

la rivista di **en**gramma  
dicembre **2023**

**207**

## Segno e disegno

La Rivista di Engramma  
**207**

La Rivista di  
Engramma

**207**

dicembre 2023

# Segno e disegno

a cura di  
Fernanda De Maio e Fabrizio Lollini

*direttore*

monica centanni

*redazione*

damiano acciarino, sara agnoletto,  
mattia angeletti, maddalena bassani,  
asia benedetti, maria bergamo, elisa bizzotto, emily verla  
bovino, giacomo calandra di roccolino, olivia sara carli,  
concetta cataldo,  
giacomo confortin, giorgiomaria cornelio,  
mario de angelis, silvia de laude,  
francesca romana dell'aglio, simona dolari,  
emma filipponi, anna ghirdalini, ilaria grippa, roberto  
indovina, delphine lauritzen,  
laura leuzzi, michela maguolo, ada naval, alessandra  
pedersoli, marina pellanda,  
filippo perfetti, margherita piccichè,  
daniele pisani, stefania rimini, daniela sacco, cesare  
sartori, antonella sbrilli, massimo stella, ianick takaes,  
elizabeth enrica thomson,  
christian toson, chiara velicogna, giulia zanon

*comitato scientifico*

barbara baert, barbara biscotti, andrea capra, giovanni  
careri, marialuisa catoni,  
victoria cirlot, fernanda de maio,  
alessandro grilli, raoul kirchmayr, luca lanini, vincenzo  
latina, orazio licandro, fabrizio lollini, natalia mazour,  
alessandro metlica,  
guido morpurgo, andrea pinotti,  
giuseppina scavuzzo, elisabetta terragni, piemario  
vescovo, marina vicelja

*comitato di garanzia*

jaynie anderson, anna beltrametti,  
lorenzo braccesi, maria grazia ciani,  
georges didi-huberman, alberto ferlenga,  
nadia fusini, maurizio harari, arturo mazzarella,  
elisabetta pallottino, salvatore settis, oliver taplin

**La Rivista di Engramma**

a peer-reviewed journal

**207 dicembre 2023**

[www.egramma.it](http://www.egramma.it)

*sede legale*

Engramma

Castello 6634 | 30122 Venezia

[edizioni@egramma.it](mailto:edizioni@egramma.it)

*redazione*

Centro studi classicA luav

San Polo 2468 | 30125 Venezia

+39 041 257 14 61

©2024

edizioni**engramma**

ISBN carta 979-12-55650-28-7

ISBN digitale 979-12-55650-29-4

ISSN 2974-5535

finito di stampare aprile 2024

Si dichiara che i contenuti del presente volume sono la versione a stampa totalmente corrispondente alla versione online della Rivista, disponibile in open access all'indirizzo: <http://www.egramma.it/eOS/index.php?issue=207> e ciò a valere ad ogni effetto di legge. L'editore dichiara di avere posto in essere le dovute attività di ricerca delle titolarità dei diritti sui contenuti qui pubblicati e di aver impegnato ogni ragionevole sforzo per tale finalità, come richiesto dalla prassi e dalle normative di settore.

# Sommario

- 7 *Segno e Disegno*  
Fernanda De Maio e Fabrizio Lollini
- 13 *L'orlo sfuggente*  
Alberto Ferlenga
- 23 *Strategie del dettaglio*  
Guido Morpurgo
- 49 *Il tempo del disegno digitale*  
Alberto Calderoni
- 59 *L'opera al nero*  
Luca Lanini
- 67 *Il disegno come disvelamento rivoluzionario*  
Laura Scala
- 77 *La magia figurativa del segno. Il cimitero partigiano di Vojsko*  
Susanna Campeotto
- 85 *Il primato del disegno nell'architettura italiana del secondo Novecento\**  
Manuela Raitano
- 93 *2015. La piramide e la sfera*  
Fernanda De Maio
- 107 *Segno e disegno nell'opera di Heinrich Tessenow*  
Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino
- 117 *Tracce visive di pensiero*  
Michela Maguolo
- 123 *Architettura del pensiero vivente*  
a cura di Monica Centanni e Fernanda De Maio
- 131 *An iconological approach to Giotto's allegory of Prudence and her mirror*  
Martina Cali

- 147 *Una, nessuna, molteplici Madonne del Salice*  
Lorenzo Gigante
- 175 *Un ciclo di lunette per il Chiostro Grande della Certosa di Firenze*  
Danilo Sanchini
- 211 *L'igloo di Mario Merz come forma del tempo*  
Pasquale Fameli
- 223 *Emociones*  
Victoria Cirlot
- 227 *"Sentire" l'arte medievale: l'edizione italiana di Experiencing Medieval Art*  
Sara Salvadori
- 233 *Imágenes loquentes*  
Alessandro Cecchi, Marcello Ciccuto

# An iconological approach to Giotto's allegory of Prudence and her mirror

Martina Cali

## 1. Introduction

By introducing the iconography of prudence as a woman holding up a mirror, Giotto also combined this symbol with three other emblems resulting in the motive of this allegory within the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua: a book, a Janus-face and a compass. My contribution does not intend to focus on the general visual tradition in the medieval representations of prudence as a virtue, mostly depicted – as it is here – within cycles of Vices and Virtues, and around which there is a wide and well known bibliography, but it will concentrate instead on the specific features and elements of this particular work of the Tuscan painter. The recent deciphering of the inscription underneath this image, which had generally been ignored, has enlarged our understanding of the individual attributes within the depiction of prudence. It has now become possible to analyse this allegory no longer only as an image *per se* but as a whole, together with the words reported in the inscription (Hamburger 2020; Hamburger, Roxburgh, Safran 2022; Kessler [2019] 2023, 7-12, 109-110, 247).

