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Mirrors for Princes

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Abstract

“Mirrors for Princes” designates a literary genre in which political ideas are expressed in the form of advice to a ruler. This genre has its roots in Antiquity and especially in Late Antiquity. The first medieval flourishing of works of this kind dates back to the so-called Carolingian Renaissance, when the image of the ideal ruler is strongly influenced by the monastic background of most authors writing on this topic. After a long decline, John of Salisbury gave a renewed impulse to the genre, exerting a long-lasting influence with his *Policraticus*. In the cultural context of the twelfth century, Mirrors for Princes opened not only to the patristic heritage, but also to classical authors. Many mirrors date back to the second half of the twelfth and to the first half of the thirteenth century, when they mostly took the form of compilations. In the following period, great thinkers such as Aquinas and Giles of Rome tried to insert the newly rediscovered Aristotelian ethical and political language into the mirrors tradition. Giles’s *De regimine principum* was the most successful and influential result of such effort. The rise of *De potestate papae* treatises in the first half of the fourteenth century reduced the role of Mirrors for Princes as carriers of political ideas but could not completely supersede them. On the contrary, when the heyday of *De potestate papae* was over, mirrors regained at least in part their function. The present article does not cover the Quattrocento: it is well known, however, that the tradition of the Mirrors continued in the Renaissance and in the following centuries.

The use of the expression “Mirrors for Princes” to designate a literary genre goes back to German scholarship that refers with the term *Fürstenspiegel* to writings dealing with the virtues of the ideal ruler, with his duties and his behavior in general. The counterparts of *Fürstenspiegel* in other European languages, such as *Miroir de princes*, *Specchio dei principi* (and the Latin *specula principum*, although it is attested much later than the first examples of the genre) have also established themselves in present day scholarship. These terms can be used in a rather loose sense, referring to a very wide range of sources, even narrative or iconographic ones, or parts thereof, carrying notions concerning rulership, or in a stricter sense, limited to independent works explicitly aiming at instructing kings and lesser rulers about the virtues they should cultivate, their lifestyle, their duties, the philosophical and theological meaning of their office. Mirrors for Princes can therefore be used as a source for many purposes, from the reception of classical literary texts to the history of mentality. They usually follow standard conventions so that their teachings about royal justice, princely virtues, and the like tend to give the impression of a continuous repetition of commonplaces. This notwithstanding the genre undergoes interesting changes during the Middle Ages. This article will focus on the aspects that can be brought to bear on the history of ethics and political philosophy.

Roots in Late Antiquity and in the Earliest Mediaeval Centuries

It is well beyond doubt that the genre is indebted to classical works and to patristic literature as well, although there is still lively discussion among specialists about the extent and relevance of such influence. Seneca and Cicero played a very important role, but also Ambrose (*De divinis officiis*) and Augustine, whose chap. 24 in Book V of his *City of God* have been regarded as examples of Christian Mirror for Princes, obviously in a very loose sense of the expression. Martin of Braga’s *Formula vitae honestae*, (570–579), mediated a virtue ethics strongly influenced by Cicero and Seneca, and in the Middle Ages was often referred to as a work of the latter. The discussion about *De duodecim abusivis* (or *abusionibus*) *saeculi*, falsely attributed to Cyprian, but now dated to the seventh century, is

still open among scholars. It seems ascertained beyond doubt, however, that this work of Irish origin influenced, especially with its treatment of the sixth *abusio* (*dominus sine virtute*) and of the ninth (*rex iniquus*), later Carolingian Mirrors for Princes.

Carolingian Mirrors for Princes

Although some writings by Alcuin during the reign of Charles the Great already bear some essential features of the Mirrors for Princes, the first flourishing of the genre is usually dated to the ninth century, in the context of Carolingian courts. Scholars have rightly pointed out that some authors of this century draw on previous works, such as the already mentioned *De duodecim abusivis seculi*. Nevertheless, Smaragd of Saint Mihiel's *Via regia* (813), Jonas of Orléans' *De institutione regia* (831), Sedulius Scottus' *De rectoribus christianis* (855–859), together with some works by Hincmar of Reims' (806–882) build up the first noteworthy body of texts explicitly devoted to the moral instruction of the ruler. A common feature of such treatises is the focus on the personal Christian virtues of the sovereign. They represent therefore an important source for the history of virtue ethics in the early Middle Ages, since authors such as Smaragd are persuaded that the ruler should possess the same virtues as other Christians, obviously at the highest level. A striking feature of Smaragd's mirror, is that it overlaps in part the *Diadema monachorum* (a sort of manual for monks) of the same author. From this point of view, Carolingian Mirrors for Princes can be regarded as a source for the ethical doctrines of the period, which are in turn heavily influenced by the monastic background of their authors.

