


## ARTICLE

# Buying Patience: Ordering and Purchasing Wedding Jewellery and Furniture through Intimate Networks during Eighteenth-Century Mercantile Marriage Initiation and Preparation

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## Abstract

This article deals with the practice of buying wedding jewellery and furniture for a new home during mercantile marriage initiation in the eighteenth century. At the centre of the paper is the act of marriage initiation between the Hamburg burgher's daughter Ilsabe Engelhardt and wholesale merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, who travelled France in the two years preceding his marriage. Luetkens postponed the marriage several times in order to finish business in France. As a compensation, Ilsabe Engelhardt instructed him to buy precious jewellery and valuable furniture. In order to comply with her requests, and to do so as quietly as possible, Luetkens had to mobilise their intimate network of close confidants in London and Amsterdam, who helped him to purchase the precious items.

**Keywords:** Merchants; Letters; Marriage; Intimate Networks; Practices

During the eighteenth century, one of the most important steps in the initiation and preparation for marriage among mercantile circles was the practice of buying wedding jewellery and valuable furniture for a new home. Indeed, during the entire early modern period, the practice of exchanging objects and love tokens in the course of initiating a marriage was “a key way for courting couples to negotiate the path to matrimony.”<sup>1</sup> At the heart of this article is the marriage between the Hamburg burgher's daughter Ilsabe Engelhardt and the wholesale merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, also Hamburg born.

Marriage was a decisive juncture in the life of early modern merchants and their wives.<sup>2</sup> It represented the home stretch of a merchant's establishment phase and heralded

<sup>1</sup> Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 69. Regarding courtship and marriage initiation, called *Eheanbahnung* in German, see Anette Baumann, “Eheanbahnung und Partnerwahl,” in *Venus und Vulcanus. Ehen und ihre Konflikte in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Siegrid Westphal, Inken Schmidt-Voges, and Anette Baumann (Munich: Oldenburg Verlag, 2011), 25–86; Dena Goodman, “Marriage Calculations in the Eighteenth Century: Deconstructing the Love vs. Duty Binary,” *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 33 (2005): 146–62; Heide Wunder, *He Is the Sun, She Is the Moon: Women in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37–62.

<sup>2</sup> See David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community: 1735–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 245; Richard Grassby, *The Business Community of Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 303–5; Peter Earle, *The Making of the*

a new chapter in a merchant's life: becoming a settled merchant who had started a family with his wife. Marriage in commercial circles in the eighteenth century often meant the merger of two merchant families.<sup>3</sup> Not only did such mergers create requisite financial resources through the dowry and the merging of capital; they also expanded the involved families' commercial networks and business opportunities, thus ensuring the continuity of the families and their businesses. Marriage often also set the course for social advancement, since it was a key to increasing one's opportunities.<sup>4</sup> "Marriage made people kin, and ink put that kinship to economic use."<sup>5</sup> Thus, marriage was oftentimes the basis for the foundation of a new merchant house, as was the case for Luetkens's marriage. In November 1745, just after his wedding with Ilsabe, he opened the merchant house Luetkens & Engelhardt in Hamburg, together with his new brother-in-law.

Understanding the marriage patterns and practices of eighteenth-century merchants is essential to comprehend many aspects of the contemporary Atlantic business community and its networks. The smooth running of mercantile marriage initiation was crucial for mercantile families. For this reason, the process required long and arduous negotiations, often over several months or even years.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, marriage was part of a merchant's business agenda. From the perspective of a future wife and her family as well, marriage was an investment in the future, and one's options warranted careful weighing.

In the two years preceding his marriage, Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens was travelling on business in France. Before he left Hamburg, he and Ilsabe Engelhardt did not know each other personally. As was customary in eighteenth-century commercial circles, the Luetkens marriage was prearranged and primarily served business purposes.<sup>7</sup> Still, arrangement notwithstanding, this did not exclude the possibility that the spouses reciprocated affection for one another. During the early modern period, when initiating courtship and marriage there was often no "clear-cut distinction between strategic unions on the one hand and marriage for love on the other," as Sally Holloway aptly summarises.<sup>8</sup> This also was the case for Ilsabe and Nicolaus Gottlieb.

Due to Luetkens's travels, all of the marriage preparations had to be settled long-distance by letter. Exchanging letters in the process of negotiating a marriage was common during the early modern period, when letter-writing was an "important stage of courtship in its own right."<sup>9</sup> The steps of a merchant's marriage initiation and

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*English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 185–94. Regarding German merchants see Klaus Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel 1680-1830. Unternehmen und Familien in Hamburg, Cadix und Bordeaux* (Munich: Beck, 2004), 191; Wolfgang Ruppert, *Bürgerlicher Wandel. Die Geburt der modernen deutschen Gesellschaft im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1984), 57–103.

<sup>3</sup> See Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority: German Merchants in London, Naturalization, and Global Trade 1660-1815* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), 116.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism: Marriage, Family, and Business in the English-Speaking World, 1580-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 305–6; Anne-Charlott Trepp, *Sanfte Männlichkeit und selbständige Weiblichkeit: Frauen und Männer im Hamburger Bürgertum zwischen 1770 und 1840* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 160–72; Rebekka Habermas, *Frauen und Männer des Bürgertums: Eine Familiengeschichte (1750-1850)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 259–314.

<sup>5</sup> Susanah Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 110.

<sup>6</sup> See Wolfgang Henninger, *Johann Jakob von Bethmann 1717-1792: Kaufmann, Reeder und kaiserlicher Konsul in Bordeaux* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1993), 198–207; Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute*, 191.

<sup>7</sup> See Earle, *Making of the English Middle Class*, 185–94; Grassby, *Business Community*, 303–5; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 245; Schulte Beerbühl, *German Merchants*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> Holloway, *Game of Love*, 9–10.

<sup>9</sup> Holloway, *Game of Love*, 44.

preparations are well documented in Luetkens's correspondence. As his letters show, while travelling abroad, he was able to make all the needed marriage preparations, including financial negotiations and renting a house in Hamburg. As was typical for the time, he entrusted his future wife and mother-in-law with furnishing and equipping the couple's home.<sup>10</sup> The letters also reveal Luetkens's mercantile agenda, with him postponing his marriage several times over a period of many months in order to finish up his business in France. As he argued, this would serve to ensure the financial security of the merger. Ultimately, Ilsabe Engelhardt had to wait for over a year before her future husband returned to his hometown to marry her in November 1745.

