

Article

Wisdom's Guiding Compass: Lady Prudence as a Pedagogical Model

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Abstract: Many educators desire to cultivate wisdom in their students but feel this goal is too vague to be clearly articulated and encouraged. One possible way around this problem is to learn from classical and medieval depictions of wisdom and particular virtues, which were often personified. I will examine one highly illustrative artistic depiction of Prudence, which gives wisdom a face and form and thus provides students with an imaginative entryway into better understanding and practicing this virtue in the classroom. After providing a brief overview of the role of images and the imagination in learning, I explain how personifications of the virtues—and of Prudence, in particular—may be a useful pedagogical guide in helping students cultivate those virtues.

Keywords: prudence; pedagogy; personifications; virtue formation; great texts

1. A Shared Vision of Prudence

Pope Gregory IX famously dubbed the university “wisdom’s special workshop”. Centuries later, a significant percentage of religious-affiliated universities still claim the cultivation of wisdom as one of their primary objectives, but few provide specifics about what they mean by wisdom and what the process of “cultivating” it looks like. Calls to recover the university’s mission to cultivate wisdom abound, but implementing this mission has proven more challenging. Conversations about wisdom tend to gravitate towards the abstract, with wisdom sometimes appearing as if it were a magical characteristic people receive after filling their heads with enough knowledge. At other times, it can seem akin to emotional intelligence. Consequently, educators who want to form character as well as the mind may find it challenging to arrive at a shared vision of cultivating wisdom.

Fortunately, it is not necessary for modern educators to work their way out of this problem all on their own. We can turn to past thinkers for guidance on how to arrive at a more specific and substantive idea of wisdom. For medieval thinkers in particular, wisdom was not an abstract notion shrouded in shadow and mist. Wisdom was personified. She was a lady who could be clearly seen. In classical and medieval depictions, the virtues are frequently personified. Practical wisdom, or prudence (*phronesis* in Greek and *prudentia* in Latin) was not just a concept, therefore.¹ Prudence was a recognizable person with tangible and specific features. Artistic depictions of Prudence give a form and shape to wisdom. They provide an entryway to understanding what wisdom is and how one attains it. Perhaps the key to arriving at a shared vision of wisdom is as simple as literally sharing a vision of wisdom. After all,

¹ Aristotle explains two kinds of wisdom—*phronesis*, or practical wisdom, and *sophia*. This article focuses on the role of *phronesis*, or *prudentia* in Latin, the virtue translated as prudence. In the Christian tradition, which is my primary source of context for this article, prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues, and is fairly consistent through time, but *sophia* is sometimes fused with prudence or sometimes considered unattainable for human beings because it sometimes is associated with the divine Logos. Prudence is the focus of this article because it has a more consistent tradition in theology, philosophy, and art, and Aristotle argues one must develop prudence first, making it a prerequisite for *sophia*; consequently, prudence is the form of wisdom more easily practiced and developed in a university setting (Aristotle 1999).

people often learn by imitation. It is easier for a person to be good if she has some sense of what goodness looks like. Prudence as a shadowy, vague concept may be difficult to understand and live out, but Lady Prudence, as a concrete form, as a body, teaches us how an abstract concept can be lived.

Art provides form to the formless, making it especially well-suited for the task of introducing abstract moral virtues. In my Great Texts class, I have adapted an artistic personification of Prudence into a pedagogical model and experimented with using both art and literature as a way to help students understand and practice the virtue of prudence. After a brief overview of the role of images and the imagination in learning, I will introduce the personification of Prudence by examining a notable exemplar sculpted by Michele Colombe and explain how it may be used in the classroom as a guide for cultivating the virtue it embodies.