From the point of view of the history of political thought, such "mirrors" share the implicit assumption that the well-being of the kingdom depends almost exclusively on the moral righteousness of the ruler. As far as the relationship between the secular rulers and religious authority is concerned, the authors of such "mirrors" consider the king or the emperor as the highest authority of a community that is temporal and spiritual at the same time. *Sacerdotium* and *regnum* are conceived of as integral parts of a whole. Sedulius Scottus (*De rectoribus christianis*) defines the temporal ruler as God's vicar in his church. Notwithstanding this, as Jürgen Miethke has pointed out, authors such as Jonas of Orléans, writing in the troubled period of Louis the Pious' empire, try to draw at least some boundaries dividing the sphere belonging to the spiritual power (mainly understood as the power of bishops) from temporal jurisdiction, without excluding however, the possibility of interference. In case of necessity, for example, the temporal ruler is allowed to have

recourse to church goods, but on the other hand, he should submit to the judgment of the bishop when he fails to fulfill his duties.

Twelfth Century

Between 1148 and 1153, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote a treatise addressed to Pope Eugenius III, the *De consideratione*, enlightening him not only about the duties and perils of the most important office in Christianity, but also about his view of the role of the pope in the church. Many scholars emphasize the similarities of this work to the Mirrors for Princes, describing it as a *speculum paparum* (mirror for popes). Bernard in fact devotes large sections of his treatise to the virtues of a good pope (the four cardinal virtues that are according to him necessarily connected), to the vices he should avoid in himself and correct in the faithful, and to the advisers he should choose, on the governance of the papal household. In addressing his advice to the pope, Bernard also expresses his ecclesiological views: on one hand, he stresses the fullness of power of the supreme pontiff, on the other, he claims that the exercise of this power should result in a service (*ministerium*) to the church and not in a dominion over it. In particular, the pope is morally bound to respect the rights of the local churches.

Written by a cleric who had attended the French schools at the eve of the age of universities and had personal experience of life at lay and ecclesiastical courts alike, John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, even though it is not only a *speculum principis* in the strict sense, gave a renewed impulse to the genre, as Wilhelm Berges noted in his ground breaking survey, which accordingly begins its detailed analysis with this work. Deeply indebted to the interest in the classical heritage that is peculiar to the so-called twelfth century Renaissance, John draws not only on biblical texts, such as Deut. 17 (which was to become an almost topical reference for this literary genre) but also on authors from Antiquity. The *Institutio Traiani* that John attributes to Plutarch and inserts in his *Policraticus* is a fake, but it adds a distinct classical flavor to John's political organicism, which conceived of the realm as a body. The hierarchical functionalism that is implicit in the detailed parallelism between limbs of the body and the parts of the regnum was also to exert a long lasting influence on later specula. Historians of political thought have also taken great interest in John's attitude toward unjust rulers, because he does not limit himself to contrasting the ideal ruler with the tyrant but supports the right to resist the tyrant, and even to kill him. According to some interpreters this right is, in John's mind, also a duty. John of Salisbury's impact is particularly noticeable in Helinand of

Froidmont's work, completed before 1210. This former troubadour converted to the Cistercian Order devoted a chapter of his huge *Cronica* in 49 books to the issue *De bono regimine principis*, drawing on the *Institutio Traiani* and its organicism, but also on John's conviction that the just king should rule according to the law. In turn, Helinand contributed to the diffusion of John of Salisbury's views, thanks to the fact that his *De bono regimine principis* was excerpted in the following century by Vincent of Beauvais and inserted in his well-known and widely read *Speculum historiale*.

Writing on the ridge between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Gerald of Wales combined in his *De principis instructione* a detailed virtue ethics enriched with exempla from classical writers (first *distinctio*) with reports about the life of contemporary rulers (second and third *distinctiones*) that is an important source for historical events as well.

