

***Prudentia* in a Classroom?
A Late-Medieval Mirror as Revealing Object
in a Miniature from London, BL Harley MS 3828¹**

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This article discusses a miniature from the Manuscript BL Harley MS 3828 (London, British Library). On folio 27v, this Flemish prayer book from mid-fifteenth century is illustrated with a miniature showing five female figures in a room. According to a recent study by Kathryn Rudy, this scene depicts the setting of a secular late medieval classroom.² In modification of Rudy's interpretation, I would like to argue that this illustration shows not a realistic scene but the presentation of three girls to an allegorical figure (most likely *Prudentia*) by their mother. Therefore, it is an allegoric scene, although real persons might be depicted. To back up this view, I will examine the miniature's iconography more closely by making use of current research on the material culture of the Middle Ages. Thus using the techniques of the so-called 'Realienkunde', I would like to give another proof of the value of object history in the understanding of medieval art.

Let us start with a closer look at the depicted scene (fig. 1). One of the five figures in the miniature sits on a seat (or throne) holding a stick-like object with a circular-shaped upper part in her left hand. Her right hand is open to receive the hand of the young woman to her right. This young woman is kneeling together with two other female figures in front of the enthroned lady. The young woman and her companion to her right are holding an open book in their hands, displaying their dedication to intense study. Behind this group of three young women, a fifth female figure is holding the kneeling woman in front of her by her shoulder. One can hardly resist interpreting this gesture as a form of introduction; it seems likely to be this fifth, apparently mature woman, who is presenting the three young women in front of her to the lady on the throne, who is

¹ I thank Duane Henderson for the revision of my text and English writing style. Furthermore, I am indebted to Claudia Schmitz-Esser for her comments on this paper and to Thomas Kühtreiber who aroused my curiosity for the work of the 'Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit' at Krems.

² Cf. Kathryn M. Rudy, "An Illustrated Mid-fifteenth-century Primer for a Flemish Girl: British Library, Harley MS 3828," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* LXIX (2006): 51-94.

expected to take care of the youngsters. Rudy concludes that the enthroned lady and the fifth women are one and the same person: the teacher of the three girls in the miniature. Consequently, she interprets the illumination as a classroom scene supporting this interpretation by pointing out that a late-medieval hornbook suspends from the wall in the left corner of the room.³ Therefore, in Rudy's eyes, "it becomes clear that the image may be the earliest representation of girls in a secular classroom."⁴



Fig. 1: London, British Library, Harley MS 3828, fol. 27v.

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³ *Ibidem*, 56-8.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 55.

However, there remain open questions. Why should the artist have chosen such an unfortunate composition that he was forced to show the teacher twice? And what is that object in the hand of the enthroned lady? Rudy would like to identify it with a ferule, although she must concede, “that most medieval ferules have not survived”, and asks rhetorically: “did they break during use?”⁵ Unfortunately, according to Rudy, only a later example of a ferule has been preserved in the Museum for the History of Education in Rotterdam, and one would have liked to compare this artefact to the discussed miniature.⁶ In her interpretation, the image of this object was inserted in the codex to “inspire the original young owner by showing her the tools of pedagogy, which are encouraging as well as threatening.”⁷ But is this interpretation convincing? As several studies on medieval art history and their interpretation show, it can be quite difficult to understand the meanings of pictorial language,⁸ especially so, if no other evidence than the picture itself has survived for its interpretation. Therefore, an analysis of the object should not proceed from a not yet convincingly confirmed interpretation of the miniature’s intention, but from an impartial scrutiny of the object itself from the perspective of the ‘Realienkunde’.

Although I do not contradict the assumption that Harley MS 3828 was used for educational purposes, I do doubt that the scene presented was merely meant to depict a medieval schoolroom.