2. Creating Moral *Kharaktēr*: Stamping Images onto the Soul

For ancient and medieval thinkers, learning started with imitation, and imitation started with having specific images and models to imitate. The word character itself stems from image-making. It originates from the Greek *kharaktēr*, a stamping tool used to impress an image on a coin.² Ancient thinkers developed the theory and practice of moral development as a type of “stamping” of the soul, and later, monastic thinkers continued to apply this practice and develop educational methods centered around images. Monastic moral education relied heavily on exercising the imagination. They recognized that while reason and logic may convince the brain, reason intimately relied upon the creativity of the imagination to change the soul. The soul was seen as moldable, akin to a wax tablet. The process of molding this tablet into a distinct and beautiful form was called *memoria*, a practice understood as “the art of fashioning the soul” (Carruthers and Ziolkowski 2004, p. 28).³ *Memoria* requires a kind of artistic discernment in fashioning this soul stamp, because ancient and medieval thinkers realized that the soul functioned similarly to the body: even if it is not intentionally exercised and shaped, it still takes on a distinct shape and form and one less likely to be as pleasing. The monastics practiced the art of *memoria* so that their moral character would become the images impressed upon their souls.

These early thinkers intuitively discovered a profound truth about education and formation.⁴ Though we have largely lost the concept and practice of *memoria*, we have retained fragments of its practices and have independently verified some of its presuppositions. Both neuroscientists’ studies of the brain and educators’ practical, classroom experiences have long acknowledged that engaging the imagination is a particularly effective learning strategy. In our efforts to provide students with tools and learning strategies to comprehend classroom information, we tout, for instance, mnemonic devices and other imaginative activities, such as story-making. Imaginative connections and reconstructions give new meaning and order to what would otherwise be bare facts, and these types of practices greatly increase memory retention.⁵ The monastics correctly linked the imagination to moral formation, as

² Theresa Flanigan’s article, “Art, Memory, and the Cultivation of Virtue: The Ethical Function of Images in Antoninus’s *Opera a ben vivere*”, was the first time I had read about the Greek origin of the word character (Flanigan 2014, p. 192).

³ I do not have the time or space in this article to represent *memoria* properly, but for a more thorough study of the topic, see Mary Carruthers’ work, especially *The Book of Memory* (Carruthers 2008) and *The Medieval Craft of Memory* (Carruthers and Ziolkowski 2004), and Frances Yates’ *The Art of Memory* (Yates 2014).

⁴ The mind, of course, does not scientifically work like a wax tablet, but there are still intuitive truths expressed in the analogy. See, for instance, Yadin Dudai and Mary Carruthers’ brief article, “The Janus Face of Mnemosyne”, where they explain that, while they do not wish “to promote the erroneous brain biology of times past”, they do “wish to revitalize the intuition and insight of scholars who didn’t have powerful tools such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, and yet still wisely contemplated the global picture of the human mind. Their insights belong not only to the history of ideas, but are relevant to neuroscience today” (Dudai and Carruthers 2005, p. 567).

⁵ While the topic is outside the scope of my paper, these links of image, imagination, and memory can be found in multiple fields of research, including educational studies and cognitive neuroscience. For example, Walter Melion and Bart Ramaker’s study on personifications overviews how some of the advancements in neuroscience call into question modern, mechanistic understandings of the brain and instead reinforce the power of images, creativity, and embodiment in human development (Melion and Ramakers 2016). See also Jocelyn Penny Small’s *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy*

well. Laura-Lee Kearns, for instance, notes that “psychologists and philosophers today argue that it is precisely the imagination that enables ethical responses, that breaks us away from our narcissistic selves and allows for empathy and orients us toward the good” (Kearns 2015, p. 114). Atticus Finch’s famous advice to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* likewise affirms the need for the imagination in developing empathy, a key underlying component of moral character. He tells her, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it” (Lee 2002, p. 33). The imagination—whether in the form of visual images or story—draws a person out of the self. Iris Murdoch describes beauty, such as beauty of art and literature, as “an occasion for ‘unselfing’” (Murdoch 1999, p. 369). The imagination offers the means to experience and contemplate something outside the self and is therefore the impetus for developing the foundational dispositions of virtue formation. The beauty of images and stories creates spaces where that “unselfing” can occur; the imagination draws one outside of the self toward something external and other, metaphorically freeing the soul from closed, locked doors, and offering it up to be stamped, impressed, inscribed by something outside of the self.

Much like children learn by imitation, so too does virtue begin with imitation. Adam Willows suggests that developing virtue echoes the process of acquiring a technical skill or the practice of apprenticeship, in which students “may begin by copying the master, but ultimately develop their own ‘style’” (Willows 2017, p. 341). Students need models to imitate before they can creatively incorporate and embody the virtues. The first step to helping students become wise, then, is to provide them with a vision of what (or *who*) wisdom is.

