *Readers' English-Japanese Dictionary*, First Edition (Kenkyusha, 1984).

¹⁹ *Medieval Political Theory- A Reader: The Quest for the Body Politic*, (ed.), Cary J. Nederman and Kate Langdon Forhan (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

²⁰ *OED*, 'law' heading 9c: 'as capable of being demonstrated by reason.'

²¹ Giles of Rome, *De Regimine Principum* (c.1277-79); Thomas Aquinas *De Regimine Principum* (1266-).

²² Mabel Day and R. Steel (ed.), *Mum and the Sothsegger* (1936; rpt.1971. EETS).

²³ *Kynde wit*, *kynde knowing* are derived from definitions given in Derek Pearsall (ed.), *Piers Plowman by William Langland: An Edition of the C-text* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p.37, 50; A. V. C. Schmidt (ed.), *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity Colleges MS B. 15.17* (Everyman, 1978), p.412, 414; G. Economou, pp.223-24. The whole corpus of the meaning *kynde* and *kynde*-terms have been thoroughly investigated by Hugh White, *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman* (D.S. Brewer, 1988).