The key to a proper understanding of the scene is the figure on the throne. As I already stated, one does not necessarily have to interpret the object in her hand as a ferule, since late-medieval ferules in this shape were not common and could therefore hardly be identified by the contemporaneous observer as such. On the contrary, an examination of fifteenth-century depictions of ferules used in late-medieval schoolrooms makes it most probable that the object in question is not a ferule, as ferules commonly consisted of a bundle of oakum, sticks or branches. One can find this object in several depictions of the Holy Kinship, a popular theme of late medieval art. To cite some examples for depictions of such bundle-ferules, one can refer to a painting of Lucas Cranach,⁹ a woodcut of the same artist with a complementary poem by Philipp Melanchthon,¹⁰ a sign board

⁵ *Ibidem*, 58.

⁶ *Ibidem*. A figure showing the Rotterdam example is not inserted in Rudy’s article. As I would like to argue that the depicted object is not a ferule at all and knowing that the Rotterdam ferule is not contemporary, this object will not be considered here.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ As to this aspect, cf. Christine B. Verzar and Gil Fishhof, eds., *Pictorial Languages and Their Meanings: Liber Amicorum in Honor of Nurith Kenaan-Kedar* (Tel Aviv, 2006), which collects several studies on this topic.

⁹ Vienna, Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der Bildenden Künste, c. 1510/12. Cf. Daniel Hess, “Die Hl. Sippe und der Wandel des Familienbildes,” in *Mit Milchbrei und Rute. Familie, Schule und Bildung in der Reformationszeit* (Kulturgeschichtliche Spaziergänge im Germanischen Nationalmuseum 8) ed. *idem* (Nuremberg, 2005), 21-34, here 30, fig. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 31, fig. 17.

from Basel by Ambrosius Holbein¹¹ and a woodcut showing the flagellation of the teacher by his disciples in a German Petrarch-edition.¹² Sometimes, a simple stick seems to have sufficed not only to point, but also served as a ferule as well.¹³ In our context, a rather crude drawing from Vienna is of some interest: it shows the late-medieval bundle-ferule “in action” (fig. 2). To the left, the allegorical figure of Grammar is depicted. She has two attributes in her hands: A bundle-ferule and a honeyspoon, signaling her power to punish and to reward her disciples.¹⁴



fig. 2: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2975, fol. 1v.

¹¹ Basel, Kunstmuseum, 1516; *ibidem*, 32, fig. 18.

¹² Francesco Petrarca, *Von der Artzney bayder Glück*. Erstes Buch, fol. 98r, Augsburg 1519/20; see Max Liedtke, “Schule und Bildung in der Reformationszeit,” in *Mit Milchbrei und Rute*, 51-74, here 54, fig. 40.

¹³ Cf. the woodcut ‘Teacher and Disciples’ by Albrecht Dürer, Nuremberg 1510; *ibidem*, 53, fig. 39.

¹⁴ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2975, fol. 1v; Hess, *Mit Milchbrei und Rute*, 13, fig. 2, identifying the items as “Honiglöffel und Rute” (a honeyspoon and a ferule).

The combination of Grammar and a scene of medieval kids around her in the Vienna Codex warns us that we should not be too fast in interpreting the miniature from the British Library as a faithful depiction of daily life in a classroom. Could the lady to the left in this miniature not be an allegory, too? A comparison of the drawing from Vienna and the London manuscript makes clear, that the object depicted in the London manuscript could more likely be the honeyspoon than a late-medieval ferule. So, at first glance, the enthroned figure from the manuscript could be an allegory of Grammar.



Fig. 3: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 5393, fol. 329r.

