

**The ‘lawe of kynde’ in the *Piers Plowman* Tradition:  
*Piers Plowman*, *Mum and the Sothsegger*,  
*Richard the Redress*, *The Crowned King*<sup>1</sup>**

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**1. Overview**

The term ‘lawe of kynde’ is used in a series of alliterative verses as a principle to rule nations. To begin with, in the monarchy portrayed in the prologue of *Piers Plowman* (hereafter abbreviated as *PP*), the importance of ‘kynde / Kynde’ (also spelt as ‘kinde’) or ‘kynde wit’ in political affairs is emphasized. This ‘kynde’ is passed down to works in the so-called *PP* tradition,<sup>2</sup> namely, *Richard the Redress* (c.1400), *Mum and the Sothsegger* (c.1409), and *The Crowned King* (c.1413) (hereafter abbreviated as *RR*, *M&S*, and *CK*, respectively). In these poems, the nation as a collective body of humankind is perceived as part of the natural order, and its sovereign is expected to rule the nation according to the ‘lawe of kynde.’ As these three poems are called the ‘Mirrors for Princes Poems,’ that is to say ‘advice to princes poems,’ which are full of advice to each of the poem’s sovereigns, Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V, and which demonstrate how they could become a perfect model of sovereigns according to the ‘lawe of kynde.’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript is based upon an oral presentation given in December 2004 at the 20th Anniversary International Conference of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies held at Mukogawa Women’s University.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Barr, ed., *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> The law of nature in *Piers Plowman Tradition* is extensively explored by Helen Barr in, ‘The Treatment of Natural Law in *Richard the Redress* and *Mum and the*

By demonstrating portraits of the ‘plenitude of nature’ (*plenitudo Naturae*) and a world in harmony (ll. 877-943),<sup>4</sup> *M&S* provides Henry IV with an exemplary model to rule a nation. *RR* explains that the ruin of Richard II’s monarchy was caused by his and his retainers’ refusal to follow ‘kynde,’ and overall it reveals the immorality of how humankind tends to disregard the order of nature in the created world. *CK*, set in England under Henry V, who is suffering from The Hundred Years War with France, preaches the importance of the ‘law of nature’ in political affairs, and suggests that he should follow the type of kingship appropriate for a sovereign. The sources of ‘lawe of kynde’ in these three poems are considered to have been Wycliffe’s *De Officio Regis* (*On the Duty of the King*) (1378), Thomas Aquinas’s *De Regimine Principum ad regem Cypri* (*On Kingship, to the King of Cyprus*) (1267), and Giles of Rome’s *De Regimine Principum* (*The Governance of Kings and Princes*) (c.1277-79).<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The *Piers Plowman* Tradition

In *RR* (c.1400), *M&S* (c.1409), and *CK*, also called ‘The Mirror for Princes Poems,’ a nation is viewed as a collective body of humans with a political will, which is part of the order of nature. The sovereign, as the head, ought to rule his nation primarily according to the law of ‘nature.’ The term ‘kynde,’ referring to nature, is based on a notion of ‘nature’ that arises from reason. Demonstrating a model exemplar of a sovereign ruling a nation through portraits of the plenitude of nature and a harmonious world (ll. 877-943), *M&S* provides Henry IV with advice to remonstrate

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*Sothsegger*,’ *Leeds Studies in English*, 23(1992), 49-80.

<sup>4</sup> All the quotations from *Richard the Redress* and *Mum and the Sothsegger* are from *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. M. Day and R. Steel, EETS, 1936; rpt.1971. The citations and line numbers of *The Crowned King* are from Helen Barr’s edition.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas gives three definitions of ‘lex naturae’ in *Summa Theologica*: 1) an inclination to self-preservation; 2) an inclination to procreative instinct which is common to all animals; 3) an inclination to good for man to live in society. The last definition concerns the governance by ‘the law of kynde’. See *Summa Theologica*. I-II, q.94.a.2. *Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1948; Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981).

