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To their Credit: The Aristocracy and Commercial Credit in Europe, c.1750–1820

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Abstract

The aristocracy and their use of commercial credit are seldom explored in the European comparative context despite important studies of the French aristocracy and their credit relations with shopkeepers, tradesmen and fashion merchants. This article studies the aristocracy and commercial credit in England, Germany and Sweden, by drawing on the normative literature and the account books, receipted bills, correspondence and diaries of several families occupying different echelons of the nobility. We examine the extent and nature of aristocratic engagement with shop credit, the ways in which they manipulated and managed this credit, and their motivations for doing so. We argue that the aristocracy was involved in a modern commercial credit economy and that this was central to their position in society and way of life. Our analysis of the ideals communicated through conduct books and parental advice and the actual credit practices of the aristocracy show that they took their credit arrangements seriously. They had to abide by the rules of commercial credit and settle their accounts: sometimes promptly, most often in a timely manner and only occasionally after considerable delay. The article offers a comparative framework for further and broader studies on the aristocracy within economic history.

Keywords

Credit, aristocracy, consumption, retailing, shopkeepers, artisans, 18th century, 19th century, Europe, England, Germany, Sweden

On 26 September 1753, Elizabeth Purefoy wrote from her home at Shalstone in Buckinghamshire to the London grocer, Mr Wilson. After listing the things that she wanted, which were to be sent by the

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Buckingham carrier, she instructed him to ‘Send your Bill with them & will order you payment’.¹ Some decades later, on 26 August 1778 and 21 June 1779, Count Hans Axel von Fersen wrote from Paris to his father in Stockholm, seeking advice and funds to settle a bill of 1,453 *livres* on ribbons, lace and rouge. The merchant, Monsieur Godin, had grown impatient and was collecting his outstanding debts from Fersen, who did not have the money.² Similarly, the Dinkelsbühl firm Bros. Mohr was becoming rather impatient with their clients, the counts of Adelmann. On 15 February 1790, they reminded them to please settle their bill of 212 *guilders* (*fl.*) incurred three years earlier. Bros. Mohr claimed that they could have received 30 *fl.* interest from that sum and accordingly asked not only for their money but also for 20 *fl.* interest. However, they had never stopped obliging their clients and continued the delivery of high-quality fabrics.³

These letters give an indication of the routine nature of how landowners sought and gained credit from shopkeepers. Yet they also show very different attitudes to credit: Purefoy’s eagerness to receive and pay her bill contrasts with the stalling of payment by Fersen and Adelmann. As such, they point to some of the key questions with which we wish to engage in this exploratory article: The extent and nature of aristocratic engagement with shop credit, the ways in which they manipulated and managed this credit, and their motivations for doing so. They also point to our comparative approach, which explores commonalities and differences in the commercial credit enjoyed by aristocratic consumers from Germany, Sweden and England. Drawing on account books and receipted bills as well as conduct books, correspondence and diaries, we offer an analysis that is social and cultural rather than purely economic: it is concerned with motivation, money, behaviour and bills.

I. Credit and the aristocracy

From time immemorial, the aristocracy has been berated for its lax handling of economic affairs. Time and again, unnecessary and even reckless spending has been denoted as a – morally highly dubious – characteristic of counts and kings, marquesses and queens. Accounts of lavish entertainments at court, of nights spent gambling, of ruinous investments on grand buildings and lavish dress have influenced the idea of a particular aristocratic way of living, which has much to do with honour and magnificence and little with the nitty-gritty of balancing income and expenditure. This perspective positions the aristocracy in firm opposition to bourgeois sobriety and virtuousness in financial matters.⁴ Indeed, the nobility’s characteristic insistence on memory, tradition and continuity seems to place them at loggerheads with a capitalistic mode of thinking that favoured an ‘imagined future’.⁵ However, this is a very partial picture that is based largely on passing assumptions and

1. G. Eland (ed.), *Purefoy Letters, 1735–1753*, London 1931, 70.

2. Riksarkivet, Stockholm (RA), Stafsundsarkivet, Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv, vol. 8. Hans Axel von Fersen to Axel von Fersen, 26 August 1778, 21 June 1779.

3. Staatsarchiv Ludwigsburg (StAL) PL 12 II Bü 409. Bros. Mohr to Joseph Anselm von Adelmann, Dinkelsbühl, 15 February 1797.

4. Seminal work on this topic includes W. Sombart, *Luxus und Kapitalismus*, 2nd ed., München 1922, 77–111; J. Swann, ‘The French Nobility, 1715–1789’, in: H. Scott (ed.), *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 2 vols., London 1995, vol. 1: 142–173; and I. Cerman, ‘Jenseits des Marxismus. Der Adel in der modernen Wirtschaftsgeschichte’, in: I. Cerman/L. Velek (eds.), *Adel und Wirtschaft. Lebensunterhalt der Adelligen in der Moderne*, München 2009, 9–22.

5. F. Lenger, ‘Adel und Kapitalismus. Europäische Schlaglichter vom Spätmittelalter bis etwa 1900’, in: A. C. Cremer/A. Jendorff (eds.), *Decorum und Mammon im Widerstreit? Adeliges Wirtschaftshandeln zwischen Standesprofilen, Profitstreben und ökonomischer Notwendigkeit*, Heidelberg 2022, 107–125; J. Beckert, *Imagined Futures. Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*, Cambridge, MA 2016.

maintained on ideological grounds rather than dealing with detailed empirical evidence. Indeed, this limited picture of the aristocracy emphasises the behaviour of a highly colourful few rather than a plainer majority, and it ignores the central importance of commercial credit in underpinning aristocratic spending.

In general, credit relations of the aristocracy are characterised as being bound up in a traditional world of obligations and reciprocations, where aristocratic honour counted more than individual commercial credit and where large deals over land, dowries and house building, rather than the settling of grocery bills or tailor's accounts, dominate the narrative. In her influential study *The Moral Economy*, Laurence Fontaine argues that debt was a normal and inevitable component of any large nobiliary fortune. She notes that the extent of aristocratic indebtedness increased steadily over the early modern period, reaching new heights in the 18th century and eventually threatening the established order.⁶ Other researchers have analysed the mechanisms of aristocratic debt and insolvency, highlighting the logic of actions guiding both the original expenditure and the (dis-)service of debts. As these studies show, the most important lenders to the aristocracy were other aristocrats, sometimes with the monarch acting to bail out their high-ranking subjects with new assets to prevent bankruptcies that threatened the social order.⁷ Both the cause and nature of aristocratic credit was thus particular to this group: necessitated by a magnificent lifestyle and based on notions of honour, mutual obligation and often inter-marriage, it was different to and distinct from urban-commercial credit. Moreover, it belonged to a traditional rather than modern world – a distinction that has also been drawn between noble and bourgeois economies.