During the preparations for their marriage, Ilsabe Engelhardt and Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens developed a relationship, a process that is visible in their correspondence as well as in material culture. My aim here is to examine the role played by Ilsabe in these preparations, and thus the influence she had on the process, by embarking upon the path mapped out by the crucial works in economic history by Anne L. Murphy, Sheryllynne Haggerty, Sara T. Damiano, Susanah Shaw Romney, and Sophie H. Jones and Siobhan Talbott.<sup>11</sup> Jones and Talbott have recently stressed the "roles played by [. . .] extended families and the emotional impact of this activity," particularly in mercantile networks, and have shown women to have been "autonomous players with the power and ability to make informed and independent decisions that directed the business interests of their families."<sup>12</sup> I have been guided by a question regarding "acquisition and assemblage," namely, what was bought for whom and why? This question has also been raised by Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery in their study on consumption and country estates.<sup>13</sup>

In particular, I will show how Ilsabe upheld her position in the run-up to the marriage with Nicolaus Gottlieb, especially with regard to his delayed return. Ilsabe's patience had a price: Nicolaus Gottlieb had to make amends. The merchant was to spare no expense if he wished to ensure his future wife's good will despite his delayed return. Specifically, she instructed her future husband to buy expensive jewellery, including a gold ring and diamond earrings, as well as valuable furnishings, such as a card table, mahogany and walnut furniture, and large mirrors. These items not only served as tokens of appreciation with an emotional value, but were also material promises that were part of Luetkens's concrete marriage pledges to Ilsabe. To comply with her requests, and to do so as quietly as possible as dictated by the rules in mercantile circles of initiating a marriage, Luetkens had to mobilise an intimate network of close confidants in London and Amsterdam, who helped him to purchase the precious items and send them to Hamburg.

The concept of intimate networks, as it has been introduced by Susanah Shaw Romney, involves the "intermingling of family and trade."<sup>14</sup> It is a concept that has been

<sup>10</sup> See Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 83–8; Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 25.

<sup>11</sup> See Anne L. Murphy, *The Worlds of the Jeake Family of Rye, 1640–1736* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Sheryllynne Haggerty, "'Miss Fan can tun her han!' Female Traders in Eighteenth-Century British-American Atlantic Port Cities," *Atlantic Studies* 6:1 (2009): 29–42; Sara T. Damiano, *To Her Credit: Women, Finance, and the Law in Eighteenth-Century New England Cities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021); Romney, *Intimate Networks*.

<sup>12</sup> Sophie H. Jones and Siobhan Talbott, "Sole Traders? The Role of the Extended Family in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Business Networks," *Enterprise & Society* (2021), 1–30, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, 1. See also Susanna Burghartz and Madeleine Herren, *Building Paradise: A Basel Manor House and Its Residents in a Global Perspective* (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2021); Gudrun Andersson and Jon Stobart, eds., *Daily Lives and Daily Routines in the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Romney, *Intimate Networks*, 112.

overlooked in much current research on early modern merchants, despite the widely accepted fact, as argued by Jones and Talbott, that “family networks were an inherent part of early-modern business.” Nonetheless, “the ways in which family members were utilized, and the emotional as well as financial consequences of this, are less well understood.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, to complement the other articles in this volume, this article aims to show the potential of the concept of intimate networks for research in a field where network analyses already have a long tradition: the field of merchant history. The concept of intimate networks provides a micro-perspective on the practices involved in creating and upholding the powerful structures of merchant networks. Intimate networks, including attempts to establish love bonds and shared activities such as buying furniture for a private home, were surely as important as the other business activities of merchants. As this article will show, love bonds and activities shared by the future spouses had an established place in the life and business of merchants, particularly during the establishment phase of their businesses. In contrast to the many networks that have been analysed in earlier research, these processes decidedly included women as crucial actors.<sup>16</sup>

Nicolaus Gottlieb and Ilsabe’s intimate network played a particularly important role during the early stage of the couple’s life together. Ilsabe Engelhard was herself “deeply embedded in networks of exchange and credit,” delegating her wishes as a “responsible shopper” to her future husband and his brother.<sup>17</sup> The article will offer insight into the merchant couple’s networks and letters, the consumer and material culture of eighteenth-century mercantile marriages, the benefits of the materiality of letter packets, the rules of secrecy, and, last but not least, the stoic calm of a bride who was left waiting for months.

### The Marriage of Ilsabe and Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens

Ilsabe Engelhardt must have been in her early or mid-twenties when she married Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, a typical marriage age for early modern women.<sup>18</sup> She had grown up in Hamburg, together with her mother and older brother Ehrenfried. Her father, a Hamburg merchant, had died in 1738, but bequeathed an immense “fortune of 70,000 Marks” to his wife and family, which allowed his widow and son to continue the business.<sup>19</sup> It also enabled Ilsabe to be courted on the marriage market. After her wedding with Luetkens, Ilsabe gave birth to four daughters. She died in 1760.<sup>20</sup> This is all that we know about Ilsabe. There are no other direct records of her in the Hamburg state archives, and while there is a family coat of arms, there is no portrait of Ilsabe.<sup>21</sup> As for many others, her story has been engulfed by the passage of time. The situation, however, is different regarding her husband, for whom extensive records exist, above all letters originating

<sup>15</sup> Jones and Talbott, “Sole Traders,” 6.

<sup>16</sup> Works in economic history, such as Hancock, Weber, or others cited in this article often tend to focus on the male perspective on business matters including marriage settlements, which underlines the importance of the articles by Brock, Ewen, Hunt, and Raapke in this volume. See also Aske Laursen Brock and Misha Ewen, “Women’s Public Lives: Navigating the East India Company, Parliament and Courts in Early Modern England,” *Gender & History* 33:1 (March 2021): 3–23.

<sup>17</sup> Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> See Murphy, *Jeake Family*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> The National Archives, UK [hereafter TNA], High Court of Admiralty [hereafter HCA] 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 357, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Hertzner & von Bobartt, 12 October 1744. All quotations from the original German letters have been translated into English by the author.

<sup>20</sup> See “Luetkens (Nicolaus Gottlieb),” in *Lexikon der Hamburgischen Schriftstelle bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Hans Schröder (Hamburg: Perthes-Besser u. Mauke, 1870), 601–2.