Personifications of the virtues were a common feature in ancient and medieval culture, filling the walls and nooks of churches, universities, and civic spaces. Images of the virtues were not merely decorative, but played an important role in education and moral formation. These personifications both exposit the represented virtue and serve as a potential *kharaktēr* stamp; in other words, the image is there to explain and to imitate.⁶

A personification illustrates an abstract concept by giving it a specific form and identifying specific features that make the concept more memorable. If one cannot understand what prudence is, becoming prudent seems even more impossible. Prudence as a concept may be very difficult to identify and understand, but one can always find, meet, and intimately know Lady Prudence.

3. What (Who) Is Prudence? An Overview of Colombe’s Personification

To demonstrate how the personification of prudence can help develop the virtue of prudence in the classroom, I will discuss how I have adapted Lady Prudence into a pedagogical model for my Great Texts class. Prudence is considered the “charioteer of the virtues”, guiding “the other virtues by setting rule and measure” (Catholic Church 1995, sect. 7.1806). She leads the way and sets the course, instructing the other cardinal virtues, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice, on where to go and how to get there. Lady Prudence likewise acts as the charioteer of my Great Texts course: she is the guide who directs our studies, attention, and practices. She is the roadmap my students follow on their own journey to wisdom. In order to clarify how this works, I will first describe what I consider to be one of the most illustrative personifications of Prudence—as she appears in a sculpture by Michel

in Classical Antiquity (Small 2015). Additionally, practically any self-help book on memory includes tools that rely primarily on the imagination.

⁶ Flanigan’s research uses a medieval monk’s instruction on using a devotional image (Antoninus’s *Opera a Ben Vivere*) to explain how medieval thinkers understood the role of images in the formation of the soul. She highlights, for instance, Antoninus’s argument that images of the saints are not intended for worship, but to “impress their excellence on the minds” of the viewers (Flanigan 2014, p. 187). Using images and the imagination in one’s devotional life was a way of “training the intellect to juxtapose past historical exemplars (such as Christ’s suffering) and present situations (the current suffering of a neighbor), the result of which could be stored in the memory and applied to future decisions and actions (charity toward said neighbor)” (Flanigan 2014, p. 193). This type of “image-led affective meditation was therefore part of an ethical and social practice with the potential to contribute to the cultivation of virtue within the individual and for the good of the wider civic community” (Flanigan 2014, p. 193).

Colombe—explaining how the tangible qualities and features of this sculpture provide insight into the virtue of prudence.⁷ The front of the sculpture may be seen in Figure 1, which shows most of the sculpture’s details. Then, I will explain how this particular personification shapes the way I frame the course, our readings, and our practices.



Figure 1. Front view of Colombe’s Prudence.⁸

Colombe’s personification of Prudence acts as a touchstone throughout the class, so that as we read and discuss the texts, we continually relate back to this personification. We read from a variety of writers from different places and times, but the personification provides a bridge between all those works, a unified goal of seeking wisdom. The personification guides us as we consider how the authors we read define wisdom, what they suggest are the pathway(s) to wisdom, and how they enhance our own quest for wisdom.

Aquinas lists the integral parts of prudence, which include memory, understanding, docility, shrewdness, reason, foresight, circumspection, and caution (Aquinas 2013, 2B Q49). I provide this list to students the first week of classes and use the personification as a visual commentary to explain each of those parts of prudence.

Colombe’s Prudence holds an instrument in her hand, identified as either a caliper or a compass. Prudence’s historical iconography tends to conflate and interchange calipers, drawing compasses, and navigational compasses. Regardless of their official use, the iconographic function of these two objects symbolizes Prudence’s role as guide and her setting of proper measures. Prudence is the virtue that establishes the proper destination and the means necessary to arrive there. Though the instrument in Colombe’s Prudence is likely a caliper, for clarity, I will describe it as a compass to represent its dual function in measurement and navigation. Additionally, a compass has historically symbolized discernment, a fundamental goal of prudence.