In this preliminary work, the contents of the inscription will be analysed to interpret the meaning of the allegory of prudence on the assumption that its significance is strictly related to ethical and moral concepts, which imbued late medieval culture and inaugurated a new anthropology. In fact, by interpreting the allegory taken as a whole, the investigation refers to the anthropological category of 'inner-directed man', which describes the attitude of early modern citizens in becoming more aware of having power over reality and autonomy of judgement.

To this purpose, the following contribution centers around the compass, at first contextualising its presence in relation to the mirror in the allegory, and then trying to draw its meaning from the inscription. Further reference will be made to some iconographical precedents of the image of the compass, while an explanation of how the symbolism of prudence's mirror was conceived will be made by referring to written sources from the thirteenth-century. This contribution can be considered the first attempt to investigate the etymological connection between the term *speculum* (mirror) and the verb *speculari* (to deliberate) as the key aspect for an iconological understanding of the allegory.



## 2. The mirror



1 | Giotto, Prudence; Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, ca. 1303-1304.

Before it was used by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, c. 1303 – 1304, the metaphor of the mirror had already been recorded in this city by the notary Rolandino around fifty years before. Rolandino, who was born in Padua in 1200 and died there in 1276, obtained the officium magistratus at the University of Bologna in 1221. Between 1223 and 1239, he was a notary in Padua and teacher of grammar and rhetoric both at the Studio of Padua and, in the period when this was not active during the tyranny of Ezzelino da Romano, at some other schools. After 1239, Rolandino did not hold any office in the city. Later, he was the author of a *Cronica*, written in Latin, which describes a century of events in the Marca Trevigiana. In the prologue, Rolandino states that when he was twenty-three years old, he was asked by his father to continue working on a chronicle that the father had begun to draft. Many years later, when the Ezzelino's tyranny was over, some religious men invited Rolandino to narrate what had happened in the city. With the sources at his disposal - his father's and his own notes, as well as his own memories - Rolandino set to work and - in 1260 - completed this text, divided into twelve books (Zabbia 2017). In his public speech in April 1262, Rolandino used the metaphor of the mirror to exhort the Padovans to learn to be more prudent: *Et hec omnia esse debite discreti et sapientibus*

*quasi speculum et lucerna, ut per flagella preterita, qui viderunt, precavere sibi cupiant et providere civitati sue prudenter et salubriter de futuris, quoniam scriptum est: Rumor de veteri facit et ventura timeri: Cras poterunt fieri turpia, sicut heri* (Rolandinus de Padua ed. 2004, pp. 8-9, mentioned in Italian translation in Frugoni 2008, 280-81). Through his speech, he advised them to shine a light on the past and its present reflection, using the wisdom gained to prudently deal with what the future could bring, and protect both themselves and their city better from a repetition of the cruelty suffered from tyrants such as Ezzelino (see also Pisani 2006; Romano 2008).

Thus, within this context and up until the dawn of the fourteenth century, the mirror of prudence had been considered as a symbol of warning and a reminder to adopt a cautious approach to future events. From that time, prudence gradually started to become also a metaphor for self-knowledge (Hancock 1988, 240; Hartlaub 1951, 158-172). Unlike these scholars, however, who recall exclusively Socrates as first emblem of the narrative (and iconography) of self-knowledge triggered by the usage of a mirror, I intend to connect this narrative to the philosophical context which was spread in European countries just before Giotto's representation of prudence in Padua. This context might have prompted the elaboration of the metaphor of

the mirror as the process in which the intellectual and ethical spheres work, thus contributing to connotating the human nature as socio-political in relation to the ability to be future-oriented.

The gradual transition towards this meaning can be observed from a variety of other sources. In fact, Popular poems (i.e. Antonfrancesco Grazzini's *Canto degli specchiali*; Giovanbattista Gelli's *Canzona de' maestri di far specchi*; Ser Vettorino Creato de' Pucci's *Canzona de' Prudenti*), Family Registers or *Ricordanze* (i.e. *Sabba di Castiglione's Ricordi ovvero Ammaestramenti di Monsignor Saba da Castiglione Cavalier Gerosolimitano, ne quali con prudenti, e christiani discorsi si ragiona di tutte le materie honorate, che si ricercano a un vero gentil'huomo; especially the Ricordo CXVII: Perché il vero non sta mai saldo all' termini suoi*) and inventories in the sixteenth century provide evidence for the increased presence of mirrors in houses, usually in studies, and in private bathrooms as objects to encourage individual reflection and, consequently, self-improvement (Thornton 1997, 167-174; Syson, Thornton 2001, 37-77; it seems, however, that *ricordanze* were not that common and widespread in Venice; see Grubb 1994, 375-387). The presence of several attributes in the allegory of Giotto's prudence in Padua suggests that it is meant to hold the tension of opposing viewpoints and perspectives such as the future and the past, the front and the back, as well as the youth and the old age.

The words in the inscription provide, in fact, evidence to confirm that the mirror should be connected to the first of the two options: namely the future, the front, but also the youth (Ammannati 2017, 30). In fact, the inscription below the painting says:

*Res et tempus summa cura agit[a]t Prudentia, / spec[u]letur [ut] futu[ra] [su]a providentia. / Sextu[s] [circu]mgi[r]at p[er]gens / sc[it]it f[u]turum spe[c]ulum / et antiqua vultus [v]ergens / [qu]o transit [s]e[c]ulum*

*Prudence considers facts and time with great attention, to foresee the future. The compass needle moves around, to indicate the direction. The mirror knows the future, while the man's face is looking towards the past (translation by the author)*

The first part of this inscription is a general definition of prudence; in the second part, an explanation of the meaning of the three symbols is given: the compass, the mirror and the Janus-face. However, no reference to the book is made. In addition, the inscription explicitly refers to the future (*futurum*) and to 'future events' (*futura*), whereas the Janus-like figure looks back towards 'past objects and deeds' (*antiqua*) as well as towards the past itself (*seculum*) (Frazer 1913, 384-385; Hancock 1988, 191; Pfeiffenberger 1966, 3, 10).