<sup>21</sup> See “Engelhard,” in *Genealogisches Handbuch bürgerlicher Familien (Deutsches Geschlechterbuch)*, ed. Bernard Koerner (Görlitz: C.A. Starke, 1912), 70–92.

from his own quill pen, as well as those of his brother Joachim and Ilsabe's brother Ehrenfried. By also reading between the lines, the letters of these men help us to paint a more complete picture of Ilsabe, including a sense of how she exerted influence on her future husband.

The reason there are surviving records of Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens is quite unusual. At the end of his extensive business travels in France from 1743 to 1745, Luetkens began to transfer his business back to Hamburg, loading his business and letter archive onto one of his ships, which departed from Brest heading towards the city on the Elbe. He instructed his men to hide the archive among the cargo. He himself returned to Hamburg by horse. The ship, however, was captured by English privateers during its voyage, and the archive was found and confiscated. Luetkens would never see it again. Today, the Luetkens archive is stored in the National Archives at Kew in London in its original condition, still including all the records from 1745, among them 2,480 letters.<sup>22</sup> This archive is a true time capsule. It allows us detailed insights into Luetkens's life, particularly during the important years in France preceding his marriage. These years saw the crucial phase of establishing a mercantile business, including investments in commission trade and shipping industry, taking part in high-risk trade, finding a business partner, finding a wife, and, last but not least, founding a merchant house. I have analysed these steps in the book *The Power of Persuasion*.<sup>23</sup> Here, however, I will concentrate on a small collection of letters in the archive that were written between October 1744 and May 1745. Numbering only fourteen, they nonetheless stand out, since they had a great impact on the final months of Luetkens's stay in France. This small group of letters pertain to Ilsabe Engelhardt. They are personal letters, letters that would have never survived if not for the unusual circumstances surrounding the Luetkens archive.<sup>24</sup> Despite their small number, they provide important information about a crossroads in a merchant's life: preparations for marriage.<sup>25</sup> I have examined these letters using what Lawrence Stone once aptly called the "searchlight method," which involves "recording in elaborate detail a single event." By ensuring "that it is very carefully set in its total context and very carefully analysed for its cultural meaning," this small group of letters allows us to arrive at a number of general insights about the world of marriage and trade in the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the letters in question were exchanged between Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens and his brother Joachim. They also include correspondence with his future brother-in-law and business partner Ehrenfried, with Ilsabe's mother, and with Luetkens's long-time business partners Jobst Henning Hertzner, Christopher von Bobartt, and Albertus de Meyere. These men and the future mother-in-law represent Luetkens and Ilsabe's most intimate network. This inner circle of confidants was the only group of people privy to the details of the upcoming marriage. In one way or another, all of them helped Luetkens and supported the couple during their marriage preparations. Despite the ultimate business purpose of the marriage, the focus of this network was a more intimate level of shared activity: practical help in personal matters. This intimate activity would have strong repercussions

<sup>22</sup> The Luetkens archive is stored as part of the Prize Papers collection, TNA, HCA 30/232–36.

<sup>23</sup> See Lucas Haasis, *The Power of Persuasion: Becoming a Merchant in the 18th Century* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> For an introduction to the Prize Papers collection see Amanda Bevan and Randolph Cock, "High Court of Admiralty Prize Papers, 1652–1815: Challenges in Improving Access to Older Records," *Archives* 53:137 (2018): 34–58; Dagmar Freist, "The Prize Papers: Uncurated Histories of Global Scope," in *Das Meer. Maritime Welten in der Frühen Neuzeit / The Sea: Maritime Worlds in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Peter Burschel and Sünne Juterzenka (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2021), 267–79, [www.prizepapers.de](http://www.prizepapers.de).

<sup>25</sup> See Murphy, *Jeake Family*, 20; Henninger, *Bethmann*, 135–54.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of the Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85:11 (1979): 3–24, 13–14.

in Luetkens's business career, allowing him to advance through this step to the ranks of established merchants.

The letters from Ilsabe Engelhard herself have unfortunately not survived, because Luetkens kept them with him in his private travel bag. This loss notwithstanding, the surviving letters clearly show that one of the most challenging steps of Luetkens's establishment phase was initiating and preparing for his marriage.

The challenge, however, was not the marriage settlement itself.<sup>27</sup> The negotiations with the Engelhardt family were settled rather quickly. Members of the Engelhardt family were "close relatives" of David Speelmeyer, Luetkens's master during his apprenticeship in Hamburg.<sup>28</sup> Trust was thus easily established between Luetkens and Ehrenfried Engelhard, together with the latter's mother. The settlement was accompanied by a "yes and written consent" from Ilsabe.<sup>29</sup> Such consent by the bride was already a formative element in bourgeois marriages of the eighteenth century, and also in mercantile circles.<sup>30</sup> As Anne L. Murphy has shown, the "interference of friends and family in a match was typical of an Early Modern society in which couples were generally free to make their own choices but at the same time subject to the approval of these closest to them."<sup>31</sup> The future spouses Ilsabe and Nicolaus Gottlieb were part of a very close "circle of potential partners," a "social exclusivity" typical for merchants of the eighteenth century.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, the marriage was beneficial for both. Ilsabe was able to ensure the continuity of her family's businesses after the death of her father, and her groom, in partnership with her brother, was to become Hamburg's third-largest sugar merchant and a wealthy senator. In return, Luetkens received a large sum from her dowry for his future business in Hamburg and, as he himself put it, counted himself lucky to get a wife "in such miraculous ways." Her "corresponding humour," as his contemporaries called it, genuinely seemed to please him.<sup>33</sup> A certain affection is also evident in the letters. Ilsabe's brother Ehrenfried described her as having "a true and genuine love in her heart."<sup>34</sup> Joachim Luetkens felt his brother's future wife had a candid, "honest mind." Moreover, his brother observed that he had noticed "a lot of good things" about her "outward appearance."<sup>35</sup> Of course, these lines are typical formulae used in love letters of the time, mobilising a language register known and expected by the respective letter writers. We find the same sort of formulae, for instance, in contemporary letter-writing manuals and novels.<sup>36</sup> Although

<sup>27</sup> See the case of Luetkens's friend and business associate Johann Jakob Bethmann in Henninger, *Bethmann*, 135–54.