Though considered a practical virtue rather than an intellectual one, prudence’s integral parts include reason, circumspection, and foresight. The word mind stems from the word measure in Latin,

⁷ My primary focus is on Colombe’s sculpture, but the sculpture reflects a fairly consistent iconography for personifications of Prudence. While there are, of course, variations, artists typically depict Lady Prudence with mirrors, snakes, and compasses. Artists depict her multiple faces less consistently, but the mirror is a suitable stand-in, because it still represents at least two faces—her face and its reflection.

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a fitting reminder of the classical understanding of reason as the proper ruler of the mind, which rules principally by ordering, measuring what, how much, and when action is due. The compass as a tool for measure, then, fits with reason as the means with which one determines the proper measure. Its use for drawing circles relates to circumspection, in that prudence accounts for the circumstances surrounding an issue. What might be good in one situation may not be good in another, nearly similar situation, so circumspection requires a careful look around, an assessing of the different factors, the outer circle, of circumstances surrounding a potential action. Prudence resists the tendency to simplify and categorize and instead seeks the truth, however complicated and messy it may be. Without a clear and accurate vision of a problem, one can become like a hunter shooting arrows in the fog, able to hit big, easy targets, but likely to miss if the target is small, moving, or otherwise challenging. What is more, cloudy vision may result in striking an unintended target, potentially causing great harm. A compass' ability to draw lines between one point and another fits well with foresight, which looks ahead to and plans for the future. A compass draws logical lines between one point and the next, a fitting metaphor for how prudence must use foresight to consider how to plan for the future today and how to evaluate potential consequences of today's action.

Lurking by Prudence's feet is a snake. This snake may feel like a threat, a harbinger of evil, but when associated with prudence, it is a sign of cleverness or shrewdness. Matthew 10:16 commands readers to be as "shrewd as snakes".⁹ The shrewd, cunning wisdom of a snake may seem duplicitous or deceptive, but when linked to prudence, it connotes the creativity and resourcefulness necessitated by difficult, complex situations. When faced with a choice between A and B, a cunning person may devise a much more appealing choice C. Shrewdness also weighs which universal moral principles may or may not apply to the circumstances and assesses moral conflicts, so that when two moral principles cannot simultaneously be followed, a prudent person can carefully analyze the situation and determine how best to act.¹⁰ Legalism wishes to reduce complex situations into simple black and white dichotomies in which universal rules are applied in universal ways. However, Prudence acknowledges that the world is messy and complex and that particular situations often create conflicts that make simultaneously upholding all universal principles impossible. Prudence is about the right measure and the right action at the right time, and while slow, methodical thinking may be required at times, shrewdness helps a person quickly size up a particular situation when timeliness is of particular concern. A cunning, quick-thinking person is better equipped to navigate difficult conflicts and find creative solutions. Conversely, the snake may also represent caution. Though one cannot predict every possible snag or surprise, proceeding with caution may prevent an accidental step on a nest of vipers. Reckless, hasty decisions typically create more problems than cautious, careful decisions. Sometimes circumstances necessitate a quick decision, therefore requiring shrewdness, but often they require meticulous, careful planning. A cautious approach may help prepare for hidden dangers.

Colombe's Prudence holds the compass in one hand, but her attention is held by the mirror in her other hand. She does not gaze into the mirror to appease her vanity and check that every hair is in place, however. She is also not necessarily concerned that her decision will look good to onlookers. Instead, the mirror she holds primarily represents the importance of self-reflection. Wisdom begins with self-knowledge: one must "know thyself" by truthfully accounting for one's weaknesses, strengths, impulses, and inclinations. If circumspection evaluates the circumstances surrounding an issue, the starting point must be the truthful evaluation of the self. Without self-knowledge and reflection, one cannot set prudent goals. It would be imprudent, for instance, for a tone-deaf man to quit his job and become a professional singer, no matter how much he loves singing. That is not to say skills cannot be developed, nor that the prudent person only chooses a path solely reliant upon one's strengths. However, honest self-reflection acknowledges areas that may need growth and therefore

⁹ Serpents or snakes are interchangeable, and translations vary. The Greek word is *textgreek{ὄφεις}*.