The separation of these two worlds is, at best, conceptual. In practice, the aristocracy were deeply entangled in webs of commercial credit as well as the personal loans and mortgages that underpinned dynastic spending on land and the house. This entanglement arose from their dealings with vast numbers of retailers, craftspeople and service-providers who supplied their considerable and varied needs, wants and desires. They took part in the all-encompassing 'economy of obligation', which involved ordinary people as well as the elite and which made credit the linchpin of not only economic but also social relations.⁸ While there is a plethora of literature on credit, there is a lack of research on credit and the aristocracy. Indeed, it is striking how little the aristocracy features in research that at heart deals with the conflicted emergence of modern society. In the debate, some have argued for a switch in emphasis in the meanings of credit during the French Revolution, away from social and towards economic connotations. However, most researchers now agree that well into the 19th century, credit continued to be based on relationships and in turn constituted

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6. L. Fontaine, *The Moral Economy. Poverty, Credit, and Trust in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2014, 72–80; see also R. Wilson/A. Mackley, *Creating Paradise. The Building of the English Country House, 1660–1880*, London 2000; R. G. Asch, *Europäischer Adel in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Köln 2008, 71–85; C. van den Heuvel, 'Amt und Kredit. Justus Möser als Kreditgeber des Osnabrücker Adels', in: J. Schlumbohm (ed.), *Soziale Praxis des Kredits. 16–20. Jahrhundert*, Hannover 2007, 81–97.
 7. W. D. Godsey, *Nobles and Nation in Central Europe. Free Imperial Knights in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1850*, Cambridge 2004, 16–47; J. Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv. Familjen von Fersens livsstil på 1700-talet*, Stockholm, Helsingfors 2012, 364–390; S. Solterbeck, *Blaues Blut und rote Zahlen. Westfälischer Adel im Konkurs*, Münster 2018; C. Jago, 'The Influence of Debt on the Relations between Crown and Aristocracy in Seventeenth-Century Castile', in: *Economic History Review* 26 (1973), 216–236.
 8. C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation. The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England*, Basingstoke 2001; C. H. Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex. Economies of Regard in Old Regime France*, Durham 2013; G. Signori (ed.), *Prekäre Ökonomien. Schulden in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Konstanz 2014; D'M. Coffman/C. Lorandini/M. Lorenzini (eds.), *Financing in Europe. Evolution, Coexistence and Complementarity of Lending Practices from the Middle Ages to Modern Times*, Cham 2018; M. Lanzinger (ed.), *Formen des Kredits. Themenheft Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* 70 (2022).

them.⁹ Personal reputation remained central to judgments of credit, which in turn represented a measure of one's economic and social worth – or, in aristocratic terms, one's honour.

In some ways, the aristocracy was above such judgements: their title, if not their wealth, made them credit-worthy in a social and thus an economic sense. If they were largely trusted in this respect, the risk remained real: default or even delay in the payment of bills that were perhaps modest in terms of overall aristocratic spending, could be ruinous for the supplier. Accordingly, contemporary critics were quick to pick up on the supposedly lackadaisical attitude of aristocrats towards shop credit and turned it into an argument about the aristocracy's economic futility.¹⁰ However, even among historians, the stressing of aristocratic notions of honour and grandeur has too often led to the assumption that paying shopkeepers' bills was a matter of personal discretion. For instance, in her portrayal of Rose Bertin, Marie Antoinette's famous '*ministre de la modes*', Michelle Saporì writes that Bertin's aristocratic clients consumed instantly but delayed payment indefinitely.¹¹ Similarly, Natacha Coquery claims in her study on Parisian luxury market that delaying payment of artisans' or merchants' bills for years, even for more than a decade, was not uncommon among aristocrats.¹² Furthermore, Clare Haru Crowston argues that the French pre-revolutionary aristocracy often regarded debt to tradespeople as 'a mere inconvenience' and neglected their payments for years.¹³

We question the applicability of this characterisation of the French aristocracy to the European aristocracy more generally by offering an innovative comparative analysis of the commercial credit arrangements of aristocrats of different social standing.

We begin by briefly outlining the extent of aristocratic dependence on shop-credit in three countries, focusing on a small number of families to illustrate the total value of credit they enjoyed with their suppliers. In the next section, we turn to the conduct literature to provide a better understanding of the (normative) cultural and behavioural context in which these credit arrangements were forged and managed: what was seen as good credit practice for a well-managed elite household? This is linked to the knotty issue of motivation: what drove aristocrats to delay or default, or to pay promptly, and what were the risks and rewards of these different courses of action? Finally, we examine the ways in which suppliers provided credit to their aristocratic customers by supplying goods and services in advance of payment, and how this varied according to the types of goods being bought and the locations of the respective suppliers. Overall, we argue that the nobility was heavily involved in 'modern' commercial credit and that this was central to their way of life and to their position in society. This implies a repositioning of the nobility as players within a capitalist economy: one that was more differentiated by spending power than a culture of credit and

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9. J. Smith, 'No More Language Games. Words, Beliefs, and the Political Culture of Early Modern France', in: *American Historical Review* 102 (1997), 1411–1444, here 1434; A. Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself. Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England*, Oxford 2015, 199; C. H. Crowston, 'Credit and the Metanarrative of History', in: *French Historical Studies* 34 (2011), 7–19; see also M. Finn, *The Character of Credit. Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740–1914*, Cambridge, 2003; Schlumbohm (ed.), *Soziale Praxis des Kredits*; G. B. Clemens (ed.), *Schuldenlast und Schuldenwert. Kreditnetzwerke in der europäischen Geschichte 1300–1900*, Trier 2008.
 10. F. H. Hirsch, 'Aufklärerische Adelskritik im Spiegel der Zeitschriften', Magisterarbeit, Universität des Saarlandes, 2004, 51–58; D. Langewiesche, 'Bürgerliche Adelskritik zwischen Aufklärung und Reichsgründung in Enzyklopädiën und Lexika', in: E. Fehrenbach (ed.), *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland 1770–1848*, München 1994, 11–28.
 11. M. Saporì, *Rose Bertin. Ministre des modes de Marie-Antoinette*, Paris 2003, 120; see also C. H. Crowston, 'The Queen and Her "Minister of Fashion". Gender, Credit and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France', in: *Gender and History* 14 (2002), 92–116.
 12. N. Coquery, *L'hôtel aristocratique. Le marché du luxe à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris 1998, 163–173.
 13. Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex*, 10, 31, 168–169, 174–175.

honour. We thus align ourselves with recent studies that have sought to rescue the elite from their marginalisation in the world of economics, arguing for an entrepreneurial spirit among the aristocracy and portraying them as adept players in the world of economy and finance.¹⁴