Although we should not exclude this possibility, which could fit to the manuscript's iconography, one has to consider the three concentric circles on the upper edge of the object. Is it, then, perhaps a more complex item? In my opinion, it could be a late-medieval mirror. Such mirrors are shaped in a form very similar to the object in question. The two inner concentric circles could be a two-di-

mensional depiction of the curvature of a mirror's glass, as in the case of a manuscript illustration in a codex from Vienna showing a virgin with a mirror in her hand (fig. 3).¹⁵ Late-medieval mirrors had a circular appearance with curved glass in the centre surrounded by a wooden or metal edge, as may be seen in several works of late-medieval and Renaissance art. The best known, albeit in our context slightly exotic example is Parmigianino's self-portrait in the Kunsthistorisches Museum at Vienna. The shape of the mirror is more clearly recognizable in paintings such as Hans Baldung Grien's picture of an allegorical, female figure in the Alte Pinakothek at Munich: The mirror in her hand is circular with a curved glass in its centre.¹⁶ In several pieces of art from the fourteenth and fifteenth century similar mirrors are depicted.¹⁷ To give just one late-fifteenth-century example: the tombstone of Margarethe, the wife of Jörg Puhler in the parish church of Imst (Tyrol), shows a similar shape.¹⁸ One of the two coats of arms on this marble slab shows a monkey with a mirror as its crest (fig. 4). Again, the mirror has a similar form. This example shows that the circular mirror was a very common feature in the fifteenth century.¹⁹ Therefore,

¹⁵ Coloured drawing from around 1465, Vienna, ÖNB cod. 5393, fol. 329r. Cf. Sarah Khan, *Diversa Diversis. Mittelalterliche Standespredigten und ihre Visualisierung*, *Pictura et poesis. Interdisziplinäre Studien zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Kunst* 20 (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2007), 356-85. The use of multiple concentric circles in late medieval depictions of mirrors is not uncommon. To give just one more example: In another codex from Vienna (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 12490, fol. 99r, around 1439), Venus holds a mirror with three concentric circles in her hand. Enlarged colour reproductions of this codex are available for consultation through realonline on the website of the Institut für Realienkunde, Krems.

¹⁶ Hans Baldung Grien, *Frau mit Spiegel, Schlange, Hirsch und Hindin*, 1529, Munich, Alte Pinakothek; cf. Gisela Goldberg, "Inv. Nr. 1423/5376," in *Alte Pinakothek München*, catalogue 3rd ed. (Munich, 1999), 55-6. A similar example of a mirror can be found in Hans Baldung Grien's depiction of the Three Ages at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Inv. 2636).

¹⁷ To give some examples: One could refer to the wall painting showing the deadly sin of pride with a mirror in her hands on the northern wall of the parish church St. James at Levoča (Slovakia), originating from around 1380-1400; to an altar by the Master of Bat, showing St. Catherine looking at herself in a mirror, at the Keresztény Múzeum at Esztergom (Hungary), around 1410-1420; or to the two mirrors, one in the chamber of St. Marc and one in St. John Evangelist's chamber, from the altar in the parish church at Schönbach (Lower Austria), around 1490-1500. All these mirrors show a circular shape. Reproductions of these paintings are available for consultation through realonline on the website of the Institut für Realienkunde, Krems.

¹⁸ Imst (Tyrol, Austria), on the western wall of the parish church, dated 1494/95. Cf. Romedio Schmitz-Esser, "Die Wappendarstellungen vom Haus Schlossergasse 13, Hall in Tirol," in *Forum Hall in Tirol. Neues zur Geschichte der Stadt* 2, Nearchos Sonderheft 16, ed. Alexander Zanesco and Romedio Schmitz-Esser (Hall in Tirol, 2008), 220-37, here 224.

¹⁹ The monkey with a mirror in its hands was a common feature in the 15th and early 16th century. The motive can be found in several late-medieval miniatures, for example in a prayer book from Tyrol or Bavaria, originating from around 1512, and an (Austrian?) bible, around 1445; Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2747, fol. 104r, and cod. 1228, fol. 82r. A monkey with a mirror in its hand accompanies the wall painting of St. Christopher in

the circular object in the London manuscript could have been easily identified by contemporaries as a mirror. And as already Giotto's *Prudentia* from the Arena Chapel in Padua looks at herself in a circular mirror, which she holds in her hand, it would appear that the London manuscript's figure shows *Prudentia* as well.