<sup>28</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 357, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Hertzler & von Bobartt, 12 October 1744.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> See Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Europa im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart: Reclam 2000), 148–60; Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 43–4, 158, 212–3, 274; Trepp, *Sanfte Männlichkeit*, 38–172; Habermas, *Frauen und Männer*, 259–314.

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *Jeake Family*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Schulte Beerbühl, *German Merchants*, 116.

<sup>33</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 357, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Hertzler & von Bobartt, 12 October 1744.

<sup>34</sup> TNA, HCA 30/236, Letter from Ehrenfried Engelhardt to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 4 January 1745.

<sup>35</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235 Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 5 October 1744.

<sup>36</sup> According to contemporary letter-writing manuals, a wife had to be, among other things, handsome, dignified, beautiful, virtuous, beautiful, nice, and sensible. See Paul Jacob Marperger, *Der allzeitfertige Handels-Correspondent* [ . . . ] (Hamburg: Schiller, 1717), 1004. See also Christian Friedrich Hunold (Menantes), *Die Allerneueste Art Höflich und Galant zu Schreiben oder auserlesene Briefe* [ . . . ] (Hamburg: Gottfried Liebernickel im Dohm, 1707), 148; Daniel Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (London: T. Warner, 1724); Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (London: Rivington, 1740).

material interests still outweighed all other interests when initiating marriage negotiations, nonetheless these letters show that expressing and fostering an emotional bond was apparently also considered necessary for a prosperous shared future, a marriage ideal that became increasingly prevalent in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

In our case, settling the marriage plan seems not to have been a problem. At issue was the period that was to pass between the agreement and Luetkens's return from France. In the end it grew to several months. The reason for his delayed return is vividly encapsulated by the Hamburg merchants Hertzner and von Bobartt, who expressed in a letter dated 5 March 1745 that they could "see from your letter, dear friend, that love on the one hand and the pursuit of profit on the other fight a battle in your heart."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Luetkens postponed his marriage several times before finally returning to Hamburg in the cold "harsh autumn" of 1745.<sup>39</sup> The Engelhard family reacted to the delays "with astonishment" and great concern, and deemed interventions to be necessary.<sup>40</sup> In particular, the delays led to a certain amount of resentment on the part of Ilsabe, who demanded compensation and a sign of commitment.<sup>41</sup> This is highly informative about the role played by future wives in mercantile marriages of the eighteenth century: brides had a say in their marriage preparations, resisting the passivity imposed on them, at least to the degree possible.<sup>42</sup> Allyson M. Poska has coined the expression "agentic gender norms" when referring to this kind of behaviour in the early modern period.<sup>43</sup> In the case of Ilsabe, she pushed the envelope, in the truest sense of the word, of what was possible within the traditional sphere of marriage.<sup>44</sup> Ilsabe ultimately relented and agreed with her groom's delays. But this came with a caveat of her and her mother's own making, and with a high price for Luetkens. His response was a mercantile solution. He outsourced the problem to his intimate network, in particular, to his brother Joachim in London, who took charge of all the necessary procurements, a task that occupied the latter for several weeks. It was a wise strategy: by delegating this work, Luetkens saved time and thus could concentrate on finishing his other business dealings in France. He also took advantage of the fact that his brother was travelling through England and was thus in London anyway.

### Marriage Preparations and Intimate Networks

A merchant marriage in the early modern period was a "highly commercial business," as David Hancock succinctly puts it.<sup>45</sup> In many ways, marriage negotiations resembled negotiations in other areas of the mercantile trade.<sup>46</sup> For Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, marriage was definitely part of his business plan, and he thus invested several months in his courtship negotiations. Contemporaries regarded reaching the "status of patched trousers," in other words, finding a caring wife, as we read in a letter, to be an important crossroads in

<sup>37</sup> See Stollberg-Rilinger, *Jahrhundert der Aufklärung*, 148–60; Haasis, *Power of Persuasion*, 538–55.

<sup>38</sup> TNA, HCA 30/234, Letter from Hertzner & van Bobartt to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 5 March 1745.

<sup>39</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 12 March 1745.

<sup>40</sup> TNA, HCA 30/236, Letter from Ehrenfried Engelhardt to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 5 April 1745.

<sup>41</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 434, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Ilsabe Engelhardt, 16 December 1744.

<sup>42</sup> See Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Allyson M. Poska, "The Case for Agentic Gender Norms for Women in Early Modern Europe," *Gender & History* 30:2 (2018): 354–65, 354.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 354–65.

<sup>45</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 245.

<sup>46</sup> See Jacob M. Price, "What Did Merchants Do? Reflections on British Overseas Trade, 1660–1790," *Journal of Economic History* 49:2 (1989): 267–84; Sheryllyne Haggerty, *Merely for Money? Business Culture in the British Atlantic, 1750–1815* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); Edmond Smith, *Merchants: The Community That Shaped England's Trade and Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

a merchant career.<sup>47</sup> Marriage even outweighed other business factors during a merchant's establishment period, because it could take a career to the next level. Still, as the Luetkens letters show, strategic thinking did not exclude the possibility of affection. Indeed, we are dealing with a "broad grey area in which both sentiment and prudence interplayed."<sup>48</sup> Luetkens understood that to gain the affection and trust of his bride it was indispensable to "toss around love letters," as he described it.<sup>49</sup>

For Ilsabe and her family, her marriage was also an investment, both in terms of promised financial gain and social prestige, as made apparent by the fact that the family chose Luetkens despite several other "rivals" in Hamburg.<sup>50</sup> As Margrit Schulte Beerbühl has pointed out, the aim of "marriage between commercial offspring was still a proven method for strengthening, expanding, and sustaining the business."<sup>51</sup> Hence, similar to other mercantile dealings, certain strategies were required when initiating, arranging, and preparing a marriage. This demanded business acumen on both sides of the negotiations. Indeed, I would add to Hancock's assessment by noting that the steps involved in initiating and preparing a marriage were a special form of commercial business dealing, one that required strategies and precautions over and above normal business practices. Most notably in Luetkens's case, it was only during his marriage negotiations that he included women in his correspondence network. Noticeably, there were clear differences in the tone of the letters when compared to his letters regarding other business dealings. There were also differences in the network he mobilised and how the individual issues were settled, namely, exchanging information and objects in confidentiality.