As a certain emphasis is placed on the skill of prudence to predict the future, consequently the mirror has long been seen as a mere symbol of foresight. In the end, the image of a mirror became in fact one of the main attributes through which the allegory of prudence was identified and recognizable throughout the early modern era (Hancock 1988, 112). Over time, scholars have continued to take this traditional association for granted, thus omitting to explore the

symbol of the mirror in its relationship with other emblems in the allegory (Lollini 2017). Consequently, this paper will investigate another attribute, namely the compass, as a springboard to better understanding the meaning of the mirror in the narrative of the allegory. Thanks to this approach, it will become clear how the interpretation of the ability of the mirror to foresee the future derives from the methodological principles bestowed on it by the function of the compass.

### 3. The compass



1 | French illuminator, God Architect of the world; Bible moralisée, Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms. Vindobonensis 2554, c. Iv, ca. 1225-30.

As for this emblem, the words in the inscription report that its ‘needle moves around, indicating direction’, thus suggesting that this emblem does not necessarily need to be interpreted as present-time related like many would be tempted to do. Scholars suggest that the meaning of the compass in the allegory may derive from Thomas Aquinas (Pfeiffenberger 1966, V:5-V:6; see also Tachau 1998; Friedman 1974), nonetheless I argue that the contents of the inscription may have drawn inspiration from Cicero’s *De officiis* as well (*De Officiis*: I.4.11). A passage of this text, in fact, focuses on the ability of human beings to embrace – in their understanding of time – the past, the present, and even the future. According to Cicero, this ability distinguishes humans from animals:

Sed inter hominem et beluam hoc maxime interest, quod haec tantum, quantum sensu movetur, ad id solum, quod adest quodque praesens est se accommodat, paulum admodum sentiens praeteritum aut futurum. Homo autem, quod rationis est particeps, per quam consequentia cernit, causas rerum videt earumque praegressus et quasi antecessiones non ignorat, similitudines comparat rebusque praesentibus adiungit atque adnectit futuras, facile totius vitae cursum videt ad eamque degendam praeparat res necessarias.

But the most marked difference between human beings and beasts is this: the beast, just as far as it is moved by the senses and with very little perception of past or future, adapts itself to that alone which is present at the moment; while man – because he is endowed with reason, by which he comprehends the chain of consequences, perceives the causes of things, understands the relation of cause to effect and of effect to cause, draws analogies, and connects and associates the present and the future – easily surveys the course of his whole life and makes the necessary preparations for its conduct (translation ed. Miller, 12-13)

Prudentia est rerum bonarum et malarum neutrarumque scientia. Partes eius: memoria, intellegentia, providentia. Memoria est, per quam animus repetit illa, quae fuerunt; intellegentia, per quam ea perspicit, quae sunt; providentia, per quam futurum aliquid videtur ante quam factum est

Prudence is the knowledge of what is good, what is bad and what is neither good nor bad. Its parts are memory, intelligence, and foresight. Memory is the faculty by which the mind recalls what has happened. Intelligence is the faculty by which it ascertains what exists. Foresight is the faculty by which it is seen that something is going to occur before it occurs (translation by the author)

This is to show that it could be seen as reductive to exclusively apply the three dimensions of time to the medieval iconographical rendering of the allegory of prudence. How about the meaning of the book, if the other three attributes are supposed to signify the three dimensions of time?

In the light of the above, I will make an attempt to infer the meaning of the compass by examining some of its figurative precedents. The compass belongs to a visual tradition that dates back to the thirteenth century. Two illuminations within the *Bible moralisé* of this period show the Creator of the world as an architect who traces the circumference of the Earth using a compass (Lowden 2000). Since ancient times, the circle has been considered the geometrical figure *par excellence* because of its intrinsic perfection. According to medieval belief, this is demonstrated by the fact that all shapes can fit within its circumference. In line with this belief, even the medieval Latin word for 'compass' (*sextus*) reflects the completeness reached by the circle by means of the tool that traces it. Indeed, the term *sextus* – literally indicating the sixth part of something – refers to the fact that the hexagon's sides within the circle that the compass traces have the same measurements as the circle's radius. Thus, the semantic field to which the *sextus* refers is that of precision and accuracy, even of 'intelligence' and rationality to a certain degree. All these properties would have been more definitively associated with this attribute in the iconography of the sixteenth and seventeenth century (For instance, in *Cesare Ripa's Iconology*, the compass is a symbol for all mathematical sciences; see Corrain 2016, 113-130).

Therefore, these illuminations show evidence of the compass in Giotto's allegory being an iconographic constant rather than a novelty in artistic renderings of an allegory. In this way, it could be inferred that also the words in the inscription relating to the compass in Giotto's allegory could be interpreted as identifying this tool as intended to have an instructive and guiding



2 | French illuminator, God Architect of the world; Bible moralisée, Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms. Vindobonensis 1179, c. 1v, ca. 1225-30. Furthermore, in another passage (*De Inventione*: II, 160) Cicero explicitly refers to three faculties (memory, intelligence and foresight) as constitutive parts of prudence:

role. Thus, it seems as if the figure of the compass represented in the illuminations could be applicable to prudence's allegory, and as if the compass could be identified as a tool responsible for both the creation of the physical world by God as well as of the ethical life by prudence.