Fig. 4: Tombstone of Margarethe Puhler, 1494/95, Imst (Tyrol), parish church.
Photo: Watzek, Hall in Tirol

There is only one odd detail within the London miniature: The mirror is attached to a staff or stick. One could think that this is the handle of the mirror, and indeed, the female figure holds the mirror by using this staff as a handle. But, although the circular shape of the mirror is obvious, such mirrors are normally depicted without such a handle. It may be that the handle in the miniature was an unfortunate combination of *Prudentia*'s mirror with an attribute belonging to an-

the church of St. Andrew at Gajach (Carinthia, Austria), around 1515-1525. As a crest, the mirror can be found in the hands of a female figure in one of the coats of arms in a votive picture showing the donator in front of St. Christopher and the Virgin and Child with St. Anne, from Styria, around 1490, today in the treasury of the Teutonic Order at Vienna. Reproductions of these MSS, the wall painting and the votive picture are available for consultation through realonline on the website of the Institut für Realienkunde, Krems.

other allegory: the sceptre of *Sapientia*.²⁰ So, as we can not rule out completely that the allegorical figure is that of Grammar, we can also not be sure that it is not that of *Sapientia* herself. However, due to the mirror, an identification as *Prudentia* seems most likely. Moreover, in all three cases we should identify the figure as a personified allegory.



Fig. 5: Lucas Furtenagel, Hans Burgkmair and his wife Anna.
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

But is the depiction of a stick as the mirror's handle the invention of the artist's inability? Such mirrors did exist, and pictures of them are to be found in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art. The portrait of the well-known artist Hans Burgkmair and his wife by Lucas Furtenagel in the Kunsthistorisches Museum at Vienna depicts the couple in front of a mirror in the hand of Burgkmair's wife, showing their faces as skulls and therefore becoming a *memento mori* (fig. 5). The mirror has not only a curved surface and a metal frame, but a long stick

²⁰ For example, on the frontispiece to Robert Recorde's 'The Castle of Knowledge', the female figure on top of the castle (obviously Wisdom herself) has a sceptre in her hands; Jean Wilson, "Queen Elisabeth I as Urania," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, LXIX (2006): 151-73, here 165, fig. 10.

as its handle.²¹ A similarly shaped mirror with a massive, stick-like handle appears in a woodcut by Cornelis Anthonisz, showing the Wise Man and the Wise Woman.²² Moreover, in several late-medieval depictions of the Virtues, *Prudentia* is holding a comparable mirror with handle.²³ Thus, the identification of the object in question as a mirror seems most probable.

If we, therefore, accept the interpretation that the enthroned lady is *Prudentia*, the whole scene becomes comprehensible. The three young girls in front are coming to the allegorical figure as their future teacher, the hand gesture of the first of the three girls towards *Prudentia* is a gesture of mutual acceptance. The fifth female figure to the right could be the mother of the three girls, as she seems to present them to *Prudentia*. From this perspective, the group of the three daughters and their mother could have been composed by the artist in analogy to the rows of praying family members (“Beterreihe”), which is a common feature in late medieval and early modern epitaphs.²⁴

To conclude, the miniature from Harley MS 3828 shows allegorical and realistic elements. The aim of the artist was not primarily to give a depiction of a classroom situation in a fifteenth-century school. He borrowed elements from daily school life, however, to garnish his illustration. The medieval hornbook is an example of this. But these borrowings do not contradict the interpretation of the scene in an allegorical sense. To cite another example: In a woodcut from Gregor Reisch’s *Margerita philosophica*, the female figure opening the tower of sciences to the young disciple has a panel in her hand, which shows similarities to the hornbook in the London miniature.²⁵ Another feature of the London miniature which coincides with its allegorical interpretation are the kneeling figures of the three girls in its centre. Do we really have to think that medieval school kids were kneeling during their lessons? Although we may assume that the relationship of students to their teachers was more respectful in the Middle Ages than today, kneeling could hardly have been the daily posture in a medieval classroom. Moreover, we seldom find pupils in this posture in front of