Thirteenth Century: From Compilation to the Reception of Aristotle

To Vincent of Beauvais and the team working under his guidance we owe a large number of works based on a compilational method, that is, on the collection of authoritative short texts (called in medieval Latin *auctoritates*) interspersed with remarks by the authors who also shape the overall structure of the work. Wilhelm Berges pointed to the parts of Vincent's works that could be seen as Mirrors of Princes. Berges's hypothetical reconstruction of the original, although not completed, plan of Vincent's work devoted to the prince was not confirmed by subsequent research. The rest of his remarks remain valid even after the recent critical edition of *De morali principis institutione*. In this treatise, together with the usual description of the just ruler contrasted with the tyrant and the stock-in-trade advice concerning life at court, one finds an interesting account of the origins of power among human beings. According to a long-lasting theological tradition, the establishment of one human being's power over others is first and foremost an act of violence, triggered by the perversity of mankind corrupted by sin. Only afterward can power, so to speak, redeem itself by fulfilling the function of compelling and punishing evildoers. The method adopted by Guillaume Peraldi's *De eruditione principum* (later falsely attributed to Aquinas) is very similar to Vincent's: together with the substantial identity of many of their views, this had led Berges to think that they belonged to the same, unfinished encyclopedic work about Christian kingship.

To the same period belongs Guibert of Tournai's *Eruditio regum et principum* (1259): the Franciscan friar

explains the function of secular power with the necessity of compelling those who cannot be persuaded by spiritual means. Strongly influenced by the corpus of treatises attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, Guibert conceives of the duties of princes according to the pattern of angelic hierarchies, thereby attributing to secular powers a mediating role between God and mankind. According to Jenny Swanson, John of Wales's *Breviloquium de Virtutibus*, written most probably in the mid 1260s, can be numbered among the Mirrors for Princes. In fact, the treatise penned by this prolific Franciscan author shows the features of a mirror centered around a virtue ethics (more indebted to texts such as *Morale Dogma Philosophorum* than to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*) designed especially for the ruler. Inserting in his text many exempla, John of Wales was deemed to exert a durable influence on the literary genre, if for no other reason than as an easily accessible collection of edifying anecdotes, mainly from classical Antiquity.

Comparison of Vincent of Beauvais's views concerning the origins of power with those maintained only a few years later by his confrère Thomas Aquinas offers a telling example of the changes brought about by the reception of Aristotelian practical philosophy. In the only extant part of his *De regno* (shortly after 1270), Aquinas offers an account of the origin of the political community that is strongly influenced by the Aristotelian pattern of the natural, teleological development of the city from the smallest social community, the family. In Aquinas's account of the establishment of power relations among human beings, the Fall does not play the role it played in Vincent. Moreover, Aquinas describes different types of constitution. Monarchy is not the only possibility anymore, so that Aquinas, unlike Vincent, feels a need to argue in favor of the monarchical constitution as reflecting in the best way the order of nature and the universe. It is still controversial whether Aquinas, in defining the duties of the ruler also toward God, suggests that regnum should be subordinated to *sacerdotium*.

Innovative as it might have been, Aquinas' *De regno* remained but a fragment. With his *De regimine principum* (most probably around 1279) Giles of Rome fulfilled the task of writing a Mirror for Princes that exploited the opportunities offered by the reception of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. The first book of the *De regimine* consists, in fact, in a description of the virtues of the ruler that is much indebted to Aquinas's reception of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. At least for its first part, the third book relies heavily on Aristotle's *Politics*. According to the traditional subdivision of practical philosophy into individual ethics, doctrine of the household (*oconomica*), and