#### **4. Circularity and synderesis**

In a very general sense, Pfeiffenberger was right to suggest that Prudentia's compass could be traced back to Thomistic philosophy. But it is perhaps too reductive to read the meaning of this emblem in purely intellectual terms. The 'measured judgement' of Prudence is a rational judgement but of a kind tempered by the ability to envision the future – as the words of the inscription emphasise. And the acquisition of this awareness can only be provided by experience, not by mere rational judgement – as Aristotle also said in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is the most important classical lesson conveyed by the allegory. In the same century in which the iconography of God as architect of the world was conceived, Albertus Magnus and his pupil Thomas Aquinas, by drawing on the Aristotelian tradition, both emphasise the function of practical reason (*ratio practica* – another name given to prudence), whose one constitutive part is called *synderesis*. According to these scholars, *synderesis* is a disposition (*habitus*) strictly related to the way in which prudence itself works (Payer 1979, 66). Indeed, its dynamic consists of a practical syllogism, whose ultimate result (or 'conclusion') is to enable individuals to make decisions. The major premise of a practical syllogism states the first principles of natural law, which are the basic cognitive contents of prudence. The minor premise ponders (*conferre*) the universal principles stated in the major premise with a particular willingness to act in a certain way or to make choices. Finally, the conclusion enables them to act in the specific way established in the previous part of the syllogism (Payer 1979, 62).

On his side, Thomas Aquinas assumes that the first principles of natural law are universal, in the same way as those which are the foundation of scientific knowledge. He also claims that *synderesis* is the natural capacity through which human beings gain knowledge of the first moral universal principles, which then guide them in decision making and in behaving. This means that *synderesis* bestows on prudence the knowledge of the principles, and the general criteria that govern judgment, choice and moral action. Therefore, Thomas Aquinas believes that the main function of *synderesis* is to provide the first general orientative principles of choices and actions: 'Synderesis movet prudentiam sicut intellectus principiorum scientiam' / *Synderesis moves prudence as understanding of principles moves discursive reasoning* (*Summa theologiae* [hereafter: ST] II, II; q. 47, a 6 (3)).

In his subsequent *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle*, Thomas Aquinas draws on the Stagirite to embellish the definition of prudence with the metaphor of the architect. This image narrows prudence's task to being the architect of all human deliberations and actions. In fact, architectonic prudence expresses itself as a legislative-related entity in the political dimension, serving also as a general model of how this virtue can be applied in private deliberations, by suggesting what action to take. Indeed, 'Unde principes imponentes legem suis subditis ita se habent in civilibus sicut architectores in artificialibus'. / Rulers imposing

a law are in civic matters as architects regarding things to be built. Because of this, positive law itself (that is, right reason according to which rulers frame just laws) is called architectonic prudence (Commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 7, 1197).

The orientative function played by *synderesis* as a constitutive part of prudence fits with the statement regarding the compass as a tool which 'indicates direction' in the inscription below Giotto's Paduan rendering of prudence. In the practical and social sphere, this means that although the natural laws dictated by tradition handed down from the ancestors (in other words, the past as it figures in the allegory) might seem to be the exclusive guiding principles of action, reason (or the compass, in the iconographic rendering) applies intelligence to remembrances and dictates new rules on how to best act in preparation for the future.

### 5. Circularity and the mirror

It is now worthwhile trying to understand why prudence focuses on carefully studying herself in the mirror instead of studying the book open in front of her, particularly since she is depicted sitting at a scholar's desk in a study. Another possible juxtaposition between the mirror and the compass will therefore be analyzed: the circle echoed in the frame of the mirror as well as the shape drawn by the compass. This part of the analysis will shed a light on how the compass could be elevated to a symbol of the speculative intellect and to the ideal shape that it imprints on the practical intellect – symbolized by the mirror. As a consequence of this interpretation, a connection can be traced between the words *speculum* and *speculetur* in the inscription below the allegory of Giotto's prudence.

According to medieval scholars, the activity of thinking (*speculatio*) is understood to be circular. Dante's *Convivio* provides evidence of this, as he states that 'l'anima filosofante non solamente contempla essa veritate, ma ancora contempla lo suo contemplare medesimo e la bellezza di quello, rivolgendosi sopra se stessa e di se stessa innamorando per la bellezza del suo primo guardare' / The philosophic soul not only contemplates the truth but, moreover, it contemplates its own contemplation and the beauty of that act as well, by turning back its glance upon itself and becoming enamored of itself by reason of the beauty of its first contemplation (*Convivio* IV, II, 18; translation from the *Princeton Dante Project edition*).

In other words, Dante here describes philosophising as a simultaneous acquisition of knowledge and self-knowledge. This notion had already been theorised in the *Liber de Causis*, a treatise translated into Latin from Arabic in the twelfth century, which contains aphorisms from Proclus and Plotinus as well as short comments about them. The aphorism number XIV (XV) describes human thought as capable of acquiring awareness and self-awareness:

Omnis sciens qui scit essentiam suam est rediens ad essentiam suam reditione completa. Quod est quia scientia non est nisi actio intellectibilis. Cum ergo scit sciens suam essentiam tunc redit per operationem suam intellectibilem ad essentiam suam et hoc non est ita nisi quoniam sciens et scitum sunt res una quoniam scientia scientis essentiam suam est ex eo et ad eum. Est ex eo quia est sciens et ad eum quia est scitum. Quod est quia propterea quod scientia est scientia scientis et sciens scit essentiam suam est eius operatio rediens ad essentiam suam. Ergo sub-

stantia eius est rediens ad essentiam ipsius iterum. Et non significo per reditionem substantiae ad essentiam suam nisi quia est stans fixa per se non indigens in sui fixatione et sui essentia re alia rigente ipsam quoniam est substantia simplex sufficiens per seipsam (*Liber de Causis*, XIV [XV]).

Now, the idea of turning intellectual activity inwards (*redire*) harks back to the metaphor of the mirror. Dante, again, associates the mirror with the primacy of contemplative life over active life (Rossi 2013, 208). In the twenty-seventh Purgatory Canto he mentions Rachel and Leah, two sisters presented in the Bible, more precisely in the *Book of Genesis*, as Jacob's wives. Rachel is described as a woman who assiduously contemplates her reflection in the mirror, while Leah is described as continually searching for flowers to make a garland for herself:

Per piacermi a lo specchio, qui m'adorno; / ma mia suora Rachel mai non si smaga / dal suo miraglio, e siede tutto giorno. / Ell'è d'i suoi belli occhi veder vaga / com'io de l'adornarmi con le mani; / lei lo vedere, e me l'ovrare appaga (*Purgatorio* 27, 103-108).