The letter episode in question is reconstructed in the following as a polyphonic letter conversation among several correspondents.<sup>52</sup> Both sides of Luetkens's story, the commercial as well as the more intimate sphere of marriage preparations, can be found. On the commercial side, the letters show how financial considerations played a part during marriage initiation and preparations. For example, bridal dowries were budgeted into merchants' career plans: Luetkens expected a "nice sum of money from the dowry" to invest in his business.<sup>53</sup> And as discussed above, there were also commercial aspects with regard to the future bride and her family, whose financial interests were also expected to make gains. For Ilsabe and her family, the marriage was a concrete investment in their future with expected returns.

Luetkens first had to offer to Ilsabe and her family a house in Hamburg with a "stately interior."<sup>54</sup> This house was also to become the merchant house he opened together with his brother-in-law. Luetkens arranged for its renting from France. Secondly, he had to offer financial safeguarding, a crucial prerequisite of marriage in the eighteenth

<sup>47</sup> TNA, HCA 30/234, Letter from Johann Jakob Bethmann to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 10 March 1745.

<sup>48</sup> Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 193; Holloway, *Game of Love*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 508, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Joachim Luetkens, 1 February 1745.

<sup>50</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 5 October 1744.

<sup>51</sup> Schulte Beerbühl, *German Merchants*, 116.

<sup>52</sup> Due to the fact that both incoming and outgoing letters have been preserved, I am able to analyse what Francesca Trivellato has fittingly called "polyphonic" letter exchanges. Francesca Trivellato, "Merchants' Letters across Geographical and Social Boundaries," in *Correspondence and Cultural Exchange in Europe 1400-1700*, Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe II, ed. Francisco Bethencourt and Florike Egmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 80-103, 89; Francesca Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 357, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Hertzler & von Bobartt, 12 October 1744; Weber, *Deutsche Kaufleute*, 272; Earle, *Making of the English Middle Class*, 190.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 12 May 1745.



century.<sup>55</sup> Thirdly, Luetkens's future wife demanded the right and financial means to furnish and equip their future home. Luetkens acquiesced, allowing Ilsabe "every freedom to do whatever you want with regard to the furnishing of the house."<sup>56</sup> As Amanda Vickery has prominently shown, in the eighteenth century this was one way women from the middle and upper ranks of society upheld their agency, not only during marriage preparations but also within their marriages.<sup>57</sup> Purchases for a future home were in this regard "not a degraded female hobby," but a means of autonomy.<sup>58</sup> It was exactly in this sense that Ilsabe Engelhard acted. She requested and was eventually given, together with her mother, complete control of furnishing and decorating her future home—as Luetkens writes, after "[your] fancy and how you like it."<sup>59</sup>

The group of letters in question also highlight something still more significant, namely, the love tokens demanded by Ilsabe as compensation for her future husband's oft-delayed return and postponement of their marriage. She requested specific pieces of valuable jewellery, including a ring and diamond earrings, as well as kitchenware and valuable mahogany and walnut furniture, "gifts typically selected by courting men."<sup>60</sup> These requests can be seen as conspicuous hints to her future husband that her upcoming marriage and new house were to be "key sites for luxury consumption."<sup>61</sup> They were also items with an emotional value, since several were specifically fancied by Ilsabe, such as a table for a card game she liked. This meant that Luetkens went to some effort to avoid disgruntlement on her side.

This group of letters also reveals information about the couple's intimate network and how the individuals in this network cooperated for the special purpose of their marriage. While this intimate group was part of Luetkens's larger mercantile network, a network typically already based on trust relationships, within the intimate group a deeper level of trust and greater steadfastness is apparent.<sup>62</sup> This is made particularly clear by the fact that letters about these more personal matters are marked with the note "particular letter," or "special letter."<sup>63</sup> They were usually found enclosed in normal business letters, or in packets of business letters addressed to the same person.

The objective driving the intimate network's collaboration was of a different nature, and the people involved in this group had closer and stronger ties: Luetkens's brothers,

<sup>55</sup> See Earle, *Making of the English Middle Class*, 189–90; Schulte Beerbühl, *German Merchants*, 116; Baumann, "Eheanbahnung"; Margaret H. Darrow, "Popular Concepts of Marital Choice in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Social History* 19:2 (1985): 261–72.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 434, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Ilsabe Engelhardt, 16 December 1744.

<sup>57</sup> See Amanda Vickery, "A Woman and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751–81," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 274–301, 281; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1998), 39–86; Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 83–128, 166–83.

<sup>58</sup> Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, 19. Regarding a bride's task to make a home and to furnish a house during the eighteenth century see also Richard van Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag in der Frühen Neuzeit. Erster Band. Das Haus und seine Menschen 16.–18. Jahrhundert* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005), 163; Stollberg-Rilinger, *Jahrhundert der Aufklärung*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 434, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Ilsabe Engelhardt, 16 December 1744.

<sup>60</sup> Holloway, *Game of Love*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> For a good overview regarding mercantile trust relationships see Christian Marx, "Economic Networks," in *Europäische Geschichte Online (EGO)*, ed. Leibniz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte (IEG), Mayence 2012, <http://ieg-ego.eu/de/threads/europaeische-netzwerke/wirtschaftliche-netzwerke>; Xabier Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World: Spanish Merchants and Their Overseas Networks* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2010), 9–14, 141–81; Haggerty, *Merely for Money*, 66–96.

<sup>63</sup> See Haasis, *Power of Persuasion*, 504–15.

his long-standing friends and business partners, his future family members. Yet these people were ultimately collaborating with an economic goal in mind: the merger of two mercantile families. As Susanah Shaw Romney has defined it, such intimate networks “consisted of a web of ties that developed from people’s immediate, affective, and personal associations,” and influenced the formation of “specific modes of economic engagement employed by women and men.”<sup>64</sup> Through the “essential personal and familial bonds” created while “find[ing] a marriage partner,” the institution of marriage “structure[d] women’s intimate and economic lives.”<sup>65</sup> Thus the driving force was an emotional association, a level usually carefully avoided in other forms of mercantile business.