¹⁰ An extreme (and admittedly overused) example of this conflict happened in World War II, where some citizens chose to lie so that they could protect Jewish lives from the Nazi persecution.

looks for opportunities to practice docility, seeking ways, methods, and advisors to help address gaps in one's own skills or knowledge. That type of docile, self-reflection may lead to changed behaviors and habits. If a student, for instance, reflects on the process of her work and realizes that she receives poor grades when she procrastinates and better grades when she plans ahead, identifying those patterns of behavior would be the first step to her changing, growing, and making better decisions.

Most of the objects associated with Prudence may seem unexpected, but the biggest surprise hides behind Prudence's beautiful, youthful face—for she actually has two faces, and the other is that of a bearded, wrinkled man (see Figure 2).¹¹ "Two-faced" typically signifies duplicitousness or hypocrisy, but Prudence's two faces warn viewers about the dangers of chronological snobbery. Wisdom requires assessing present-day situations carefully and diligently, but in order to do so, the prudent person must invite, attend to, and account for the past, here represented by the old man of memory. The old man represents personal memory and experience, in that wisdom considers what has worked and what has not, but it also represents cultural memory and experience. A single person cannot, due to constraints of time and space, experience enough on one's own to become truly wise. Drawing upon the ancient stores of cultural memory—upon human history—provides a wealth of experiences beyond one's own limited lifespan and enables an individual person to oscillate from seeing with the eyes of a single, limited perspective to the eyes of history, which represent a vast, diverse multiplicity of views and experiences. Prudence turns to cultural memory, carefully considering what was deemed so worth remembering that it was passed down from and through the ages. It asks what wise and foolish people of the past have done when facing a similar decision or problem and considers the consequences of those decisions. However, Prudence's other face, the youthful, female face, reminds us that foresight prepares not only for today, but also for tomorrow. Prudence looks beyond the current age and seeks the good of the next generation, recognizing that actions today may limit or enlarge tomorrow's world.



Figure 2. Side view of Colombe's Prudence.¹²

¹¹ While it would take a separate study to investigate fully, gender representations in the personification of prudence provoke interesting avenues of inquiry. Typically, personifications of virtues are female, because the Latin words for the virtues are female. Prudence, on the other hand, has a gender fluidity not often seen in the other virtues. She is most often depicted as a single female (with a mirror to represent her "second face") but has also appeared as a male, such as in Titian's "Allegory of Prudence". Colombe's sculpture is particularly rare in its combination of the female and male face.

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4. Adopting Lady Prudence into a Pedagogical Model

4.1. Prudence as a Contextual Frame

In my Great Texts course, Colombe's personification of Prudence serves as a pedagogical model both for contextual framework building and for developing particular classroom practices and assignments. In our cultural moment of clickbait headlines, 24-h news cycles, and constantly refreshing social media, convincing students of the value of carefully studying lasting, treasured texts from several hundred generations past can be challenging. Students sometimes see the class as nothing more than a requirement and expect to get nothing out of these "old" texts that "have nothing to do with" them. They may question how studying a work written in the 8th century BC could possibly be "relevant" to their lives.¹³ We have found a multitude of ways to diminish the ideas and personhood of people who are not like us, and the voices of the past, with their wildly different culture, way of writing, and approach to the world, can certainly feel "other". The model of prudence, however, emphasizes the value of these cultural storehouses of wisdom and the important tradition of passing them down from generation to generation.

Typically, the storehouse of wisdom—the form it took as one generation transmitted it to the next—was storytelling. These treasures of wisdom were considered far more valuable than any other type of treasure. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, for instance, considered by many to be the earliest work of literature we have, begins by telling the reader that the story they are about to read ought to be kept in a jewel-covered box, for its contents are far more precious than the rare stones that adorn it (Mitchell 2006). Likewise, in a short telling of a Native American legend, "The Storytelling Stone", a young boy discovers a stone that tells him stories. The boy, and eventually the entire village, sacrifices food to the stone so that it will share its stories. The storytelling stone instructs all those listening to preserve and pass on these stories to each new generation (Blackfoot Tribe 1999). Sharing wisdom through stories, both *Gilgamesh* and "The Storytelling Stone" profess, is more important than money, working, and even food.