Our analysis centres on a small number of aristocratic families in England, Germany and Sweden. These countries are chosen to provide a variety of political and economic contexts, and to form a counter-balance to the results of existing research on the aristocracy and commercial credit with its strong focus on *ancien régime* France. Our selected families differed considerably in wealth and power, both between and within countries; but all of them formed part of the land-owning elite and were numbered amongst the wealthiest five percent in their respective countries. At the top of the hierarchy are the Leighs of Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire in the English midlands, who were worth as much or more than Jane Austen's Mr Darcy, with his £10,000 a year; Count Axel von Fersen, who was considered one of the most politically powerful and wealthiest Swedish aristocrats of the second half of the 18th century, and his older brother Count Carl von Fersen, an influential courtier; the Salm-Reifferscheid-Dycks, who were from the highest echelon of the German nobility and independent rulers in their principality, and the Nesselrode-Ehreshovens, an 'old family' and high ranking among lower German nobility. Slightly lower down the hierarchy were the Newdigates (neighbours of the Leighs in Warwickshire), occupying the lowest tier of the British aristocracy but wealthy based on land and, later, coal mines; the Adelmans, who enjoyed an independent status as imperial knights but had only limited resources at their disposal, and the Dillens, recently ennobled and owing their position and wealth exclusively to the first Württemberg king. Below these families were the von Schnell-Reenstiernas, a land-owning gentry family who had a comfortable income and lived in a manor house in the outskirts of Stockholm, and the Purefoys, untitled county gentry who had a modest income and resided in a manor house in Buckinghamshire. Of course, other families could have been chosen for each level of the status/wealth hierarchy, but our sample demonstrates a good cross section of the aristocracy and each has the advantage of providing rich and readily available archival material on their credit relationships. The extent to which they shared motivations and behaviours reveals much about the integrity of the aristocracy as a group as well as the nature of their engagement with commercial credit.

2. The extent of credit

The aristocracy drew goods and services from a wide range of suppliers. Many were non-commercial or internal to the estate and gifting played an important role in supplying a variety of goods, especially food.¹⁵ However, a large quantity of things coming into the aristocratic household was acquired from commercial suppliers, most of whom provided short-term credit to their customers. This generally took the form of a bill presented after the goods or services had been supplied and subsequently settled by the customer, at which point it was receipted by the supplier. Individually, these bills were generally modest in size, although major building or refurbishment programmes could generate some extremely large bills. Regardless of their individual sizes, the complexity of aristocratic households and the high levels of everyday and luxury consumption that underpinned their lifestyles, meant that bills quickly mounted up, as did the overall level of commercial credit (and debt) to which the aristocrat was exposed.

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14. A. Jendorff, *Virtus, Merkur und Moneten. Adeliges Unternehmertum und die Transformation der alteuropäischen Eliten*, Baden-Baden 2021; A. Jendorff/A. C. Cremer (eds.), *Decorum und Mammon im Widerstreit? Adeliges Wirtschaftshandeln zwischen Standesprofilen, Profitstreben und ökonomischer Notwendigkeit*, Heidelberg 2022.
 15. J. Whittle/E. Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household. The World of Alice Le Strange*, Oxford 2012, 72–84; F. Heal, 'Food Gifts, the Household and Politics of Exchange in Early Modern England', in: *Past & Present* 199 (2008), 41–70.

Naturally, tradesmen and retailers presented their bills in the local currency, which presents challenges for the comparative analysis of credit. Whilst it is possible to produce conversion rates, these would vary considerably over time, not least due to the constant use of parallel currencies and currency reforms such as that in Sweden in 1776. A better idea of the local buying power of these different currencies – and thus the relative wealth of the aristocratic families – can be gleaned from some relative prices, for example the cost of employing a footman. At the turn of the 19th century, a footman in the Rhineland could expect to earn up to 30 *Reichstaler (Rtl.)* per year (plus board, lodging and livery), while his equivalent in Württemberg was paid roughly the same at 35 *fl.* A little earlier, the same footman in Sweden would have earned 6 *riksdaler*, whereas one in England could expect to receive £15 per annum by 1790.¹⁶ With this in mind, we can tentatively suggest that an income of £10,000 in England was the equivalent of 20,000 *Rtl.* in the Rhineland, 25,000 *fl.* in Württemberg and 4,000 *riksdaler* – or 72,000 *daler kopparmynt* before the 1776 monetary reform – in Sweden.

The account books of Sir Roger Newdigate show average annual outgoings of about £4000 in the 1760s, which rose to £8000 by the 1780s and the 1790s, although the figures varied considerably year-on-year.¹⁷ A large proportion of this (increased) spending was on investments in land and the development of coal mines, the repayment of loans, the payment of servants' wages, and the like. Perhaps one-third of it went to tradespeople supplying goods to his houses in Warwickshire and London. The nature of spending is captured in the receipted bills of the Leigh family.¹⁸ They record total outgoings of £68,395 between 1730 and 1806, with intense bursts of spending in 1738–1739 and 1763–1766, following the inheritance of the estate by Thomas, fourth Lord Leigh, and Edward, fifth Lord. Annual family spending reached about £2700 and £4200, respectively, against an annual income that rose from about £7000 per annum in 1749 to over £10,000 by the 1760s.¹⁹

In Germany, the counts of Salm-Reifferscheid-Dyck had an annual turnover of 12,000–14,000 *Rtl.* at their estate in the Rhineland, although this excluded the monies spent during their annual stay in Paris over the winter as well as other sources of income.²⁰ The accounts of the Württemberg court noble Karl von Dillen record receipts and expenditure of about 25,000 *fl.* in 1815/1816. Half of the amount was spent on the ongoing building project at his country house in Dätzingen, while the remainder funded an extravagant lifestyle at court, where he had to keep up appearances.²¹ The count of Adelman were imperial knights in the Southwest of Germany and had to be more careful with their money. Although their income amounted roughly to 20,000 *fl.*, the better part of this went into the upkeep of the estate, the servicing of debts, and meeting the demands of various family members.²²

The consumption landscape was more limited in Sweden than in England and Germany: Strict state and guild regulations restricted the number of suppliers.²³ Country houses and manors produced many of the everyday goods that they needed and they also received goods from tenant farmers as part of their rent. Nonetheless, the account books of the Fersen family record outgoings

16. Archiv Schloss Dyck (ASD) Rentamtsbücher No. 1, fol. 40; StAL PL 12 III Bü 131, fol. 235; RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 13; Warwickshire Record Office (WRO), CR136/v/136: Sir Roger Newdigate Accounts, 1763–1796.

17. See J. Stobart/M. Rothery, *Consumption and the Country House*, Oxford 2016, 25–26.

18. They largely exclude estate costs, building work, wages and even mundane spending on provisions.

19. Shakespeare Central Library and Archives (SCLA), series DR18/5, receipted bills; see also Stobart / Rothery, *Consumption and the County House*, 20, 25–27.

20. ASD Rentamtsbücher No. 1–35 (1806–1825).

21. Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (HStAS) Q3/13 Bü 2.