with avaricious aristocrats and listen to his retainers' suggestions. In *RR*, the cause of Richard II's misrule is thought to be attributable to his arbitrary behaviors that are against 'nature.' In these three works, sovereigns who rule with the advice of retainers are Henry IV in *M&S*, Richard II in *RR*, and Henry V in *CK*. Their retainers advise each to acquire education and proficiency in the military arts, develop their character as the head of the nation, and to lawfully secure benefits for their impoverished subjects. The term 'kynde' is used to express the order of nature in these three works. When it applies to an individual person, it refers to 'man's innate or instinctive, moral feeling' that guides a person toward virtue so that he or she acts on reason. In this respect, nature or 'kynde' is represented by 'kynde wit' in *PP*, and this term becomes endowed with reason and moral justice. The world with the God-created 'nature' is controlled by the 'lawe of kynde,' and humans are considered to be social creatures with political prowess.

Using the characteristics of animals depicted in animal fables and encyclopedias,<sup>6</sup> *RR* allegorically portrays historical events and social trends of that time,<sup>7</sup> and adds ethical commentaries. That is to say, it depicts the anomic situation in the late 14th century induced by the assumption of power of Richard II and his supporters, their ensuing arbitrary rulings, and the downfall of the 'Lords Appellant' who resist his power through allegorical uses of animals representing each political leader: a white stag for Richard II and his supporters, an eagle for Henry Bolingbroke, a swan for Duke of Gloucester, and a horse and a bear for the Earl of Arundel and Earl of Warwick, respectively. By emphasizing each animal's natural characteristics, *RR* offers advice to each party. For example, using the image of a stag which, at the age of 100, catches a snake and consumes its poison to reproduce his own skin and bones, *RR* suggests that Richard and his supporters should have purged harmful

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<sup>6</sup> As cited by Helen Barr in 'The Treatment of Natural Law in *Richard the Redress* and *Mum and the Sothsegger*,' the characteristics of animals are very often drawn from *De proprietatibus rerum* by Bartholomaeus Anglicus. John Trevisa, trans., *On the Properties of Things*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 2 vols (Oxford, 1975), I. 602; II. 1176, etc.

<sup>7</sup> For the general historical situation of contemporary England, I am indebted to M. H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1973).

parties (III.13-25). According to *RR*, the fall of the monarchy is attributable to the following factors: Richard II and his retainers' assumption of powers against 'Kynde' as a moral principle; their "unnatural" treatment of the Lords Appellant; and their regaining of power in a way against 'nature.' Thus, the downfall of Richard and his supporters was induced by their refusal to rule according to 'kynde.' Overall, *RR* demonstrates the immorality of humankind's predominant principle at that time, which tended to disregard the order of nature in the created world. The order of nature is restored by the rout of Richard's followers and Henry Bolingbrook's succession to the throne. Henry's return is beneficial to the country, and the poet legitimizes Henry's oppression to Richard's followers by mentioning the eagle's ability to fly high and command a view of happenings in the world below.

In *M&S*, the portrayal of the natural world (ll. 877-943) symbolizes the 'plenitude of nature,' and the well-ordered harmonious world serves as a good example for a sovereign to rule the human world: 'A swete sight for sourayns, so me God helpe' (l. 931).<sup>8</sup> The story of a bee king and his community is presented as an exemplum of a society in balance with the law of nature, through describing worker bees and the bee king committed to working for the benefit of the community.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the story explains that the law of nature also applies to the human mind, which constitutes the principle of reason that naturally drives him toward virtue. Nevertheless, humans commit vice, and the reasons are explained allegorically. This story about human psychology is incorporated in the political moral fable about bee society, and the author seeks there the source of principles of political morality in that era.

In *CK*, the course of nature is a paragon for humans to emulate;

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<sup>8</sup> Jinno Takashi points out that it is John of Salisbury who first articulated an ideal republic modelled on 'a tiny commonwealth of bees.' See *The Middle Ages in Metaphors* (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1992), pp. 57-58; *John of Salisbury, Policraticus* (1159), trans. by C. J. Nederman (Cambridge University Press, 1990), Bk VI, chaps. 21-24.