To please myself when at my mirror, I adorn me here; / but never doth my sister Rachel leave / her looking-glass, but sits there all day long. / Her pleasure is to see her lovely eyes, / as mine is to adorn me with my hands; seeing contented her, and doing, me (translation ed. Langdon, 1920).

Dante dreams of encountering the two sisters. After dreaming of Rachel contemplating her own reflection in the mirror, the poet concludes that he must now leave the sublunar bodily world, the material dimension, in order to turn his attention towards an intransient reality. Dante prepares for the imminent vision of God, and, therefore, Rachel's gaze and 'contemplative life' gain the upper hand over Leah's practice of virtues, in other words over 'active life'. By using these images, Dante makes reference to the rational analysis developed by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas; and by employing their terminology, he describes the philosophical path to reaching the truth as a mystical ascent to God (Rossi 2013, 208).

The iconography of prudence could thus be considered the transposition into a philosophical perspective of the image of the inner path culminating in the acquisition of truth. This path consists of the circle of acquisition of intellectual virtue and the simultaneous turning inwards by the individual to acquire self-knowledge in order to be enabled to understand how to behave. This inner path is also described in two philosophical treatises of the thirteenth century, in which the symbolism of prudence's mirror has unremarkably a moral emphasis. The first source is the epic allegorical poem by Alain de Lille entitled *Anticlaudianus*. It deals with the journey undertaken by Prudence, also known as *phronesis* (from Greek), and by her sister Reason. They are travelling to God's palace to ask him to add a soul to the body of the perfect man (*Juvenis*) they have already created, with the aim of saving mankind from its fall. At the moment when prudence reaches the edge of the universe and is about to enter God's palace, she starts to waver, dazzled by her increasing awareness of the magnitude of his divine power in proportion to her own abilities. The reality of God's greatness increasingly overwhelms her. Even though prudence is powerful, nevertheless she is a human virtue and welcomes the help that Theology gives her. However, more support is needed from theology's sister – Faith

– to help prudence. In this way, faith offers prudence a mirror, through which she regains her strength and is finally able to reach God's palace. This happens because the mirror's function is to show the seminal reasons or primary causes that govern the human world, making it possible for prudence to distinguish between good and evil.

Hoc speculum mediator adest, ne copia lucis / Empiree, radians visum, depauperate usum. / Visus in hoc speculo respirat, lumen amicum / Invenit et gaudet fulgens cum lupine lumen. / Cernit in hoc speculo visu specularante Sophia, / Quicquid divinis in se complectitur orbis (Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*: VI, 116-133).

In this mirror is reflected everything which the fiery region encompasses: in it shines clear everything which the heavenly universe holds. [...]. By using this mirror her eyes are able to recover, find a kindly brightness and enjoy the clear, gleaming light. As her eyes explore the mirror, phronesis sees there all that the divine world embraces. As her eyes explore the mirror, Sophia [Phronesis] sees there all that the divine world embraces (translation ed. Sheridan 1973, 160).

Another text dealing with prudence and the creation of the universe is Bernardus Sylvestris's *Cosmographia*. More precisely, this poem contextualizes three symbols which will be important for the future characterisation of the allegory of prudence: the mirror of providence, the book of memory and the table of fate; but it is providence – not prudence yet – who donates her mirror to Urania to guide this character in the task of creating a new human soul. This soul should be modelled on the existing one but with the addition of the edifying power of virtues. The mirror contains providence's wisdom, as well as her knowledge of the cosmic and timeless totality enjoyed by men in their original condition, before the fall. Urania and providence now intend to use it to save humanity and return mankind to its original state.

Erat igitur speculum Providentiae, cuius magna admodum circumferentia, intermina, latitudo, extensa semper facies, perspicuus introspectus ut, quas olim contineret imagines, non rubigo deterreret, non deleret antiquitas, non turbaret incursus. Vivebant idea, vivebant exemplaria nullo nata in tempore nolloque in tempore deisitura. Speculum igitur Providentiae mens aeterna, in qua sensu alle profundissimus, in qua rerum genitor extortorque omnium intellectus. Erat in exemplaribus invenire simulacrum, cuius velis generis, quale, quantum, quando et quomodo proventurum (Bernardus Silvestris, *De mundi universitate libri duo sive megacosmus et microcosmus*, vv. 19-31)

The Mirror of Providence was of vast circumference and boundless breadth, its surface extending forever, its shining glass such that whatever reflections it had once received no rubbing might erase, nor age make faint, nor destruction mar. There lived ideas and exemplars, not born in time and destined not to pass away in time. This mirror of providence is the eternal mind, in which resides that unfathomable understanding, that intellect which is the creator and the destroyer of all things. Among the exemplars might [be] discovered the model of anything, of whatever sort, and its quality and quantity, and when and how it had come to be (translation ed. Winthrop 1973, 114-115)

The source for the narrative scheme of Bernardus Silvestris's *Cosmographia* is one of the most beloved texts from late antiquity culture, whose resonance survived throughout the Middle



Ages: *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by Martianus Capella. This tale reveals how Urania's mirror bestows upon the soul the ability to know itself: 'Uranie autem praenitens speculum, quod inter donaria eius adytis Sophia defixerat, quo se renoscens etiam originem vellet exquirere, clementi benignitate largita (Martianus Capella: *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* 1,7 (4.20-22) / Urania, with kind generosity, bestowed upon her a gleaming mirror, which Sophia had placed amongst her gifts in her rooms, so that Psyche, recognizing herself, would also decide to seek out her origins (translation by Winthrop; see Winthrop, 1973, 24-28).

