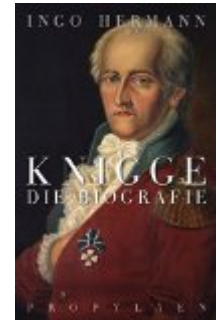


Ingo Hermann. *Knigge: Die Biographie.* Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 2007. 386 pp. EUR 35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-549-07260-8.



Reviewed by Paul E. Kerry

Published on H-German (November, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

With a book heavily focused on the contemporary relevance of its subject, Ingo Hermann sets out to change the reputation of Adolph Freiherr von Knigge (1752-96), whose name is an eponym in Germany for etiquette. This association stems from his well-known *Über den Umgang mit Menschen* (1788). Hermann also wants to recast Knigge for those who see him as a liberal activist associated with secret societies, but not necessarily as a contributor to the rich philosophical discussions of the late German Enlightenment.

The first half of Hermann's popular biography, based on Knigge's published works and a selective sampling of scholarly sources, sketches his subject's peripatetic life. The chapters are all short, some as little as two pages. Constant breaks in narrative seem to convey Knigge's life on the move as a minor aristocrat in search of a court post. Hermann's book strings together vignettes of the stations of Knigge's life and relays them in a conversational tone, all the while providing spec-

ulative access into the states of mind of Knigge and his parents.

Knigge's father's alchemical experiments failed to stave off growing debt, and so the family estate was eventually turned over to its creditors to operate, thus constraining Knigge to search for financial stability throughout his life. After legal studies at the University of Göttingen, Knigge joined the freemasons and accepted a minor appointment with minimal salary in Kassel in 1771. Owing to his naïveté, he became entangled in court intrigue and, Hermann informs us, was manipulated into marrying Henriette von Baumbach on account of a practical joke gone wrong. The couple had one daughter (Philippine) and welcomed a foster daughter (Franziska) into their home. Earlier accounts have suggested that the marriage thrived; nevertheless, Hermann does his best to insinuate that Henriette had a tendency to nag, Philippine was strangely neglectful of her father's literary legacy, and Franziska was once the source of a family fracas.

After a botched attempt to seek a position at the Prussian court of Frederick II, Knigge set his eye on Weimar, where he encountered Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and was granted an honorary title, but no paid job. As the decade progressed, he continued to be involved in freemasonry and was deeply interested in its historical origins, as well as its symbolism and rituals, as several of his essays testify. In Wolfenbüttel, Knigge met Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose play, *Emilia Galotti* (1772) he had reviewed positively. Hermann argues that it was Lessing's emphasis on the Enlightenment view of a shared humanity in freemasonry, rather than its ceremonial shell, that began to alter Knigge's view of it.

1780 marked a turning point for Knigge. He moved his family to Frankfurt am Main and devoted himself to literary and journalistic pursuits. He was accepted into Adam Weishaupt's Order of the Illuminati and, according to Hermann, saw in the space and structure of secret societies possibilities for political reform. His growing popularity and grandiose aim to unify freemasonry with the Illuminati implicitly challenged Weishaupt's leadership, and Knigge was forced out of the order. Again on the move, Knigge settled his family in Heidelberg.

The second half of the book focuses on the final twelve years of Knigge's life. Hermann interprets these years largely through the lens of Knigge's fiction, including *Geschichte Peter Clausens* (1783) and *Josephs von Wurmbrand politisches Glaubensbekenntniss* (1792). Knigge's satiric pen embroiled him in controversy of one kind or another for the remainder of his days, even as his health declined. He not only parodied minor figures, but criticized the pedagogy of Joachim Heinrich Campe and the guru status of Johann Kaspar Lavater. Knigge was labeled a Jacobin because of his strong public sympathy for the French Revolution, despite its terror. After he finally found a position as a civil administrator in Bremen, just six years before his death, he never-

theless became ensnared in the machinations of the Viennese police and came under the suspicion of high military officials in Hanover.

Hermann's biography shines light on lesser known facets of Knigge's life, such as his pedagogical writings, his musical compositions, his translation of the libretto to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (1786), and his role in fostering amateur theater in Bremen. Hermann is keen to show that Knigge was connected to the intellectual discourse of the late eighteenth century. He asserts the influence of Laurence Sterne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, describes Knigge's admiration of Friedrich Schiller (the playwright invited Knigge to the Mannheim opening of *Kabale und Liebe* [1784]), and suggests that Knigge's ideas can be linked to those of Immanuel Kant. Yet, the biography often does not reach a deeper level of analysis (although it comes closer when considering Schleiermacher) or produce evidence for its assertions other than quotations by Knigge.

Hermann is at his most insightful in showing that *Über den Umgang mit Menschen* is far more than a manual on manners; instead, it offers a sophisticated response to the fragmented Holy Roman Empire and the multiplicity of mores in the Germanic lands. According to Hermann, it presents a secularized, enlightened ethos, a new religion of humanity, and ought to be placed in the context of similar cultural projects such as Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780) and Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), as well as earlier work on polite conversation. Hermann describes Knigge's project as an anthropological model of communication that combined the essentially aristocratic concept of "Anstand," or decency in human relationships, with the democratic concept of equality. This model would facilitate diversity in a community by fostering a shared sense of social values and promulgating a meritocracy. This element makes Knigge's contribution all the more relevant to modern Germany, as Hermann spirit-

edly contends. He opines that signs have appeared of egocentricity replacing socially responsible and considerate behavior, and detects an alarming lack of a common understanding as to why certain community occasions might require formal responses in, say, comportment, demeanor, or dress. Hermann laments the erosion of shared values in Germany surrounding what it means to be decent and civil. This is what Hermann's *Knigge* is called on to remedy, reflecting Hermann's belief that eighteenth-century conceptions of coexistence in a community may yet be crucially productive in our times.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Paul E. Kerry. Review of Hermann, Ingo. *Knigge: Die Biographie*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25677>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.