Luetkens was able to procure all the items demanded by Ilsabe for their future home and their marriage. He did this with the help of his brother, close family and business friends in London, Amsterdam, and Hamburg, a benevolent friend of his uncle and even that man’s daughter, his future mother-in-law, and his future business partner and brother-in-law. During the early modern period, preparations for a marriage were usually accompanied not only by the exchange of gifts, but also larger items to seal the family connection, items that would “give honour to a marriage,” as Nicolaus Gottlieb’s brother Joachim Luetkens observed.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, while it was typical that “during marriage initiation gifts played a major role, during the subsequent courting phase, it was often concrete material goods [such as furniture] that were exchanged on a large scale,” as has been pointed out by Richard van Dülmen.<sup>67</sup> In the case of our Hamburg couple, we see both forms of material culture. Intriguing about the episode portrayed in this group of letters is that Ilsabe knew exactly which buttons to press to receive the goods she desired, and her future husband knew exactly whom to approach to fulfil her wishes. Ilsabe and Nicolaus Gottlieb seem to have been a well-coordinated team even before their wedding.

### How to Buy Patience

On Wednesday, 16 December 1744, Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens wrote a letter to Ilsabe Engelhardt.<sup>68</sup> The letter could be categorised as a love letter in the contemporary sense of the word. It is brimming with typical eighteenth-century love phrases invoking his “restless heart,” his “faithfulness and true love,” his hope to “embrace his future wife” and to “to hug her” soon.<sup>69</sup> However, the letter was also, if not primarily, about business. In this letter, Luetkens postponed his return to Hamburg for several months. His justification was that unfortunately “every time new obstacles come in my way and hinder me to return home earlier. I don’t see that I will be in Hamburg before next spring.”<sup>70</sup> The obstacles being referred to, were his flourishing business in France, to which he gave priority. While he did not forget to mention the benefits for the family that supposedly came

<sup>64</sup> Romney, *Intimate Networks*, 18–9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20.

<sup>66</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 12 March 1745; Diana O’Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 57–98; Holloway, *Game of Love*, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Van Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag*, 145.

<sup>68</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 434, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Ilsabe Engelhardt, 16 December 1744.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* See for instance Benjamin Neukirch, *Anweisung zu teutschen Briefen* (Leipzig: Thomas Fritsch, 1727), chapter “Von verliebten Briefen,” 193–208; Tanja Reinlein, “Verlangende Frauen, zögernde Männer. Strategien des Liebeswerbens in Briefen der Empfindsamkeit (Meta Moller und Klopstock, Caroline Flachsland und Herder),” in *SchreibLust. Der Liebesbrief im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Renate Stauf and Jörg Paulus (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 33–48; Holloway, *Game of Love*, 20–44.

<sup>70</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 434, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Ilsabe Engelhardt, 16 December 1744.

along with his delay, it would not be the last time that the “news and the intention of the late return [was received] with astonishment” by the Engelhardt family.<sup>71</sup> Later, his future partner Ehrenfried Engelhardt was even so frank as to state that Luetkens’s ever-later return might make a mockery of their business, which shows how strongly the preparations for marriage were intertwined with the presumed success of the future merchant house. While Ehrenfried could only wait for his future business partner’s return, Ilsabe found a way to gain her future husband’s attention during his final months in France. Love letters notwithstanding, she most likely did not approve of his late return either. But her reaction was more pragmatic. In her replies to Luetkens, she requested diamond earrings, a golden ring, a valuable mirror, mahogany furniture—all luxury items.<sup>72</sup> Since her letters have been lost, we do not know the exact tone she struck when making these requests. Nor can we be entirely sure that they were only made out of resentment. Some requests may have also been due to necessity, or simply because she preferred furniture from London.<sup>73</sup> Taking into consideration the types of items she requested, one could assert that these two sides were at least in balance. Nonetheless, I am certain that by ordering these items, Ilsabe was seeking some form of compensation for the time she had to wait. I strongly assume that Ilsabe’s requests were subtle and gentle. She could not manage all of the preparations on her own, her future husband also had to do his part; she simply could not wait any longer to begin making a home for herself and their future family. Following Amanda Vickery, this was her way to maintain her voice in the marriage preparations, an intrinsic part of her “agentic gender norms.”<sup>74</sup> For a bride the task of furnishing and equipping a home was particularly relevant, since “houses and household products became an important status symbol during the [. . .] eighteenth century,” as Lisa Sturm-Lind has noted.<sup>75</sup> Vickery speaks of a “gender division of domestic purchases” that fits perfectly with Ilsabe’s behaviour.<sup>76</sup> The same is emphasised by Stobart and Rothery, who refer to “distinctive female modes of consumption,” also linking women to the buying of luxury items for stately family homes.<sup>77</sup> By furnishing and equipping a new house, a future wife could demonstrate “proper taste and elegance” before the public eye of the Hamburg elite.<sup>78</sup> While her demands came at a high financial price for Luetkens, they underlined her vested rights and also foreshadowed her future role as a wife and a woman of fashion in eighteenth-century Hamburg.

In his letter of December, Luetkens fully agreed to her conditions. In my view, this is the most important passage and actual message of the letter. He confirmed that he will “order the demanded items from London,” adding immediately in the letter to his “dearest love” that he allowed her every freedom with regard to furnishing the house, because ultimately her “heart is what I am aiming at and want to win my dear.”<sup>79</sup> It is difficult to

<sup>71</sup> TNA, HCA 30/236, Letter from Ehrenfried Engelhardt to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 5 April 1745.

<sup>72</sup> Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, 24; Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

<sup>73</sup> See Michael North, *Material Delight and the Joy of Living: Cultural Consumption in Germany in the Age of Enlightenment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 49; Ulla Iljäs, “English Luxuries in Nineteenth-Century Vyborg,” in *A Taste for Luxury in Early Modern Europe: Display, Acquisition and Boundaries*, ed. Johanna Ilmakunnas and Jon Stobart (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 265–82, 271; Maxine Berg, “French Fancy and Cool Britannia: The Fashion Markets of Early Modern Europe,” in *Fiere e mercati nella integrazione delle economie Europee secc. XIII–XVIII*, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Prato: Le Monnier, 2001), 519–56.

<sup>74</sup> Poska, “Agentic Gender Norms.”

<sup>75</sup> Lisa Sturm-Lind, *Actors of Globalization: New York Merchants in Global Trade, 1784–1812* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 155.

<sup>76</sup> Vickery, “A Woman and the World of Goods,” 281.

<sup>77</sup> Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>79</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 434, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Ilsabe Engelhardt, 16 December 1744.

determine to what degree he could have rejected her demands. More important is the fact that he clearly gave in to them without any objection, perhaps seeing this as an appropriate way to mollify Ilsabe about his postponed return. Most certainly, his response confirmed the emotional bond between the two. However, the efforts he actually undertook himself to procure the desired items were relatively modest. As mentioned above, he outsourced this task to his brother Joachim, who was in London, not as a merchant, but as a prospective priest. In turn, Joachim received help from a business partner of the brothers' merchant uncle, as well as several other people in their intimate network of confidants.