There are certainly some resemblances between Giotto's circular shape of the mirror and the movement of the intellectual process. Thus, the compass-and-mirror relationship could well be the key to decoding the allegory of prudence and interpreting the words in the inscription. Therefore, the insight into understanding Giotto's painting lies in the relationship traced between the symbols of the compass and the mirror. The precedence of speculative life over active life is thus due to the fact that active life is brought back within the sphere of contemplation, which governs decision-making as well as behaviour.

This interpretation also sheds new light on the anthropological understanding of temporality as the main theme in the inscription of prudence. A quick look at the early medieval culture helps to better comprehend this idea as it shows the transition in the perception of human behavioural facets.

## 6. Conclusion

Moral discourse was originally developed by the Church Fathers as part of their commitment to the Church, which tried to strengthen control over social attitudes, thus contributing to the creation of moral typologies. This discourse focused on the act of confession, as dictated by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and on the Final Judgment as the eschatological alternative between salvation and damnation. Consequently, the didactic intent of paintings and moral treatises of the period was to illustrate the *Quattuor Novissima*, that are the ultimate realities encountered at the end of life: Death, Judgment, Eternal Glory or Hell. Instead, in Italian communes of the fourteenth century, moral discourse started to be inscribed within the political context. This furthered the transition towards new representations of moral typologies with particular focus on the description of vices and virtues, and on the four cardinal virtues as no longer part of the religious sphere, but also of the political discourse (as Frugoni has appropriately pointed out, the building that houses the famous Giotto's cycle within the Scrovegni Chapel, far from being a mere private religious place, was in fact a church open to a large audience and also a major pilgrimage hub, Frugoni 2008, 38)

Among these virtues, prudence and justice played a central role in the moral and juridical reflection, as they bind together moral perspective and social order. The allegory of prudence, in particular, has imbued Italian humanistic culture. Through this allegory, the mirror's metaphor became a sign of self-awareness, pragmatism and civic responsibility. It is rare to find this metaphor with such a meaning in religious iconography, which instead focused on the mirror as a symbol of the vanity of earthly life (Taddei 2022; Baschet 2000, 225–260; Katzenellenbogen

1939, 73, 83; Del Monaco 2018, 129-130; Donato 1995; 316-318; Marrow 1983, 154-165). Other examples that I have found are the detail in the fresco of the *Last Judgment* and *Inferno* by Buffalmacco in the Camposanto of Pisa (1336-1341) and the *Vanagloria* in the *Allegory of Bad Government* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (Sala dei Nove), ca. 1338/39. In the latter fresco, an allegory of prudence without mirror also appears, even though she holds an inscription containing the words 'preteritum, presens, futurum' (past, present, future) (See Donato 1995; 316-318); for an example from a miniature of the thirteenth century see Marrow 1983, 154-165).

Thus, by choosing to paint an allegory of prudence in which this personified virtue holds a mirror to her face, Giotto insisted on establishing the anthropological dominance of the front, the future, the new, and the young in humanistic culture. The importance of the mirror therefore lies in its suggestion of a faith in the future, which is now perceived as a dimension of time fully manageable by mankind through the governance of prudence and practical reason upon their moral lives.

This transformation in the perception of mirrors as tools of moral improvement occurs also in literature, where the mirror is no longer seen as a symbol with a warning and didactic meaning. This latter sense attributable to mirrors was instead traditionally present in a genre of writings called *Specula*, widespread in the middle ages, and partly also in the early modern era (Booz 1913; Röder 1933; Eler 1971, 1361-1362; Darricau 1980, 1303-1312; Schmidt 1980, 1292-1295; Montanari 1984, 81-103; Senellart 1995; Berges 1952, Hadot 1972, 555-632; Grabes 1973; Stammen 1996, 495-507; Foucault 2004, 88; De Benedictis 1999; Anton 2006). *Specula* served in particular to transmit a value through the example of someone who had embodied it, thus becoming a behavioural reference point for the social-cultural type of tradition-directed individual. On the contrary, with the emergence of the allegory of prudence, the mirror confirms the transition to a more modern set of ethics that perceived this artefact as a tool for self-knowledge related to the socio-cultural type of inner-directed individuals, therefore, strongly hinting at the pre-eminence of the temporal category of the future over that of the past, and of rational choice over collective consciousness in early modern anthropology (Riesman, Glazer, Denney 2001; Goldberg 1985, 138-140). This attitude differentiates itself from that of so-called 'tradition-directed man', more in line with early medieval anthropology, which was bound to a system of values dictated by rules repeated from generation to generation.

To conclude, it does no longer matter to ask whether the emblem of the book in Giotto's allegory of prudence recalls the Bible and its elaborations, such as the *Moralisées* containing the illuminations of God as the architect of the world, or whether this emblem is meant to echo a *Speculum*-like text. What matters here is that, at the dawn of the fourteenth century, prudence does not read it, nor is her countenance turned into it. Instead, what is worth further investigating is why prudence is represented as looking at a tool that reconciles moral knowledge (*speculum*) with rational accuracy (*speculator*), thus sealing the beginning of a new mindset in the early modern world.

---

## Bibliographical references

Adalbert 1971

E. Adalbert, *Fürstenspiegel*, Vol. I, in E. Adalbert, E. Kaufman, S. Wolfgang, *Handwörterbuch zur Deutschen Rechtsgeschichte*, Aachen 1971, 1361-1362.

Ammannati 2017

G. Ammannati, *Pinxit industria docte mentis. Le iscrizioni delle allegorie di Virtù e Vizi dipinte da Giotto nella Cappella degli Scrovegni*, Pisa 2017.

Anton 2006

H. Anton, *Fürstenspiegel des frühen und hohen Mittelalters*, Darmstadt 2006.

Baschet 2000

J. Baschet, *I peccati capitali e le loro punizioni nell'iconografia medievale*, in C. Casagrande, S. Vecchio (ed), *I sette vizi capitali. Storia dei peccati nel Medioevo*, Torino 2000, 225-260.