In this digital age of easily accessible book summaries and study notes, I start by emphasizing the importance of reading the texts themselves. Simply the act of reading and thinking about classic texts helps cultivate several integral parts of prudence, particularly memory, docility, reasoning, and circumspection.

One of the most integral parts of prudence is memory, or experience. However, no matter how adventurous or productive a person may be, one's perspective and experiences are inherently limited. Prudence cannot rely only upon one's own experiences, but must study and learn from the experiences of others, as well. Texts of the past—and the imaginative situations, characters, and consequences they depict—enhance our memory by allowing us to inhabit other experiences and perspectives. A prudent person adopts a posture of humility and a willingness to understand and appreciate the works previous generations deemed so beautiful and wise that they worked to ensure those stories were preserved and passed on to future generations.

This attention to the past serves as a practice of docility, of a willingness to accept counsel and consider positions different from one's own. Following Socrates's revelation that he is the wisest man alive because he knows that he knows nothing, prudence recognizes one's own limitations. Practicing docility by reading helps develop intellectual humility in the encounter of ideas and experiences far removed from one's own. Aquinas says prudence requires us to "carefully, frequently, and reverently apply [the] mind to the teachings of the learned, neither neglecting them through laziness, nor despising

¹³ I have written about reading practices I believe are important for counteracting some of these kinds of attitudes and approaches toward texts in a previous article, "Using Formative Assessments to Form Christian Readers" (Davis 2019). It details other ways I have adopted monastic educational practices into the classroom.

them through pride” (Aquinas 2013, 2B 49, a 3 ad 2). Looking to the past not to judge it, but to learn from it, is a simple but key disposition prudence requires of us.

Wisdom recognizes that other people—from different places and different times—have wisdom to share. With our increasingly polarized positions comes easy dismissals of perspectives that differ from our own, and the wide availability of media outlets has produced echo chambers that further entrench a singular perspective and enable people to avoid regularly encountering ideas or understandings of the world that do not correspond with their own. Because I teach at a Christian liberal arts university, most students who enter my Great Texts classroom come from a Christian background—and even more specifically, from a conservative Christian evangelical background. Many of them have been taught to be suspicious of non-Christian books, thinkers, and media. Students begin class, then, with a great deal of skepticism: not only are these writers “outdated and irrelevant”, but even worse for many students, they are not even Christian. Framing the class as an exercise in prudence opens an opportunity to explain to students that studying and adapting ancient wisdom is rooted in the Christian tradition itself and that even the virtue of prudence itself was borrowed from classical thinkers and incorporated into Christianity.

Great books also allow students to develop reason and circumspection in analyzing fictional conflict. The fictional narrative provides a low-risk, safe space to weigh decisions, draw conclusions, and test theories and thus can function as a particularly fitting training ground for developing prudence. Similar to how a general may study past battles and war strategies as a way to prepare for real battle, so too can students study conflicts in literature as a preparation for the conflicts of life. Good literature provides no easy answers and requires readers to sit longer—both with the book itself and with the problem(s) or tension it proposes—than is typical in today’s world of tweets and headlines. The text itself challenges a reader and develops one’s ability to follow patterns, themes, and storylines through twists, turns, and sometimes confusing language. Venturing beyond this surface-level understanding through discussion and careful re-readings equips them to see complexity and nuance as they navigate the text’s multiple layers.

Sophocles’ *Antigone* (Sophocles 1984) serves as a fitting example to help illuminate how the simple act of reading and discussing a great text can develop parts of the virtue of prudence. As students read *Antigone*, they witness a complex, life-and-death conflict and contemplate the questions it raises without its high-stakes risks. The play’s central conflict reveals one of the hardest truths about prudence: universal moral principles cannot be applied to all situations at all times and may even be contradictory. For instance, both Creon’s and Antigone’s decisions stem, at least in part, from their pursuit of justice, in that Creon’s actions are intended to unify and protect his vulnerable city and Antigone’s to honor and protect her dead brother. These pursuits of justice clash with one another, for here, what is just for an individual may unintentionally cause great injustice for the wider city. Both individual and collective justice are equally important in definitions of justice, but the play demonstrates just how difficult it is to honor both. Students, however, overwhelmingly tend to side with Antigone when they first read it, which opens an important question about context. Once students realize the ancient Greek audience would likely have had much greater sympathy for Creon’s initial desire to protect the city, they better recognize that their own background—typically one shaped by an individualistic American narrative—shapes how they read the text, giving them a small glimpse of their own filtered lens and the way it shapes their view of the world. Students also trace the motives and consequences of the characters’ speeches and decisions, weighing whether, when, and how the tragedy may have been prevented. Prudence determines the right action at the right time and with the right measure, and this play allows us to question, for instance, whether Antigone and Creon may both have had the right action but with the wrong measure or time and how the results may have been different if Antigone and Creon had accepted counsel. Finally, students weigh how this play, written many centuries ago, still shines a mirror on contemporary problems, such as our own political polarizations and the way impassioned pursuits of a single good may result in the neglect or harm of other goods.