22. StAL PL 12 III Bü 131.

23. See, for example, L. Magnusson, *An Economic History of Sweden*, London, New York 2000, 66–67.

on a variety of goods and services provided commercially. Their annual incomes varied considerably year-on-year due to investments in and the sale of ironworks: between 1752 and 1784, Carl von Fersen's incomes ranged from 1000 to 16,000 *riksdaler*, of which more than half went to maintaining the household and personal consumption; the income of his brother, Axel von Fersen, varied even more, from 6200 to 47,000 *riksdaler* (1762–1794), with roughly one-fifth being spent on running the household and the estates. Peaks in spending came with marriages and house building. In 1751, for instance, the cost of renovations and building accounted for 40% of Axel von Fersen's annual income. By the 1760s, it was further compounded by the expenditure associated with the brothers' seven daughters and Fersen's renovation of his country house at Mälsåker and the construction of a new house at Ljung.²⁴

While the income enjoyed by these families and their room for manoeuvre in terms of discretionary expenditure was certainly different, they all spent heavily and made good use of commercial credit, be it for themselves or for the upkeep of the estate. Indeed, credit came from a huge number of suppliers. The Leigh bills, for example, include 1302 individuals providing goods or services on credit (1730–1806), whilst the account books of Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury Hall identify 1551 named suppliers (1747–1796).²⁵ Over a much shorter time period (1808–1815), Karl von Dillen used 179 different artisans, retailers and tradesmen, all of whom sent bills to his estate.²⁶ The Fersen accounts seldom identify the supplier by name, but it is apparent that they too depended on a large number of local and more distant tradespeople.

In short, aristocratic families across Europe were dependent upon commercial credit from a broad range of suppliers. The sums involved varied between families, each of which was enmeshed in dense but geographically broad networks of credit that encompassed local suppliers of everyday items, such as candles and coal, as well as prestigious metropolitan tradesmen who supplied high-end goods, including silverware and mahogany furniture. The precise motivation for these suppliers to extend credit to their aristocratic customers is beyond the scope of this paper. Some probably sought the kudos that this patronage brought; but the bills they presented and the accounts of noble families make clear that they expected debts to be paid and were seldom shy about pursuing payment.

3. Guiding conduct: books and letters

Aristocrats saw themselves as natural leaders of society. As such, they were deeply involved in upholding the legal, moral and religious norms that regulated society. In terms of credit relations, this meant honouring one's commitments, paying the bill and giving one's commercial counterpart their due, with all the considerable time-lag that was the norm in contemporary commercial dealings. At the same time, notions of nobility relied on a certain kind of lifestyle as well as the idea of standing above generally accepted social norms which resulted in highly adaptive behaviours to competing norms.²⁷ Although defaulting on commercial credit might have come to be seen as

24. Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv*, 412–425. The currency is given in riksdaler, in order to compare figure before and after the monetary reform of 1776; see also E. Bengtsson et al., 'Aristocratic Wealth and Inequality in a Changing Society. Sweden, 1750–1900', in: *Scandinavian Journal of History* 44 (2019), 27–52.

25. Warwickshire Record Office (WRO), CR136/v/156: Accounts 1747–1762; CR136/v/136: Accounts, 1763–1796. 25% of transactions recorded do not include a named supplier.

26. HStAS Q3/13 Bü 1–5.

27. See R. G. Ash, 'What Makes the Nobility Noble?' in: J. Leonhard/C. Wieland (eds.), *What Makes the Nobility Noble? Comparative Perspectives from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Göttingen 2011, 329–339; H. v. Thiessen, 'Normenkonkurrenz. Handlungsspielräume, Rollen, normativer Wandel und normative Kontinuität vom späten Mittelalter bis zum Übergang zur Moderne', in: A. Karsten / H. von Thiessen (eds.), *Normenkonkurrenz in historischer Perspektive*, Berlin 2015, 241–286.

acceptable behaviour by some if it assisted in maintaining the noble lifestyle, normative literature such as conduct books, educational treatises as well as parental advice tried to impress the importance of maintaining good credit, as we will see in the following.

Conduct books, an important genre since the late 16th century, set out the norms for a well-run, patriarchal household within a God-given order. Mostly written by professional men, including jurists, doctors and clergymen, with noblemen such as Wolf Helmhardt von Hoberg being the exception, conduct books were directed at the heads of noble and even princely households.²⁸ Jessica Parland-von Essen argues that the conduct literature in Sweden was not primarily targeted at the highest echelons of the aristocracy, but to families of the lesser nobility and wealthy bourgeoisie with social aspirations, as well as to the governesses and private tutors of their children.²⁹ Still, classified as *Oeconomica*, books of this kind were commonplace in the libraries of even the highest nobility across Europe.³⁰

While these conduct books were mostly concerned with agrarian production, they nevertheless tended to stress the importance of carefully balancing incoming and outgoing monies by highlighting not only the economic prudence of such circumspect behaviour but also its moral worth.³¹ In Germany, influential works like Otto von Münchhausen's *Der Hausvater* (1764–1773) and Christian Friedrich Germershausen's *Die Hausmutter in allen ihren Geschäften* (1778–1781) included moralistic tales which admonished its readers to always keep within their means and to withstand even the lures of unexpected windfalls. Here, reckless spending led to a life on credit and consequently to the loss of former ease.³²

Domestic conduct books in England sang from the same hymn sheet and provided a clear and consistent message over generations: both gentlemen and gentlewomen were exhorted to be cautious when buying on credit and assiduous in repaying these debts. In *The Gentleman's Calling* (1660), the author laments that 'Tis become so fashionable a thing to run to Scores [i.e., debts], and so unfashionable to pay them, that he is scarce thought well-bred, that has not bankrupted one at least of each Trade he deals with'.³³ The exaggeration was for effect but underlined the importance of dealing honourably with tradesmen. In *The Gentleman Instructed* (1704), George Hickee was more concerned with the dangers that credit held for the aristocracy. He related the cautionary tale of Madam P., whose 'Credit run her in every Merchant's Book, from the Exchange in the Strand to that in the City. She waded Chin-deep, but by Misfortune, tho' Credit enter'd her Name in so many, it was unable to cross it out of one [...] she run on Tick till she sunk her Purse with her Credit'.³⁴ In short, she drowned in debt. The risks posed to both finances and reputation were still apparent at the end of the 18th century, when the authors of *Practical Education*

28. A. C. Cremer, 'Adeliges Wirtschaftshandeln in der Frühen Neuzeit – eine Annäherung', in: Cremer / Jendorff, *Decorum und Mammon*, 27–49, here 28–29.

29. J. Parland-von Essen, *Behagets betydelse. Döttrarnas utbildning i det sena 1700-talets adelskultur*, Möklinta 2005, 34–37, 59–60.

30. C. Reinle, 'Auf Spurensuche. Recherchen zu den Bibliotheken der Ritterschaft im Süden und Südwesten des Alten Reiches', in: K. Andermann (ed.), *Rittersitze. Facetten adeligen Lebens im Alten Reich*, Tübingen 2002, 71–109; F. Scholten-Buschhoff, 'Verkaufen, Verschenken, Lagern. Adelige Getreidewirtschaft in Rheinland und Westfalen, 1650–1850', Dissertation, Universität Münster 2022, 129–150.