Booz 1913

E. Booz, *Die Fürstenspiegel des Mittelalters bis zur Scholastik*, Freiberg 1913.

Benjamin 1085

G. Benjamin, *The mirror and man*, Charlottesville 1985.

Corrain 2016

L. Corrain, *Per una semiotica degli attributi. Gli strumenti di misurazione nell'Iconologia di Ripa*, in S. Maffei (a cura di), *Cesare Ripa e gli spazi dell'allegoria*, Napoli 2016.

Darricau 1980

R. Darricau, *Miroirs des princes*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, Ascétique et Mystique. Doctrine et histoire*, Vol. X, Paris 1980, 1303-1312.

De Benedictis 1999

A. De Benedictis, *Specula principum*, Frankfurt am Main 1999.

Del Monaco 2018

G. del Monaco, *L'Illustratore e la miniatura nei manoscritti universitari bolognesi del Trecento*, Bologna 2018

Donato 1995

M.V. Donato, *L'Allegoria del malgoverno*, in E. Castelnuovo 1995 (ed), *Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Il Buon Governo*, Milano 1995.

Foucault 2004

M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, London 2004.

Friedman 1974

J.B. Friedman, *The Architect's Compass in Creation Miniatures of the Later Middle Ages*, "Traditio", 1974; Vol. 30, 419-429.

Frazer 1913

J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion. Part I: The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, Vol. II, London 1913.

Frugoni 2008

C. Frugoni, *L'affare migliore di Enrico. Giotto e la cappella Scrovegni*, Torino 2008.

Grabes 1973

H. Grabes, *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-Glass: Kontinuität und Originalität der Spiegelmetapher in den Buchtiteln des Mittelalters und der englischen Literatur*, Tübingen 1973.

Grubb 1994

J.S. Grubb, *Memory and identity: Why Venetians didn't keep ricordanze*, "Renaissance Studies" Vol. 8 No. 4, 375-387.

Hamburger 2020

J.F. Hamburger, *Diagramming Devotion. Berthold of Nuremberg's Transformation of Hrabanus Maurus's Poems in Praise of the Cross*, Chicago 2020

Hamburger, Roxburgh, Safran 2022

J.F. Hamburger, D.J. Roxburgh, L. Safran (eds.), *The Diagram as Paradigm. Cross-cultural Approaches*, Washington, DC 2022.

Hadot 1972

P. Hadot, *Fürstenspiegel*, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Ravenna 1972, 555-632.

Hancock 1988

P.M Hancock, *Transformations in the Iconography of the Mirror in Medieval Art*, Atlanta 1988.

Hartlaub 1951

G.V. Hartlaub, *Zauber des Spiegels. Geschichte und Bedeutung des Spiegels in der Kunst*, München 1951.

Katzenellenbogen 1939

A. Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art from Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century*, "Studies of the Warburg Institute" 10 (1939).

Kessler [2019] 2023

H.L. Kessler, *L'esperienza medievale dell'arte [Experiencing Medieval Art]*, Toronto 2019], trad. it. di G. Confortin e F. Lollini, Roma 2023.

Langdon 1920

C. Langdon, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. The Italian Text with a Translation in English Blank Verse and a Commentary*, vol. 2, Cambridge 1920.

Lollini 2017

F. Lollini, 'Quasi stupida laetitia': Stultitia e Prudentia nella Cappella Scrovegni: una postilla, "La rivista di Engramma" n. 149, settembre 2017.

Lowden 2000

J. Lowden, *The Making of the Bibles Moralisesées*, State College 2000.

Marrow 1983

H.J. Marrow, *In desen speigell: A New Form of 'Memento Mori' in Fifteenth-Century Netherlandish Art*, in A.M. Logan (ed.), *Essays in Northern European Art presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann on his sixtieth birthday*, Groningen 1983, 154-165.

Montanari 1984

G. Montanari, "Speculum" medievale: nota di Iconologia speculativa, in B. Bandini, D. Baroncelli (a cura di), *Fallit imago. Meccanismi, fascinazioni e inganni dello specchio*, Ravenna 1984, 81-103.

Payer 1979

J. Payer, *Prudence and the Principles of Natural Law: A Medieval Development*, "Speculum" Vol. 54, n. 1, January 1979.

Pisani 2006

G. Pisani, *Le figure allegoriche dipinte da Giotto sopra la porta laterale d'accesso alla Cappella degli Scrovegni*, "Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova" XCV (2006), 67-77.

Pfeiffenberger 1966

S. Pfeiffenberger, *The Iconology of Giotto's Virtues and Vices at Padua*, Bryn Mawr 1966.

Riesman, Glazer, Denney 2001

D. Riesman, N. Glazer, R. Denney, *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character*, New Haven e London 2001.

Romano 2008

S. Romano, *La O di Giotto*, Milano 2008.

Röder 1933

J. Röder, *Das Fürstenbild in den mittelalterlichen Fürstenspiegeln auf französischem Boden*, Emsdetten 1933.

Rossi 2013

P.B. Rossi, *Vita attiva / Vita contemplativa: l'ideale etico e civile di Gasparo Contarini, Venezia 1542* in A. Fidora, A. Niederberger, M. Scattola (eds.), *Textes et études du Moyen Age*, 68: 'Phronesis - Prudentia - Klugheit. Das Wissen des Klugen in Mittelalter, Renaissance und Neuzeit. Il sapere del saggio nel Medioevo, nel Rinascimento e nell'età moderna, Porto 2013, 203-226.

Schmidt 1980

M. Schmidt, *Miroir*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, Ascétique et Mystique. Doctrine et histoire*, Vol. X, Paris 1980, 1292-1295.