²¹ Karl Schütz, “I.15 Der Maler Hans Burgkmair und seine Frau Anna, geb. Allerlai,” in *Wir sind Maske*, ed. Claudia Ferino-Pagden, exhibition catalogue (Milan and Vienna, 2009), 81-2, with a bibliography on the history and attribution of this piece.

²² Today in Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, P-RP-P-1932-127, from around 1540. Cf. Andrew Morrall, ‘Ornament as Evidence’, in *History and Material Culture. A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. Karen Harvey (London et al., 2009), 47-66, here 58.

²³ Such mirrors are to be found in the hand of *Prudentia* in MS 9232, fol. 448v of the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels, the MS fr. 9186, fol. 304r of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, or the Add. MS 6797, fol. 276r in the British Museum. All examples taken from: Rosemond Tuve, ‘Notes on the Virtues and Vices’, in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXVI (1963): 264-303.

²⁴ Rudolf M. Kloos, *Einführung in die Epigraphik des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt, 1992), 79.

²⁵ Gregor Reisch, *Margerita philosophica* (Straßburg, 1504); Liedtke, “Schule und Bildung,” 57, fig. 41.

their teacher in depictions without an allegorical context. We may conclude that the London miniature shows three late medieval, well situated schoolgirls being presented to *Prudentia* by their mother and interpret the scene at the same time as an allegory of their work (Learning) and the aim of their efforts (*Prudentia*) in their real life.

As this analysis has shown, “Realienkunde” is of immense value to art history, especially studying the Middle Ages. For the interpretation of pictorial language, the object itself becomes more and more relevant, and the case of the miniature from folio 27^v in Harley MS 3828 shows the applicability of research into the material heritage of the Middle Ages.

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Vorwort

Das vorliegende Heft von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* beschäftigt sich vorrangig mit der Untersuchung und Analyse von verschiedenen Bereichen spätmittelalterlicher bildlicher Überlieferung und ihrer Bedeutungsmuster. Die Beiträge von Kristina Potuckova und Isabella Nicka sind die für den Druck überarbeiteten Vorträge der Autorinnen, welche sie am 45. International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo/Michigan im Mai 2010 in der Sektion „Intention and Response: Late Medieval Images and Public Space“ gehalten haben.¹ Beide Aufsätze zeigen in beeindruckender Weise, wie stark Alltag und materielle Kultur einerseits mit religiösen, andererseits sozialen und geschlechtsspezifischen Komponenten des mittelalterlichen Lebens verbunden waren. Sie vermitteln darüber hinaus, wie wichtig sich die Analyse der ‚Zeichensprache‘ von Bildinhalten des Zeitraums für ein besseres Verständnis der Wirkung visueller Botschaften darstellt.

Der Beitrag von Romedio Schmitz-Esser widmet sich der Neuinterpretation einer flämischen Miniatur aus der Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts, die bis dato als die Wiedergabe eines Schulraumes für den Unterricht von Mädchen gedeutet worden war. Mit Hilfe des Herausarbeitens und einer Analyse der allegorischen und realistischen Bildelemente gelingt ihm ein wichtiger neuer Vorschlag zur Sinngebung der Darstellung.

Gerhard Jaritz

¹ Die Sektion wurde vom Department of Medieval Studies von Central European University (Budapest) und dem Consortium for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (Claremont, Kalifornien) organisiert. Die Vortragstitel waren: Kristina Potuckova, Female Messages from the High Altar (Central Europe, Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries); Isabella Nicka, Saintly Distance and Domestic Proximity: The Sign Language of Furniture in Late Medieval Art.