31. See I. Richarz, *Oikos, Haus und Haushalt. Ursprung und Geschichte der Haushaltsökonomik*, Göttingen 1991; M. Sikora, *Der Adel in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Darmstadt 2009, 78–80; S. Maß, *Kinderstube des Kapitalismus? Monetäre Erziehung im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2018, 44–50.

32. For an example, see O. v. Münchhausen, *Der Hausvater*, vol. 4.1, Hannover 1769, 320–324.

33. R. Allstree, *The Gentleman's Calling*, London 1671, 75.

34. G. Hickee, *The Gentleman Instructed*, 10th edition, London 1732, 150.

(1798) wrote of the need for boys to gain experience in the practices of financial management and for girls to rely on their natural prudence in matters of household management.³⁵

In Sweden, many conduct books were adapted translations from German, French and, more occasionally, English originals, although the nobility read conduct literature predominantly as originals, mostly in French. Swedish translations naturally repeated the values expressed in the originals and included Mme Leprince de Beaumont's *Nyttige och nöjsama öfvingar, för barn och ungdom* (1768–1775), which had been adapted from French, and Joachim Heinrich Campe's *Faderliga råd til sin dotter* (1798), which was adapted from German. Similar to Swedish texts, some of which had a remarkably long shelf life, Campe's book echoes the importance of carefully balancing incomes and expenses as seen in Germershausen's *Die Hausmutter. Oeconomia*, which was written by the Swedish aristocrat Count Per Brahe between 1581 and 1585 and circulated in manuscript form before its publication in 1677, remained the most widely read conduct manual in Sweden well into the eighteenth century. In his discussion of the principles and practices of aristocratic thrift and the management of estate and household, Brahe stressed the importance of discipline, temperance, and moderate luxury.³⁶

Despite all their advice on economising, these normative texts agreed on the fact that certain forms of conspicuous consumption were needed to maintain the family's noble status and honour and to acquire distinction. To live like a lord, one had to spend like a lord. However, this did not imply a careless approach towards money matters or credit; indeed, noble parents never tired of instilling in their children a profound respect for house- and book-keeping – not least to set a good example to the lower order of society. To educate their children about money, many nobles resorted to the instrument of pocket money. Christian Franz Dietrich von Fürstenberg (1689–1755), for example, decided to give his daughters a quarterly allowance to spend on clothes and accessories. They were expected to keep an account of all their expenses in order to 'learn thriftiness'.³⁷ Joseph von Salm-Reifferscheid-Dyck, aged eleven, must have received similar instructions from his widowed mother as he carefully noted in his account book expenses such as alms, pencils, engravings to copy, and a book of puzzles 'for leisure time'; he balanced these outgoings against the monies received.³⁸ At a similar age and of equally high social standing, Franz von Spee also recorded his purchases of chalk, playing sticks and donations, this time in his diary.³⁹ These practices were widespread across Europe, as also demonstrated by the carefully kept account books and diaries of the Welsh Wynne-sisters.⁴⁰ Similarly, in Sweden, the children of nobility learned from an early age to record their spending and were socialised to the practice through quarterly pin money. The sums involved varied considerably according to the family's wealth, the children's gender and the parents' prudence.⁴¹ Therefore, already at a tender age,

35. M. Edgeworth/R. Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, London 1798, 690, 699–700, 707.

36. P. Brahe, *Oeconomia, Eller Huuszholdz-Book För ungt Adels-folck. Skrifwin Anno 1581*, Wijsingsborg 1677; B. Eriksson, *Statstjänare och jordägare. Adelsideologi i Per Brahe den äldres 'Oeconomia'*, Stockholm 2008; L. Runefelt, *Hushållningens dygder. Affektlära, hushållningslära och ekonomiskt tänkande under svensk stormaktstid*, Stockholm 2001. The importance of "oeconomics" to household management is discussed in detail by K. Harvey, *Little Republic. Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford 2012.

37. N. Jansen, 'Christian Franz Dietrich von Fürstenberg (1689–1755). Instructionum mehrentheils die Töchter betreffend – Ein Beispiel der weiblichen Adelserziehung im 18. Jahrhundert', *Staatsarbeit*, Universität zu Köln 2011, 15–16.

38. E. Schläwe, 'Transkription. Rechnungen des jungen Grafen Joseph über Ausgaben seines Taschengeldes, 1784/85', in: M. O. Braun / E. Schläwe / F. Schönfuß (eds.), *Netzbiographie – Joseph zu Salm-Reifferscheidt-Dyck (1773–1861)*, Köln 2014.

39. Archiv Schloss Heltorf T1, Anschreibebuch über Einnahmen und Ausgaben (1793).

40. A. Freemantle (ed.), *The Wynne Diaries. The Adventures of two Sisters in Napoleonic Europe*, Oxford 1952.

41. See Parland-von Essen, *Behagets betydelse*, 82; K. Vainio-Korhonen, *Sofie Munsterhjelmin aika. Aatelisnaisia ja upseereita 1800-luvun Suomessa*, Helsinki 2012, 124–129.

noble children learned about money and its value(s) and were encouraged to exercise accounting, maybe even more so than their bourgeois counterparts.⁴²

When sons left home to go on a grand tour or to enter university, their parents also went to great lengths to instruct them on the right management of money and credit. For the young noblemen, these episodes of perfecting their education oftentimes represented their first experience of independently handling large amounts of money.⁴³ For the families, though, this independence was a source of constant worry and caused a stream of haranguing and admonition. When Fabian Reinhold von Fersen was travelling to France as part of his grand tour in 1783–1786, his father Axel von Fersen advised him to ‘be thrifty and wise, Paris is seductive, everything invites you to pomp and dissipation, you have a good advice close to You, use it and do not rely too much on Yourself’.⁴⁴ Fersen was referring to his friend, Baron Jean Bolemany, who accompanied both his sons on their grand tours, as a sensible and reliable person whose judgment Fabian was to trust. Fersen underlined the sentence, which in his correspondence was a strong testimonial of his worries concerning his son’s spending. A key motivation for Fersen’s advice was the lavish spending of Fabian’s older brother during his own grand tour. Between 1770 and 1774, Hans Axel von Fersen had spent a fortune equivalent to several landed estates or the rent of a town palace in central Stockholm for half a century. Compounding this, Hans Axel lived mostly in France after 1778 while he established a military career there. The endeavour, which was financed by a somewhat reluctant father, was extremely costly.⁴⁵