Cultural storehouses of memory such as *Antigone* may not provide universal, or even particular, answers to the problems they pose, but they incite a journey toward deeper understanding. By offering a mix of characters who demonstrate both prudent and imprudent actions, literature provides students with exemplars to add to their store of memory, so that they may draw upon a large wealth of experience when weighing options and thinking about what might be helpful to try and what would be good to avoid. Increasing one's arsenal of experiences by adding those borrowed from fiction and history to one's own personal experiences improves the odds that one (or multiple) of those experiences will inform a particular problem or situation and provide insight or context, therefore increasing the likelihood of a prudent decision.

4.2. Prudence as Practices

As prudence is practical wisdom, it is fitting to propose tangible, pedagogical practices to complement any theoretical framework. I connect each of the parts of Colombe's *Lady Prudence* to a particular classroom practice. In touching upon each of her features, I want to focus on particular classroom practices, but at the same time, unify the various pieces of prudence I addressed earlier. My hope is that, like the personification of Prudence herself, the different features will come together in a unified form—that the scattered dots will connect to form a clear picture of prudence.

Lady Prudence's aged face represents memory, an integral part of prudence that is the easiest to practice, especially in a classroom setting.¹⁴ Memory may be developed in several ways. I relate Prudence's aged face to cultural memory and the wisdom passed down through classic texts. I also explain the ancient tradition of oral storytelling and the ancient and medieval practice of memorizing texts as a way to inscribe words of wisdom into the soul. Engaging with these texts is, as I noted earlier, itself a practice in developing memory, but I require students to practice memorization, as well. Modern-day education has largely abandoned memorizing texts, but ancient and medieval thinkers considered memorization a fundamental part of the fashioning of one's character—one's soul.

I incorporate two different memorization practices. The first is carried out daily. The second is a longer, more comprehensive project with a performative aspect. For the daily practice, students select one line to memorize as they read the text and prepare for class. I leave the assignment parameters fairly open, telling students simply to look for lines they find especially beautiful, wise, or otherwise significant. Then, they cite them at the beginning of class, as part of our roll call. This practice may seem small, and it does not require much class time, but it has had a substantial impact. Saying lines out loud provides a space for other students to hear and appreciate the beauty and power of the text, and students have frequently noted that searching for a quote worthy to memorize makes them engage more actively and deeply with the text; it provides a sense of creativity and ownership in the reading process and makes them more invested in it. Finally, this practice also aids class discussion, because all students come ready to contribute and analyze at least one piece of evidence from the text.

The second memorization practice requires students to identify a passage of about 15 lines, or around 150 words, to memorize. I again tell students that the passage they select should be one they find particularly meaningful and significant. Students then must perform their memorized passage in a way that illuminates the passage and makes it come alive. I tell students to think about the details of the performance: the location they choose, the clothes they wear, their facial expressions, their bodily posture and gestures, and the speed, tone, and emphasis of their speech. I emphasize that the point of this exercise is not to rattle off the words in a fast monotone, but to inhabit the text. They explain their process and choices in a short paper and have often noted that contemplating the ways written dialogue changes when delivered with sarcasm or sincerity, hesitancy or certainty, made them rethink characters' words and actions more carefully. This memorization practice powerfully imprints the text

¹⁴ Aquinas appears to have felt the same way, in that memory is the only integral part of prudence that he provides specific, practical steps for developing.

upon students because it requires full, bodily participation. They are, in a sense, becoming the text, a significant step that echoes the imprinting process of prudence, wherein its *kharaktēr* stamp impresses wisdom upon one's character.