<sup>9</sup> Using a community of bees as an exemplary model of society was common in medieval Europe. For example, see *Thomas Aquinas, De Regimine Principum*, ch. 12, in *Thomas Aquinas, Selected Political Writings*, ed. A. P. D'Entrèves (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1959).

therefore, it should set the standards by which humans are measured. The narrator falls asleep, and when the sun rises in the east, he stands on the summit of a hill to look down at the political theater happening there—he sees an ailing England, ruled by Henry V, suffering from the Hundred Years War with France. Kneeling down in front of the king, a scholar monk preaches the importance of the ‘lawe of kynde’ in political affairs (l. 43ff.), and suggests that he should follow the ‘kynde of kingship’ (l. 121) appropriate for a sovereign. He advises the king to ensure benefits for poor families in return for their loyalty, to avoid flattery and appoint competent officials, and to acquire proficiency in the liberal and military arts in order to polish his character appropriate for a king.

Given the perspective that ‘kynde’ or ‘Kynde Wit’ refers to the innate ability of humans to form political communities that contribute to the ‘common good,’ *PP* shares a common aspect with its tradition. In *PP* (B and C texts), structures of political community are described in the prologue (Prol. 114-22).<sup>10</sup> Here, ‘Kynde Wit’ plays an important role in nurturing the king’s advisers, and forming and maintaining a community. In addition, contributing to the benefit of the community implies being involved in the legislature, justice between king and community, and supporting a three-class society with a sovereign at the head. In the prologue to the C-text, a clause saying that a king should rule in observance of the parliament and its laws was deleted, and it is suggested that a king can transcend corrupt common laws according to natural law, assisted by reason and conscience. Langland’s support for a strong monarch is suggested in the society he describes. Either directly or through the protagonist Piers’ remarks, Langland praises the hard labor of farmers and sympathizes with the unprivileged poor, but at the same time in the speech to knights, he implies acceptance of the existing social relationships between lords and lessees, that is to say, a feudal system

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<sup>10</sup> See Yoshiko Asaka, ‘Meanings of the “law of kynde” in *Piers Plowman*,’ M. Tajima and N. Suematsu, eds., *The Bulletin of the History of the English Language* (Tokyo: Kaibunsha, 2008), pp.160-66. The quoted lines are from A. V. C. Schmidt, ed., *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, Longman, 1995.

(B.6.24-28, C.8.24-27). Furthermore, the episode about attaching a bell to a cat (B.Prol. 146ff; C.Prol. 165ff) implies that any attempt at suppressing the king's authority is useless and that autocracy is essential to ferret out the destructive elements in a community.

In this respect, *RR*, *M&S*, and *CK* are derived from *PP*. However, demonstrating advice to the sovereigns of the three works—Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V—and showing how they, as rulers, should become the flower of the nation by abiding by the ‘lawe of kynde,’ the three works suggest the ‘lawe of kynde,’ which is fundamentally the same as Chaucer’s ‘lawe of kynde.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Chaucer derives his concept of *Natura* as *natura procreatrix* and as *natura artifex* from his French sources, especially Machaut. *Natura procreatrix* and *natura artifex* are both attributed to Alanus ab Insulis. Chaucer, however, draws from *Anticlaudianus* the idea of *Natura* as *regulatrix*, a God-given moral law. It is in this respect that Chaucer differs from the French predecessors. Alanus’ greatest achievement is that he combines the cosmological function of *Natura* with the role of *regulatrix*, a moral law which is necessary to maintain human society. The notion that human ‘nature’ is the base for moral behaviour, referring to the ‘good and bad’ of the human heart, is a common one. Great thinkers, such as Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Aquinas and Jean de Meun, all thought that the moral behaviour originates from human ‘nature’ or ‘reason’. See Peter Ochsenein, *Studien zum Anticlaudianus des Alanus ab Insulis* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1975), p. 127; Willi Erzgräber, “‘Kynde’ und ‘Nature’ bei Chaucer: zur Bedeutung und Funktion des Naturbegriffes in der Dichtung des ausgehenden Mittelalters,” in Gerd Wolfgang Weber, ed., *Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus von See: Studien zur europäischen Kulturtradition* (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1988), pp.125-26; Gérard Paré, *Les idées et les lettres au XIIIe siècle: Le Roman de la Rose* (Montreal: Edition le Centre de Psychologie et de Pédagogie, 1947), pp. 327-40.