Similar tensions characterised the correspondence of English and German families, with sons often pleading that the funds allowed were insufficient for them to properly benefit from the experience of travel. Writing in 1761 to his father at Lulworth Castle in Dorset, John Weld argued that another young man ‘whose oeconomy and good conduct you have already approved’ had considerably more than the £500 he was being allowed. Pleading for a greater allowance, he assured his father that the money would be spent well rather than making ‘ducks and draks with it’.⁴⁶ Similarly, the Prussian noble Friedrich Ludwig Karl von Finckenstein expressed general economic concerns when his two sons entered Erlangen University. However, he also heaped eminently practical advice onto them: diligence and punctuality were to be observed in all financial matters, and fixed costs were never to be incurred on credit. He demanded that they got to know both the price of things and the value of (foreign) currencies, and that they recorded all their daily expenses, small and large, into an account book to keep track of their finances. The concerned father further advised his sons to keep all the receipts until the merchant in question had sent a final bill showing a settled account.⁴⁷ When writing to their parents, sons were therefore aware of the need to illustrate their sound financial management, even when they were seeking additional funds. In England, John Coffin argued that Oxford was ‘a very pleasant place, if a man has money in his pocket’, but he was likewise careful to stress that the extra £20 that he sought was required to cover the cost of his

42. On pocket money, see also Maß, *Kinderstube*, 35–26, 91–102.

43. J. Black, *The British Abroad. The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*, Sutton 2003; M. Leibetseder, *Die Kavaliertour. Adlige Erziehungsreisen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Köln 2004; J. Matzerath, ‘Was bildet den Adel? Gruppentypische Ausbildungswege und Bindekräfte’, in: I. Cerman/L. Velek (eds.), *Adelige Ausbildung. Die Herausforderung der Aufklärung und ihre Folgen*, München 2006, 83–93.

44. RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Fabian Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 1a. Axel von Fersen to Fabian Reinhold von Fersen 16 September 1785.

45. Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv*, 103–110.

46. M. Rothery/H. French, *Making Men. The Formation of Elite Male Identities in England, c.1660–1900. A Sourcebook*, Basingstoke 2012, letter 93: 2 March 1761.

47. Brandenburg Landeshauptarchiv (BLHA) Rep 37 Alt-Madlitz 379, Madlitzsche Unterhaltung im August 1801; on the Finckenstein family, see G. de Bruyn, *Die Finckensteins. Eine Familie im Dienste Preußens*, Berlin 1999.

chambers, gowns and books.⁴⁸ An indirect route was sometimes taken to avoid the embarrassment of admitting a ‘want of prudence’, such as when Edward Parker of Brownsholme, Lancashire, wrote to his sister for a loan of £20 rather than asking his father directly.⁴⁹

To these noble families, a sound financial education of their children, both boys and girls, was an important factor for them to lead a successful life as well as a guarantee that the ‘lustre of the family’ was going to be preserved. Both ideas of noble honour as well as a healthy respect for commercial dealings and economic dependencies underpinned their attitude.

4. Motivation: honour, reputation and good standing

With the advice of the conduct literature and their parents’ admonishments ringing in their ears, it is unsurprising that all the aristocratic families studied in this article settled their accounts with suppliers. This is not to say that the aristocracy could always be relied on to pay: some undoubtedly defaulted on debts to tradespeople and others. Personal insolvency could also prohibit payment and leave tradespeople with unsettled accounts, and nobles sometimes died leaving more debts than assets, as was the case of the South German noble Johann Ernst von Landsé, who died impoverished in the hospital of the Konstanz chapter. Among his debtors were not only family members and fellow nobles – a tangible reflection of personal loans underpinning the culture of aristocratic credit – but also a wide range of shopkeepers and artisans who had offered Landsé commercial credit. It seems doubtful that these debts were ever repaid.⁵⁰ However, such examples were the exception rather than the norm. Indeed, some elite householders could be said to be assiduous, and even anxious, to settle their accounts. Whilst their general motivations were shaped by the cultural milieu created through advice and example, several specific rationales can be identified that reflected both their economic or social standing and their conception of (family) honour.

Economic motivations appear to have been most common amongst the lower ranks of the aristocracy. Perhaps the most significant impetus to settle debts was fear of the consequences of not paying. In Sweden, Märta Helena Reenstierna regularly travelled the short distance from her estate to Stockholm on shopping trips. While she clearly gained considerable pleasure from these excursions, she was also anxious to pay for her purchases promptly. She used ready money and paid directly as often as possible. In June 1799, she bought 10½ ells of blue silk serge for a new petticoat from the fashionable shopkeeper Johan Abraham Théel, noting that her purchases were ‘however on Credit’ – usually, she paid him in cash. In March 1794, she noted in her daily journal that she had travelled to Stockholm in order to ‘pay Th[é]el my debt for Jacob Reenstierna’ (her distant cousin).⁵¹ Indebtedness made Mrs Reentierna worry about potentially swift fluctuations in the family economy that could lead, according to her, to the debtor’s prison where a friend of hers, the famous poet Carl Michael Bellman, had landed in April 1794.⁵² Elizabeth Purefoy appears to have harboured no such fears, but she was just as keen to settle her bills promptly. She did much of her shopping by correspondence, writing from her home in Buckinghamshire, England, to shopkeepers in the surrounding towns and in London.

48. Rothery/French, *Making Men*, letter 71: 18 April 1696.

49. H. French/M. Rothery, *Man’s Estate. Landed Gentry Masculinities, c.1660–c.1900*, Oxford 2012, 92–93.

50. HStAS B 580 Bü 864.

51. Nordiska museets digitala arkiv, Årstafruns dagböcker. 27 March 1794, 17 June 1794, 12 November 1794, 9 February 1795, 1 June 1799; see also P. Rasmussen, ‘Shoppingturer och shoppingupplevelser med Märta Helena Reenstierna vid sekelskiftet 1800’, in: M. Hellsing/J. Ilmakunnas (eds.), *Shopping i Stockholm. Sociala praktiker på gatunivå, 1700–1850*, Stockholm 2023, 31–65.

52. Nordiska museets digitala arkiv, Årstafruns dagböcker. 2 April 1794.

Her letters almost invariably ended with instructions for the bills to be sent with the goods and assurances of prompt payments. Her reasons for doing so were made explicit in a letter to a London grocer called Mr Wilson, with whom she placed many orders: 'I always pay you as ready money', she wrote, 'because Mr Cossins [Wilson's predecessor] told mee [sic] I should be better used for doing so'.⁵³ Paying promptly, she believed, would bring her keener prices, good quality items and better service – things that she was not confident would follow from her social standing alone.

Those further up the social hierarchy were more concerned with ideas of individual and family honour. In England, the anonymous author of *The Gentleman's Library* (1722) lamented the way that there were many who 'are proud of the boasted Worth of their Families, yet have neither Honour nor Conscience enough to discharge these personal Engagements, but protract Payment to an unreasonable Date, and perhaps at last force their Creditor to the Trouble of a Prosecution'.⁵⁴ Perhaps this was what had happened in 1799 when Sir Roger Newdigate received a writ for an outstanding debt owed to his now-deceased coachmaker, Mr Leader. Clearly alarmed, he dashed off two letters to his lawyers, instructing them to pay the debt, despite his reservations about both the accuracy and legitimacy of the bill. He complained that part of it was for 'some small articles [...] for which they never thought it worthwhile before to send a bill. The rest is an enormous charge for a very plain chaise and harness for four horses, which I do not believe any Jury would allow two thirds'. Nonetheless, he concluded that 'I do not think it worth my while to contest',⁵⁵ probably because pursuing the matter through the courts would only end up undermining his honour and dignity, which had been carefully guarded and nurtured through thirty years as an MP.