politics, Giles, still lacking a Latin translation of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica*, draws on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Rhetoric*, and the last two books of the *Politics*, especially as regards the upbringing of children. The *De regimine principum* presented itself as a mirror that meets the expectations of an audience interested in the newly discovered Aristotelian practical philosophy. At first glance, it could seem that Giles limited himself to summarizing Aristotle's relevant works. On the contrary, he did not only draw on the reception of Aristotle through Aquinas (there are many tacit references to the *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, to the fragmentary *Sententia libri politicorum*, to *De Regno*, and even to the *Summa Theologiae* of the great Dominican master), but also very often succeeded in bending the Aristotelian texts he quoted in his treatise to an apology for hereditary monarchy (presented as the best form of government according to Aristotle), where the king is above positive law and subordinate only to natural law. Giles of Rome also succeeded, however, in setting a standard, so that his Mirror for Princes enjoyed an enormous success, partly because it was used as a handbook of Aristotelian practical philosophy. The *De regimine principum* was also translated into many vernaculars. Some of these versions, however, were not literal, but rather free arrangements that inserted remarks by the translator and also used other sources, such as the Bible, that Giles had neglected in favor of Aristotle, in order to offer an almost purely philosophical Mirror for Princes. Among such modified versions one can count, for different reasons, the so-called *Glossa castellana* to the *De regimine principum* (first half of the fourteenth century) and John Trevisa's rendering in Middle English. Writing a philosophical, that is, in his opinion, an Aristotelian Mirror for Princes, was also the intention inspiring, Engelbert of Admont, whose *De regimine principum* (shortly after 1300) had, however, almost no diffusion in the Middle Ages. This work is nevertheless of great interest, since Engelbert develops a virtue ethics that distinguishes between the four cardinal virtues, that are necessary to anybody, and the virtuous habits that are required in kings and emperors. Only the latter, in fact, need what Engelbert calls *virtutes regales*, using an expression that most probably derives from the *Secretum Secretorum*, a spurious Aristotelian work whose first part was sometimes referred to as the *De regimine principum* written by the Stagirite. Engelbert also provides the reader with a quite original discussion of the forms of government, in which he takes into consideration not only simple constitutions, but also mixed ones. Surprisingly enough for a supporter of the imperium, Engelbert admits that monarchy in its simple form is extremely rare, because of

the rarity of virtues among rulers. Therefore, according to the most recent interpretation by Karl Ubl, he gives his preference to a blend of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.

Examples from the Fourteenth Century

Already at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the literary genre of the Mirrors for Princes begins losing ground as a carrier of political theories, in favor of other genres, such as the *de potestate papae* treatises, especially in the first half of the century, or the *somnia* literature, toward the end of the same century. This does not imply, however, that the production of *specula principum* ceases abruptly. On the contrary, political authors continued to recur to this genre to express their views during the Renaissance and well into modern times, even after Machiavelli and often against him. An overview of such development would exceed the scope of an article devoted to medieval Mirrors. It seems reasonable to conclude with some examples from the fourteenth century, before the influence of Humanism introduces a new shift in the Quattrocento.

For example, at the beginning of the 1330s, William of Pagula uses the literary form of the *speculum*, to protest against the institution of royal purveyance in the English kingdom. He does not limit himself to a moral complaint but argues in defense of a sort of "basic economic rights" that the king himself is not allowed to infringe. Interestingly, William supports his claim by arguing that the English realm is a fief of the pope, so that the sovereign does not possess the same fullness of power that an emperor or a pope can legitimately claim.

Some years later, Guido Vernani of Rimini dedicates to the Malatesta, most probably Malatesta and Galeotto, a *Liber de virtutibus*, that is an abridged version of Aristotelian virtue ethics mediated through Aquinas' doctrine of happiness attainable in the present life. Guido had criticized Dante's *Monarchia* and supported a hierocratic theory of power. Here he develops his own ethics for an Italian signore whose territory is inscribed in the boundaries of the "state" claimed by the Roman church.

In 1340–1344, the Portuguese Franciscan friar Alvaro Pais dedicated to Alfonso XI of Castiglia a *Speculum Regum* that not only puts a strong emphasis on princely virtues but also defends the superiority of monarchy over other constitutions and supports the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal. His account of the origins of power is, as usual in many Franciscan authors, especially after John Duns Scotus, clearly not Aristotelian. He prefers tracing back the origins of subordination among men to pride and other vices. However corrupted the intention of

the first rulers could have been, they still played a role in preserving social order. For this reason, God tolerates such a state of affairs, although it does not correspond to his original plan for mankind.

Wilhelm Berges numbered Francesc Eiximenis's *Regiment de la cosa publica* (1383) among Mirrors for Princes. More recent studies have emphasized that the scope of this work exceeds the traditional limits of a mirror, developing an overall theory of monarchy. His views about monarchy are not only inspired by the principle that Christian faith must be the unifying element of every political community but are also guided by the peculiar experience of the kingdom of Aragon, where this Catalan Franciscan friar spent most of his life. As a result, Eiximenis supports the idea of a monarchy that is bound by covenants to its subjects and shares its power with parliamentary institutions.

See also: ► Bernard of Clairvaux ► Giles of Rome, Political Thought ► John of Salisbury ► Thomas Aquinas, Political Thought

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