Lessing Yearbook

XXV

1993

Edited for the Lessing Society
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[University of Cincinnati]

Wayne State University Press  Detroit


The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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Lying somewhere between Cicero and Ann Landers, Quintillian and Miss Manners, Knigge’s Über den Umgang mit Menschen is part of the Enlightenment project of defining goodness not only in abstract terms but in daily life. In writing his treatise, Knigge combines knowledge of the philosophical and rhetorical tradition with experience and empirical insights. The book is less a treatise on etiquette and manners [though these do play a subordinate role than an attempt to offer practical wisdom on the conduct of life. The present edition, prepared by Karl-Heinz Göttert, follows the fifth and final version of the text from 1796 (the first edition was published in 1788). It contains extensive and intelligent annotations, which focus on intellectual precursors, contemporary affi- liations, and differences in the versions (the third version contains the most substantial revisions, the fifth adds only a few). Göttert has also prepared a helpful afterword.

The book, which is more encyclopedic than systematic, is divided into three parts. After an introduction that justifies the enterprise in the context of the thedocy (even good persons suffer, but if they follow the correct precepts, they should suffer less [14]), Knigge offers general insights into human conduct and then deals with duties toward oneself and relations with persons of uneven temperaments. The second section discusses persons of different age, marriage partners, lovers, women, friends, masters and servants, landlords and neighbors, hosts and guests, magistrates, teachers and students, debtors and creditors, as well as an array of specifics from travel to dance. Part three deals with the question of class, beginning with royalty and the wealthy and passing through various occupations, religious groups, members of secret societies, and concluding with animals and a section on writers and readers.

The lack of a clear systematic progression or concept weakens the work, as do the tapeworn sentences and the dry progression from one topic to the next. Knigge’s volume is one of the most eclectic works one will ever read purposes, for every hundred pages worth of insights, at times the going is slow and pedestrian. Anyone who has studied thematically similar texts by Cicero and Marcus Aurelius cannot help but notice the drop in style and elegance.

Knigge’s bits of wisdom are not always profound or original, for example, the maxim that one should not fall asleep during sermons or talk during concerts [63]. Nevertheless, a substantial number of astute observations and everyday tips are still relevant, ranging from the elevation of other-directed discourse (22–23) to the best way to get to know another culture when traveling (227). Other comments are dated because of history or ideology. At times the datedness renders the book valuable to the historian, but it also adds to the book’s charm, as it weighs such anachronistic questions as: Toward which side should men withdraw their hats? [68] How do we best avoid being robbed by our servants? [36–37]? What is the proper response to the landlord’s trick question, "What would you like for dinner?" [278]? Is it preferable to travel by foot or by horse? [367]? Why should we not give gifts to priests? [367]? Though these topics are today amusing, the work itself is far more didactic than it is witty. Irony is rare, if not fully absent [151–52]. Substantial ideological problems arise primarily with Knigge’s comments on women [170, 192–209, 218] and his discussion of Jews [173, 252, 386–89].

The general intention of the book is sound. Because Germany is not a nation, and because it is not a land of equals, region and class often obstruct human interaction. Knigge seeks to help readers overcome the obstacles that prevent their developing contacts with persons who are superficially different [15–23]. He argues we should get beyond the notion of thinking our own sphere superior and learn the tools of dealing with others. Humility should triumph over the superiority of class, region, or area of interest. Although manners clearly have for some of their codifiers the purpose of facilitating better relations across diverse groups and cultures, it is ironic that what is often remembered as the essence of manners are the arbitrary conventions and customs that seem to separate different groups and generations.

Knigge works with the Aristotelian notion of the golden mean; the rhetorical tradition of vir bonus and decoreum; and the French theory of conversation. He then
adds to those philosophical sources a commonsensical eye for what is just and what works well. He does not seek to defend his views with any substantial theoretical foundation, but wants simply to pass on what is manifestly effective in relations with others and oneself. He proffers the tricks and tips he himself wishes he had commanded when he was younger. For the most part these follow Enlightenment ideals of autonomy, modesty, reticence, {tolerance}, and consistency of action. Certain precepts, such as the elevation of endurance [Standhaftigkeit] [83], reveal traces of earlier eras.

Among the highlights are Knige's insistence on the universal value of civility [no one, however great, should be exempted [12], the critique of self-pity, especially in public varieties [83, 183, 264]; the admonition not to destroy others' beliefs unless one has something better to offer [55]; the idea of elucidating duties toward oneself, which seems to have lost any relevance in the contemporary era of individual rights and intersubjective duties [81–85], the suggestion that one deal gently with the insane and, thereby, avoid pushing them deeper into their problems [125–27], the view that younger marriage partners may choose with less wisdom than their older counterparts but compensate with greater adaptability [159]; a recognition of the eloquence behind certain non-verbal gestures [189]; a paean to friendship forged in youth [210–11] and a discussion of the role of symmetry in friendship [212]; an analysis of the proximity of discontent and paranoia [262–63]; the whole discussion of travel, which is informative in its historical details [271–82]; and a limited discussion of the rights of animals [406–09].

Certain sections have intellectual-historical significance. Knige's brief critique of Kant, which he develops further in his last major work Über Eigennutz und Un dank, is among the soundest passages [267]. Though Knige fails to grasp the legitimacy of Kant's moral philosophy as the only tenable ground of ethics, he does see the need to expand Kant's theory in terms of motivation. In this sense Knige's critique fits nicely in the Schiller-to-Scheler tradition of Kant criticism. The scholar of German literature will enjoy hearing in the background the battle of Enlightenment and Storm and Stress literature (not surprisingly, Knige prefers the former) as well as the emerging views of German Klassik [121–23, 193, 362]. Knige's work can also be seen in relation to Schleiermacher's Tagebuch und his Versuch einer Theorie des geselligen Betragens, which was partially conceived as a response to Knige and takes the Enlightenment thinker to task for overly schematizing human relations and doing so with instrumental ends in mind, whereas Schleiermacher champions a more elevated and wholistic approach to human relations, developing an idea of free and reciprocal relations as ends in themselves.

Sections of Knige's book might make interesting reading for introductory classes on Enlightenment. Scholars will profit from the availability of the full text and the intelligent annotations.

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LA ROCHE, SOPHIE VON, The History of Lady Sophia Sternheim. Trans. and with a critical introduction by Christa Baguss Britt.


After Lawler and Richardson's translation of Dorothea Velt-Schlegel's novel Florentin (1968) and Blackwell and Zantor's English anthology Bitter Healing (1990), Britt's translation is the most recent attempt in an important project: to make the works of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women in Germany available to the English reader. Britt's competent rendition of one of the most popular eighteenth-century German novels is the third English translation [after Joseph Collyer's and Edward Harwood's, both 1776], but constitutes the only usable one, since both of the older translations took considerable liberties with the text and are virtually unavail-