Upholding the honour of the family as well as social norms was also important in Germany. Joseph Anselm von Adelmann took great pride in the fact that over a period of several decades and by personal application he had managed to put the family's finances on a stable footing again. Among his three sons, he deemed only the youngest one a suitable successor and future head of the family. Clemens Wenzelslaus had namely 'always kept his things together and knows very well that thrift is an essential virtue among the nobility to preserve its lustre and to avoid contempt'. Whilst Joseph Anselm berated his two other sons, Nikolaus and Philip, for their spendthrift, dissolute, and ungrateful ways and in effect disinherited them, he nevertheless consented to servicing their debts.⁵⁶ He reasoned: 'Most of my son's debts are being paid promptly, herein lays his and the family's credit – is the latter weakened, the family's reputation suffers endlessly.'⁵⁷ Personal credit and reputation were as tightly interwoven in noble circles as they were in mercantile families and social rank alone was not sufficient to guarantee it.⁵⁸ The upstart noble Karl von Dillen was just as keen to maintain his honour and reputation, a fact some shopkeepers made good use of to ensure the payment of almost forgotten bills. The Parisian tailor Georg Armbruster

53. Eland, *Purefoy Letters*, no. 104.

54. Anon., *The Gentleman's Library Containing Rules of Conduct in all Parts of Life*, London 1722, 54.

55. WRO, CR136/B/2627[1], Letter, 20 May 1799.

56. STAL PL 12 II Bü 829, will and codicil, 17 October 1787 and 17 February 1789. Joseph Anselm seems to have been justified in his disappointment: Both sons managed to repeatedly run up debts of up to 10,000 fl. in one year. See G. Kollmer, *Die schwäbische Reichsritterschaft zwischen Westfälischem Frieden und Reichsdeputationshauptschluss. Untersuchung zur wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Lage der Reichsritterschaft in den Ritterkantonen Neckar-Schwarzwald und Kocher*, Stuttgart 1979, 200–201.

57. StAL B 575 Bü 25, Joseph Anselm Adelmann von Adelmansfelden an das Direktorium des Kantons Kocher, Ellwangen 29 August 1792, cited after Kollmer, *Die schwäbische Reichsritterschaft*, 210.

58. See M. Häberlein, 'Kreditbeziehungen und Kapitalmärkte vom 16. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert', in: Schlumbohm (ed.), *Soziale Praxis des Kredits*, 37–51; A. S. Overkamp, *Fleiß, Glaube, Bildung. Kaufleute als gebildete Stände im Wuppertal*, Göttingen 2020, 176–185.

not only wrote to Dillen himself but also engaged the services of his brother, who was still living in Altenrieth, to claim the money owed for a pair of silk breeches made in Paris three years earlier. In their letters, the brothers engaged a language mixing subservience with social pressure, implying on the one hand that it was the insignificance of the sum to such a wealthy person as himself that had made Dillen forget about it, while suggesting that an honourable person such as the count would surely not fail to pay the bill now that he had been reminded. And pay he did.⁵⁹ Similarly, in 1812 the recently widowed Elise Goldschmied played on Dillen's sense of noble self as well as his image as a man of ample means to extract the money owed to her deceased husband. She claimed to have asked a lawyer to collect all her husband's outstanding monies, except for the 121 *fl.* owed by Dillen since 1803. She flattered Dillen: 'I did not doubt a minute that once Your Excellency has received my letter and the bill, Your Highness will most certainly pay me the balance on which I rely very much for the upkeep of my household.' Although it took another four months and yet some more carefully worded letters, in the end Elise Goldschmied received the money.⁶⁰

In both instances involving Dillen, the shopkeepers and artisans turned contemporary ideas of patronage, honour and reputation into mechanisms of moral blackmail which highlighted that credit was negotiated not only in commercial, but also in social terms. This reminds us of the fragility of reputation and honour and of the fact that credit was negotiated. It was contingent on the actions of the supplier as well as the aristocrat-consumer: both had agency in shaping credit relations and their social and economic consequences.

5. Credit arrangements

The credit offered by various tradespeople essentially took the form of book debts for goods and services supplied in advance of payment. Arrangements varied widely, but they fell into three broad categories: first, where a bill was presented by the supplier shortly after a single transaction had taken place; secondly, where goods and services were supplied over several months or even years before the bill was presented; and thirdly, a formalisation of these practices into accounts that were presented at regular intervals. In each instance, a further period of *de facto* credit occurred between receipt and payment of the bill.

Single transaction bills were the standard way in which the Fersens paid for everyday goods for their Stockholm house: supplies of firewood and coal, oats and hay, wine, spices, cooking oil, flour, sugar and coffee were all invoiced in this manner. A similar practice was used when Axel von Fersen built a new country house in Ljung in the 1770s and the early 1780s. For instance, the 25 tiled stoves – costing either 100 or 200 *koppardaler* apiece and installed in all the rooms – were delivered by the local master stove maker Olof Humbla in the nearest town, Norrköping, and a bill was presented on delivery. Similarly, local carpenters and painters sent Fersen a bill directly after their work was finished.⁶¹ For them, a bill comprising several thousands of *dalers* was simply too large to delay. The desire to minimise the period of credit might have also motivated those supplying the Nesselrodes with soap, candles and schnapps, or the Dillens with knitting yarn or horse brushes, to present their bills after each transaction.⁶²

On other occasions, a single-transaction bill reflected one-off purchases or goods acquired for a specific occasion. This could be seen in the Dillens' purchases of visiting cards and a shoetree, and in the

59. HStAS Q3/13 Bü 1, letter by Georges Armbruster, Paris, 20 July 1812; HStAS Q3/13 Bü 1, letter by Christian Armbruster, Altenrieth, 31 August 1812.

60. HStAS Q3/13 Bü 3, letters by Elise Goldschmied, Karlsruhe, 2 December 1813, 24 April 1814, 17 June 1814.

61. RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 38–52, Räkenskaper (account books).

62. See various bills in LA NRW R AA0606 Nesselrode-Ehreshoven 2294 and in HStAD Q3/13 Bü 2.

repair work by a coachmaker or the making of a tablecloth and matching napkins for the Nesselrodes.⁶³ It was also true of many purchases made by Mary Leigh at Grove House, her London villa. The lamp acquired from Argand & Co. in 1790 may have been an experiment (the lack of subsequent purchases suggesting that it was not a great success), but the funeral drapery supplied by Storer and Fisher in 1792 was clearly required for a specific event, and the work undertaken in the autumn of 1786 by the upholsterer, Thomas Thackthwaite, was aimed at making necessary improvements to her newly acquired home.⁶⁴ In each instance, Leigh paid just one bill from each supplier before looking elsewhere for drapery and upholstery goods. Perhaps they were being tried out in the manner described by Hannah Chavasse in her study of Sir John Griffin Griffin.⁶⁵ The Salm-Reifferscheid-Dycks used this straightforward arrangement when they ordered goods for the fulfilment of specific requirements. In 1809/1810, for example, their steward paid six different suppliers for the provision of small quantities of velvet, cloth, linen and yarn.⁶⁶ In contrast with Leigh, however, these did not necessarily remain as one-off transactions, with the Salm-Reifferscheid-Dycks returning to some of these suppliers for future purchases. Instead, both the prompt delivery of the bill and its payment seem to have been a means to keep a clean desk when it came to rather insignificant purchases.