The subsequent process is especially illuminating with regard to marriage preparations during the eighteenth century. As has been mentioned, intimate networks were an intrinsic part of larger mercantile networks. However, in contrast to the larger networks, these intimate networks were used for more informal purposes. While the same people could be found in economically driven enterprises, when part of intimate networks they formed new constellations to deal with more practical or emotional matters, and were committed to absolute secrecy.

As we read in a letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb to his brother Joachim, Ilsabe must have been very clear about what items Luetkens was to procure: "a pair of diamond earrings and a [ . . . ] ring for women. The diamonds shall be white, brilliant-cut diamonds. [ . . . ] I strongly recommend that it must be cut diamonds and not raw diamonds. Mr Well can help you with that because he knows many jewellers. I also ask you to purchase for me and to send to Hertzner & von Bobartt in Hamburg under the name of Well or of our uncle at your earliest convenience the following items: a nice big mirror circa 2 cubits high and proportionally wide with 6 corresponding sconces, a Lombre table which is collapsible, 6 dozen tin plates, 24 bowls large and small, [ . . . ] 2 ditto [tin] flat soup plates, 6 metal candleholders with snuffers, 2 dozen good knives and forks for men, 2 dozen small knives and forks for dames [ . . . ]. In order to cover the expenditures you can draw a bill on Hertzner & von Bobartt à 2 uso to the order of Mr Well or our uncle. Please purchase these items only yourself when you are in London."<sup>80</sup>

London was well known at the time for a booming domestic and export market of elegant mahogany furniture as well as for other luxury goods and even for everyday items such as kitchenware.<sup>81</sup> It was thus the perfect place to buy these goods. For Nicolaus Gottlieb's brother Joachim, this task was, of course, not without challenges. Many of the desired objects were luxury items that required careful selection and handling. Since it was an immense testimony of trust from his older brother, Joachim accepted the task with "the greatest conceivable pleasure" and made "every effort to take care of the purchase and transport of the requested items with the available ships."<sup>82</sup> As advised, Joachim worked with the London merchant Mr Well, who was acquainted with London jewellers "whom he trusts," and who was also experienced in the trade with mahogany furniture. In the end, Joachim was able to procure all the desired items. For the furniture, he made sure to "follow the latest fashion" and that it was all handmade

<sup>80</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 508, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Joachim Luetkens, 1 February 1745.

<sup>81</sup> See "London," in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts*, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 49–54; North, *Material Delight*, 49; Iljäs, "English Luxuries," 271; Adam Bowett, "English Mahogany Trade 1700–1793" (PhD diss., High Wycombe: Buckinghamshire College/Brunel University, 1996); Tijl Vanneste, "The Eurasian Diamond Trade in the Eighteenth Century: A Balanced Model of Complementary Markets," in *Goods from the East, 1600–1800: Trading Eurasia*, ed. Maxine Berg et al. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2015), 139–53; Tijl Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks: Eighteenth-Century Diamond Merchants* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

<sup>82</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 18 February 1745.

and in the “most elegant style [. . .], made of mahogany or walnut [. . .].”<sup>83</sup> Particularly the card table for the game Lombre, a game popular among eighteenth-century middle-class women and, as we know from the letters, one that Ilsabe enjoyed and was experienced at playing, will have met her expectations.<sup>84</sup> But even with regard to the kitchenware Joachim chose the most precious items like the requested knives for “dames” with ivory handles. As for the wedding jewellery, they chose earrings that had “4 diamond pendants which makes them look fabulous. The ring looks equally beautiful and fits perfectly with the earrings, it was newly made. The ring is golden.”<sup>85</sup> The earrings and the ring certainly represented appropriate items advocating for and honouring a marriage.

As is apparent from Joachim’s letters, the thought of Ilsabe was omnipresent during his shopping trips. Joachim knew what was at stake, so he did his best to find the right items. In this regard, and with a certain amount of regret, he noted that “it would have been good if you or your beloved had described some of the items you wish in more detail,” but he still managed to fulfil his task by choosing “many of them after my own and Mr Well’s fancy.” He also often “dared to take the role of the husband here for a moment”, a phrase that alone indicates the strong and intimate bond between the brothers.<sup>86</sup> It was indeed a bond that exceeded the character of mere trust that was typical for merchant families or networks. Luetkens not only trusted his brother, he allowed him access to his relationship and to his most personal decision-making processes. In fact, he allowed his brother to stand in for him and act in his name.

Joachim also tried to imagine Ilsabe, whom he held in high regard, when choosing the golden ring, noting that “she has very delicate hands.” He even made sure that the appearance of the rings was given a dress rehearsal: “the oldest of the Well’s daughters has tried them on so that we can see how it looks and they did not seem oversized.” Quite the contrary, the jewellery was “finely crafted, the diamonds fine and clean.”<sup>87</sup> Joachim Luetkens seems to have gone about his brotherly duties with diligence.<sup>88</sup> In the end, he passed the test of trust with flying colours.

The subsequent process of transporting these items to Hamburg required tact, secrecy, and support from further helping hands. The bills were paid by Luetkens’s uncle Anthony and his friends Hertzner and von Bobardt in Hamburg. These friends would also await the shipments in Hamburg. The transport itself was handled by another intimate friend in Amsterdam, Albertus de Meyere, as well as Luetkens’s youngest brother in Hamburg, Anton.

As for the transport of the jewellery, Joachim chose a practice typical of the eighteenth century: hiding rings by enclosing them in a letter packet and sending them via the reliable and trusted postal route London–Amsterdam–Hamburg.<sup>89</sup> Joachim noted that, admittedly, “this is still hazardous,” but still the “best way to transport and the usual way to send such precious items, as they choose here [in London] to first send them to Holland. That is why I will send them to the de Meyere family first, and ask them to forward them to Hertzner & von Bobardt.” He made sure that “the brilliants are safely

<sup>83</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 12 March 1745.

<sup>84</sup> See Hugo Kastner and Gerald Kador Folkvord, *Die große Humboldt-Enzyklopädie der Kartenspiele* (Baden-Baden: Humboldt, 2005), 120–3; “Lomber, Lombre, eingedeutsche Form von span./franz. L’Hombre, daneben die Mischform L’Homber,” in *Goethe-Wörterbuch*, ed. Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011), 5, 1284.

