

Adolph von Knigge, Criticism of the Aristocratic, Courtly Lifestyle (1790)

Abstract

The author and Enlightenment philosopher Adolph (von) Knigge (1752–1796) came from the Lower Saxon nobility. He was employed at various princely courts and worked as a writer. He eventually became well known for his book *Über den Umgang mit Menschen*, portions of which were translated into English as early as 1799 and published under the title *Practical Philosophy of Social Life, or, the Art of Conversing with Men*. The book aimed to create a “new person” to serve as the model and benchmark for an Enlightenment-oriented society. In this passage, Knigge criticizes aristocratic courtly culture as superficial, uneducated, immoderate, and wholly lacking in inner values, useful knowledge, and purposeful work.

Source

Third Chapter

On Relations with Courtiers and Their Like

I am summarizing here observations about relations with courtiers and such persons in general who live in the so-called “world of high society” and have adopted its tone. Unfortunately, this tone, which princes and members of the upper class of the type I described in the first chapter of this section use and spread, is aped by all the classes that make some claim to a superior lifestyle. Removal from nature; indifference to the first and sweetest human ties; derision of simplicity, innocence, purity, and the most sacred of feelings; shallowness; destruction or grinding down of any characteristic mannerisms and originality; lack of thorough, truly useful knowledge; in its place on the other hand, insolence, persiflage, impertinence, garrulousness, inconsistency, imitative babbling; coldness toward anything that is good, noble, and great; prodigality; intemperance; unchastity; spinelessness; foppery; fickleness; frivolousness; tasteless arrogance; the splendor of frippery as a mask for mendicancy; poor household management; obsession with rank and titles; prejudices of all kinds; dependency on the views of despots and patrons; slavish groveling to get something; flattery of the person whose help is needed, but also neglect of the worthy person who cannot help; sacrifice even of the most sacred to achieve one’s ends; falseness; disloyalty; dissimulation; failure to honor oaths; gossip-mongering; intriguing; malicious pleasure; blasphemy; anecdote pursuit; ridiculous manners, customs, and habits—those are some of the delightful things that our men and women, our sons and daughters learn from the gracious court riff-raff. Those are the studies from which the high-toned people take their education. Wherever this tone prevails true merit is not just ignored but as much as possible trampled underfoot, suppressed, pushed back by empty heads, obscured, mocked. [There is] no greater triumph for a vapid court lackey than when he humiliates a man of decided value whose superiority he secretly feels, catches him failing to engage in a more conventionally refined lifestyle, and, by the way in which he calls attention to this, or by the fact that he speaks to him in a language or on subjects about which the man knows nothing, can cause the latter to become confused and show himself in a skewed light. No greater triumph for the petite-maîtresse (fashionable woman) than when she can present an honest woman endowed with true inner and outer merits and worth from a ludicrous side in a company of worldly people. All of that must be expected when mixing with people of that class. We should not be upset when something of that sort happens to us and should not get grey hair about it afterwards. Otherwise, a person will not have a moment of peace, and will be perpetually agitated by thousands of emotions, especially ambition and vanity. However, there are three ways to avoid all

these uncomfortable circumstances: one can either approach the high-society world unselfconsciously or continues in it along one's own straight path without allowing oneself to be troubled by these follies, or finally, one studies the tone of that world and, to the extent that it can be done without betraying one's character, howls with the wolves.

[....]

Source: Adolph Freiherr von Knigge, "Über den Umgang mit Hofleuten und ihresgleichen," in Adolph Freiherr von Knigge, *Über den Umgang mit Menschen*. Third part. Third revised and expanded edition. Hannover: im Verlag bey Christian Ritscher, 1790, pp. 48–51. Available online at: <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/details/bsb10041018>

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