Students tend to assume that ancient texts are divorced from today's reality, but Prudence's mirror acts as an impetus for students to reflect on how these ancient texts, though they are far removed in time and place, reveal us to ourselves. George Bernard Shaw famously wrote that "you use a glass mirror to see your face: you use works of art to see your soul" (Shaw 2010, p. 527), and sometimes, art may show us what we might prefer to keep hidden. Ovid's depiction of Envy in his poem about Mercury, Herse, and Aglaurous, for instance, helps students to identify patterns and consequences of the vice. Envy feeds off venomous snakes and "is herself her own punishment" (Ovid 2010, p. 58), a description we connect to social media by comparing it, for example, to the self-inflicted poisoning of looking at photo after photo of an ex looking happy with a new girlfriend; this poison hurts her rather than her ex, yet she continues to feed herself with it. Granted, these types of applications can go overboard and derail conversations, but leading some discussions that ask students to self-reflect on how they relate to characters or how the work has taught them something about their own habits, attitudes, and inclinations impresses upon students that "old" does not mean "irrelevant". It also aids them in identifying characteristics—such as the vice of envy—they may typically want to hide or hide from. Students may easily judge characters such as Creon or Odysseus, but with self-reflection and context, may recognize the ways they, too, share the same faults they condemn in others. Prudence's mirror requires gazing truthfully at the self and acknowledging both the good and the bad. Great books help shine the mirror of self-reflection on all its hidden beauty and ugliness.

Prudence's snake, and its association with cunning, connects with the creative projects I assign. Storing up all the experiences and cultural wisdom in the world would still not make a person prudent if that person lacked the creativity to apply and adapt those memories to present situations. Creative projects ask students to create something new still clearly rooted in the wisdom of the past (i.e., the course texts). In other words, students apply what they have learned to something new. Students may work within a wide variety of forms or genres, and they have turned in a wide variety of projects: paintings, sculptures, videos, collages, jewelry, costumes, woodworking, etc. Students have even created board games and recipes.

Prudence's compass reminds students to look carefully at the potential impact and consequences a decision may have by circumspectly examining a situation and considering it from multiple angles. Evaluating a problem from a single point severely limits perspective. The compass requires a wide circle of understanding, tracing decisions forward and consequences backward. The *Odyssey* (Homer 2000) is a particularly fitting text to practice the tracing of a compass. It begins with Odysseus, after losing all his men and ships and delayed nearly a decade from returning home, and then gradually unravels the story of how this sad fate came to pass. In the process of reading his version of the story, students trace the consequences of each stage of his journey and question Odysseus's accusations against fate, especially after digging more carefully into Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus and the resulting curse. Tracing these events, and providing a broader sense of the context behind decisions, cultural values, and traditions, helps students move beyond evaluating a situation or circumstances only by considering a single, set point and, instead, to identify cause and effect, complex networks of relationships, and inciting actions, influences, and consequences. Prudence requires a breadth and depth of understanding, and reading with the symbol of the compass in mind encourages students to practice thinking beyond the immediate, particular moment.

5. Conclusions

Artistic personifications of Prudence give wisdom a face and, in doing so, help us know her with an intimacy conceptual knowledge could never achieve on its own. Perhaps by seeing a virtue embodied, students will be better able to embody the virtue.

While this paper focuses on just one particular virtue and one personification of it, this type of model can easily be adapted and expanded. Universities already dabble in the imaginative arts, but they tend to be focused on creating a marketing brand or sports fans: a powerful imaginative appeal and sense of shared identity stem, for instance, from a university's mascot, colors, traditions, and pep songs. However, the imagination is often neglected when it comes to the true heart of the university's educational mission. The classroom, too, needs conscientious efforts to find persuasive, imaginative visions of education that can act as a model to unify the university's faculty, staff, and students in its shared mission. If universities truly aim for a holistic education and have a desire to shape character as well as the mind, to instill wisdom in addition to professional preparation, they need to ignite the imagination by casting a tangible, concrete vision—preferably a physical, literal one.

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