<sup>85</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 12 March 1745.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> See Bernard Capp, *The Ties That Bind: Siblings, Family, and Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>89</sup> See Haasis, *Power of Persuasion*, 471–6.

packed,” having them “wrapped in cotton and enclosed in a piece of corduroy which will be cut in the form of a letter which will be enclosed and sent in a letter packet.”<sup>90</sup>

Over the next two months, the furniture left London on several ships which were part of convoys, that is, guarded by other ships. This was also a relatively safe method for transport. In Hamburg, Anton Luetkens, for his part in the procurement procedure, kept a neat “Nota von Mobilien,” an inventory of all the furniture that reached Hamburg. On this list we find all the items Ilsabe desired, as well as “2 tin teapots, 6 metal candleholders for the [dining] table, 1 walnut commode to be placed under the mirror [. . .], [and a] tea commode.”<sup>91</sup> It seems that Ilsabe had continued to make requests.

Not only the purchases, but also the transport and arrival of the furniture in Hamburg had to happen in secrecy, since the news of founding a new merchant house was always accompanied by rumour mongering. A merchant wedding changed the existing business community in a city; a new competitor entered the stage. Luetkens’s marriage was “a thing of consequence,” as he wrote to his brother Anton.<sup>92</sup> Joachim assumed that it would lead to “humming and mumbling,” to “noises” comparable to “the ringing of a beer bell, as they call it in Hamburg,” the bell that was rung when it was no longer allowed to serve beer.<sup>93</sup> Both the Luetkens and Engelhardt families tried to keep the merger a secret as long as possible.

In the end, all of the furniture was moved into a stately Hamburg burgher house in the famous Katharinenstrasse, in Hamburg’s merchant quartier. Luetkens moved in together with Ilsabe in 1745 and opened the merchant house Luetkens & Engelhardt there. Today, the golden Louis XVI bel étage of Luetkens’s merchant villa is on display at the Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts, a testimony to the later success of his trading house.<sup>94</sup>

### Conclusion: The Importance of Letters and Tokens of Affection

While we have heard the voice of Ilsabe Engelhardt only indirectly in this story, her voice was clearly not a passive one. As seen in the letter episode above, Ilsabe’s influence in her relationship with her future husband Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens was unmistakable. Historians such as Anne L. Murphy have shown on the basis of mercantile family records that one does not always need direct sources to derive information about the lives of societally positioned women.<sup>95</sup> Even if surviving sources are sparse, in many instances it is possible to gain information through documents connected to their merchant husbands. Murphy has investigated the early modern Jeake family and edited their letters in an important volume that in many ways resembles the story of Ilsabe and Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens. In fact, in the courtships examined by Murphy there is also a case of a bride demanding tokens of affection from her future husband in the same way as

<sup>90</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 19 March 1745.

<sup>91</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Inventory of furniture, “Nota von Mobilien,” compiled by Anton Luetkens in 1745.

<sup>92</sup> TNA, HCA 30/232, Letter Book I, no. 1, Letter from Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens to Anton Luetkens, 5 May 1744.

<sup>93</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 16 November 1744. Regarding the beer bell see “Bierglocke,” in *Frühneuhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, online, [http://fwb-online.de/go/bierglocke.s.1f\\_1645562144](http://fwb-online.de/go/bierglocke.s.1f_1645562144).

<sup>94</sup> See “Althamburgisches Bürgerhaus,” in *Hamburg Lexikon*, ed. Franklin Kopitzsch and Daniel Tilgner (Hamburg: Ellert & Richter, 2010), 36–8. Period Room “Louis Seize Room,” circa 1775, Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, MK&G), <https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/de/sammlung/sammlungen/period-rooms/louis-seize-raum.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Anne L. Murphy, “‘You Do Manage It So Well that I Cannot Do Better’: The Working Life of Elizabeth Jeake of Rye (1667–1736),” *Women’s History Review* 27:7 (2018): 1190–208. During the courtship and marriage of Samuel Jeake Junior and Elizabeth Hartshorne, unfortunately “Elizabeth’s own initial views on the marriage were not recorded.” Murphy, *Jeake Family*, 134.

Ilsabe did, including “a ring with a diamond in it.”<sup>96</sup> This not only shows how common it was to exchange gifts during the preparations for a marriage, but also the corresponding expectations on the part of wife and husband and their families. This also underlines that “material objects [. . .] held a central place in rituals of courtship.” Material tokens and letters “were used to negotiate, cement, and publicize” the match, as it has been described by Sally Holloway.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, although only a handful of the more than 2,400 letters in the Luetkens archive pertain to Ilsabe, these letters were highly informative about the later life of the couple. These few letters contain important information about the relationship between Nicolaus Gottlieb and Ilsabe, as well as between their families. Moreover, albeit indirectly, they provide information about Ilsabe’s agency, her means of empowerment, and her powers of persuasion.<sup>98</sup> In the preparations for her marriage, she maintained her assertiveness in a manner typical of her time: furnishing the new family home while her husband was abroad. As I have shown in this article, this was in part compensation for her future husband’s long absence and numerous marriage postponements. Despite his excuses and affirmations of love, she demanded concessions from her future husband: precious jewellery and valuable furniture. By purchasing these items, not only did the merchant buy time to continue his business dealings, he also won his future wife’s patience.

The responsibility for their future home, the merchant house in the Katharinenstrasse, clearly rested to a large extent with Ilsabe and her mother. Luetkens’s brother summed it up in a later letter quite succinctly by congratulating his brother on his new “home, where you find everything arranged.”<sup>99</sup> The most important precondition of arranging a mercantile marriage was keeping all the preparations secret. In our story this was done by mobilising the couple’s most intimate network through letter correspondence, and by using special transport means. In the end, it can be hoped that all the arrangements satisfied both Ilsabe and Nicolaus Gottlieb. The only thing we know for sure is that on 22 November 1745, they celebrated their wedding in Hamburg.

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<sup>96</sup> Murphy, *Jeake Family*, 20.

<sup>97</sup> Holloway, *Game of Love*, 14.

<sup>98</sup> See Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, 141.

<sup>99</sup> TNA, HCA 30/235, Letter from Joachim Luetkens to Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, 16 November 1744.

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