Senellart 1995

M. Senellart, *Les arts de gouverner. Du regimen médiéval au concept de gouvernement*, Paris 1995.

Singleton 1936

C. Singleton, *Canti carnacialeschi del Rinascimento*, Bari 1936.

Stammen 1996

P. Stammen, *Fürstenspiegel*, in G. Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. III, Tübingen 1996, 495-507.

Syson-Thornton 2001

L. Syson, D. Thornton, *Objects of virtue. Art in Renaissance Italy*, London 2001.

Tachau 1998

K.H. Tachau, *God's Compass and Vana Curiositas: Scientific Study in the Old French Bible Moralisée*, "The Art Bulletin", Mar. 1998, Vol. 80, No. 1, 7-33.

Taddei 2022

I. Taddei, *La Prudence au pouvoir. Florence, xive-xve siècles*, Paris 2022.

Thornton 1997

D. Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study. Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy*, New Heaven and London 1997.

Wilhelm 1952

B. Wilhelm, *Die Fürstenspiegel des hohen und späten Mittelalters*, Stuttgart 1952.

Winthrop 1964

W. Winthrop, *The Cosmographia of Bernardus Silvestris*, New York and London, 1973.

Zabbia 2017

M. Zabbia, *Rolandino da Padova*, in *Dizionario Biografico Treccani degli Italiani*, Volume 88, 2017.

---

## Sources

Albertus Magnus, *Super Ethica commentum et quaestiones*, in W. Kubel (ed.), *Opera omnia*, 14,1, Munster, 1968/1972.

Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, or *The good and perfect man*, translation and commentary by James J. Sheridan, Toronto 1973.

*Bernardi Silvestris De mundi universitate libri duo sive megacosmus et microcosmus*, Frankfurt am Main, 1964, 57, vv. 19-31.

Cicero, *De Officiis*, ed. Miller, Harvard 1975.

Cicero, *De inventione*, ed. H.M. Hubbell, Harvard [1952] 2014.

Dante, *Convivio* IV, ii, 18.

Rolandinus de Padua, *Vita e morte di Ezzelino da Romano: cronaca*, a cura di F. Fiorese, Milano 2004.

Sabba di Castiglione, *Ricordi ovvero Ammaestramenti di Monsignor Saba da Castiglione Cavalier Gerosolimitano, ne quali con prudenti, e christiani discorsi si ragiona di tutte le materie honorate, che si ricercano a un vero gentil'huomo*, Venezia 1564.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. *Corpus Thomisticum*. S. Thomae de Aquino *Opera Omnia*, recognovit et instruxit Enrique Alarcón automato electronico Pompaelone ad Universitatis Studiorum Navarrensis aedes a MM A.D., <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/iopera.html>

Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, ed. R. A. Gauthier, Rome 1969.

Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics VI, 7, 1197*, translated by C. I. Litzinger, Chicago 1964.

---

## English abstract

The essay constitutes a first investigation on the etymological connection between the noun *speculum* (mirror) and the verb *speculari* (to deliberate), used here as key to the iconological interpretation of the allegory of *Prudence* in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Using the recently deciphered inscription beneath it, as well as studies on the relationship between text and image, Giotto's *Prudence* is analysed as a whole, comprised by the image, the words explaining the meaning of its attributes and the system of reciprocal relations between those attributes. The mirror, depicted for the first time by Giotto as an attribute of *Prudence*, is tightly connected to late-mediaeval ethical and moral concepts. The whole allegory is interpreted through the anthropological category of the 'inner-directed man', to describe the Modern Age citizen as

an agent of deliberative control on political reality. Furthermore, the iconographic precedents of the image of the prospector will be investigated, as well as the ideation of the mirror symbolism through the analysis of 13<sup>th</sup> century texts.

keywords | Prudenza; Giotto; Padova; Mirror; Iconology.

*La Redazione di Engramma è grata ai colleghi – amici e studiosi – che, seguendo la procedura peer review a doppio cieco, hanno sottoposto a lettura, revisione e giudizio questo saggio.  
(v. Albo dei referee di Engramma)*

*The Editorial Board of Engramma is grateful to the colleagues – friends and scholars – who have double-blind peer reviewed this essay.  
(cf. Albo dei referee di Engramma)*



la rivista di **engramma**  
dicembre **2023**  
**207 • Segno e disegno**

#### **Editoriale**

Fernanda De Maio, Fabrizio Lollini

#### **Architettura**

##### **L'orlo sfuggente**

Alberto Ferlenga

##### **Strategie del dettaglio**

Guido Morpurgo

##### **Il tempo del disegno digitale**

Alberto Calderoni

##### **L'opera al nero**

Luca Lanini

##### **Il disegno come disvelamento rivoluzionario**

Laura Scala

##### **La magia figurativa del segno. Il cimitero partigiano di Vojsko**

Susanna Campeotto

##### **Il primato del disegno nell'architettura italiana del secondo Novecento**

Manuela Raitano

##### **2015. La piramide e la sfera**

Fernanda De Maio

##### **Segno e disegno nell'opera di Heinrich Tessenow**

Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino

##### **Tracce visive di pensiero**

Michela Maguolo

##### **Architettura del pensiero vivente**

a cura di Monica Centanni e Fernanda De Maio

#### **Arte**

##### **An iconological approach to Giotto's allegory of Prudence and her mirror**

Martina Cafì

##### **Una, nessuna, molteplici Madonne del Salice**

Lorenzo Gigante

##### **Un ciclo di lunette per il Chiostro Grande della Certosa di Firenze**

Daniilo Sanchini

##### **L'igloo di Mario Merz come forma del tempo**

Pasquale Fameli

##### **Emociones**

Victoria Ciriot

##### **"Sentire" l'arte medievale: l'edizione italiana di Experiencing Medieval Art**

Sara Salvadori

##### **Imagines loquentes**

Alessandro Cecchi, Marcello Ciccuto