In all these instances, credit appears to have been purely transactional rather than a sign of the developing trust between customer and supplier. Trust was much more important in the second type of credit arrangement, involving the presentation of cumulative bills for purchases made over several months or even years. The most eye-catching examples of this kind of arrangement are the large, consolidated bills for furniture, upholstery and wallpapers presented to Edward, fifth Lord Leigh, by John and Thomas Burnett, William Gomm & Co., and Thomas Bromwich. These itemised goods and services which were mostly supplied between May 1763 and July 1764, and included dozens of separate items, often organised by the room at Stoneleigh Abbey for which they were intended, and amounted to £3,383 3s. 5 ½d., £819 9s. and £356 7s. ½d. respectively.⁶⁷ Such bills reflect not only the scale of work being undertaken, but also the size of the businesses being run by these men. Much the same is true of other suppliers of 'big-ticket' items, such as coachmakers and silversmiths: men like Robert Makepeace, the London silversmith, were able to allow Mary Leigh to accumulate a bill of £1031 7s. 3d. in the months leading up to June 1788, while also allowing her £534 for pieces sold back.⁶⁸ Similarly, on 15 November 1764, a Stockholm coachmaker called Burman presented Carl von Fersen with a bill for 250 *daler koppermynt* for a new chaise delivered to the count in 1763.⁶⁹

Carl von Fersen also received large cumulative bills from drapers, tailors and shoemakers, sometimes for purchases dating back several years. In August 1765, a shopkeeper Westerberg presented a bill for 4652 *daler koppermynt*, which had accumulated since 1762 and included purchases by both Count Carl von Fersen (2714 *daler*) and Countess Charlotta Sparre (1938 *daler*). It mostly comprised different types of cloth (including luxury textiles, ribbons and laces), but also included snuff.⁷⁰ On 30 May 1761, the shoemaker Kihlberg likewise billed Fersen 484 *daler koppermynt*

63. HStAD Q3/13 Bü 2, expenses of 15 Oct 1815; HStAD Q3/13 Bü 3, bill by Joh. Heinrich Glück, 14 November 1813; LA NRW R AA0606 Nesselrode-Ehreshoven 2166, fol. 55; LA NRW R AA0606 Nesselrode-Ehreshoven 2294, fol. 19.

64. SCLA, DR18/5/5899a, DR18/5/5975, DR18/5/5703.

65. H. Chavasse, 'Material Culture and the Country House. Fashion, Comfort and Lineage', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Northampton 2015, 131.

66. ASD Rentamtsbuch Nr. 4, fol. 81–83; ASD Rentamtsbuch Nr. 5.

67. SCLA, DR18/3/47/5; DR18/5/4402; DR18/5/4408.

68. SCLA, DR18/5/5809.

69. RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 5. Account book and bills 1765.

70. Ibid.

for 19 pairs of shoes and slippers made between 1758 and 1761. The footwear included shoes for the count and the countess, their daughters and their male servant.⁷¹ The Leighs also received large cumulative bills from their favoured drapers, the Fells of Haymarket in London, who generally allowed three or four months of purchases before presenting cumulative bills of up to £226.⁷² In Germany, it was almost standard to run up this type of bill with drapers and tailors. Quite often, shopkeepers, who simply sent the selected materials on to the tailor, billed only for the merchandise; they did so generally several months, but occasionally years, later. A case in point are the bills presented by the Stuttgart mercers Rapp & Finckh to Karl von Dillen. In the twelve months from April 1813, they repeatedly supplied fabrics and haberdashery, which came to a total of 632 *fl.* in April 1814.⁷³ As ordered, the mercers had sent the goods directly to a variety of suppliers in Ludwigsburg and Stuttgart, among them the tailor Häuser who regularly worked for Dillen. For work carried out between December 1812 and January 1814, Häuser finally charged 244 *fl.* in April 1814.⁷⁴ The previous bills, which had been carried over a shorter period of time, only amounted to 68 *fl.* and 86 *fl.* respectively, which suggests a growing level of trust as well as credit.⁷⁵

Even the most mundane goods were often acquired on credit extended via the presentation of a cumulative bill. This was the case with Frances Field, Wilson, Thornhill and Wilson, and Blakiston and Myles, who supplied the Leighs and Newdigates with groceries and presented bills covering anything from a few weeks to 6 months.⁷⁶ The Nesselrode-Ehreshovens in the Rhineland used grocers in Cologne and Düsseldorf, all of whom waited several months before they sent in their quite often substantial bills.⁷⁷ Here, the relatively small cost of items was offset by their quantity, and the bills could reach up to 100 *Rtl.* and more. In Württemberg, the counts of Adelman kept a 'booklet' [*Büchlein*] with the local innkeeper to record their regular purchases of both meat and beer. The booklet was settled intermittently and often in conjunction with various fees payable by the innkeeper to his lordship.⁷⁸ Similarly, a blacksmith called Weisheit occasionally undertook minor work and repairs at the Stockholm house of Carl von Fersen in the 1760s. He presented only two bills during the decade, but one of them comprised four pages and covered all the work that had been undertaken in the previous two years.⁷⁹

In all these instances, the cumulative bills indicate stable and long-term relationships between the supplier and their aristocratic customers. They reflect what Helen Berry has described as a system of 'personal acquaintance and credit' and Clare Haru Crowston as 'economies of regard', which are built on and sustained by mutual trust and mutual dependence.⁸⁰ Such arrangements were sometimes formalised in the final category of credit arrangement: the regular account, most common with suppliers of everyday provisions.

The shortest period of credit provided through these regular accounts was one month. The Nesselrodes in Düsseldorf, for instance, had a standing arrangement with the confectioner

71. RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 4. Account book and bills 1761.

72. SCLA, DR18/5/6098.

73. HStAD Q3/13 Bü 3, bill by Rapp & Finckh, 22 April 1814.

74. HStAD Q3/13 Bü 3, bill by Häuser, 22 April 1814.

75. HStAD Q3/13 Bü 1, bill by Häuser 29 April 1810, 29 May 1812.

76. SCLA, DR18/5/5865a, DR18/5/5992; WRO CR136/v/136, Sir Roger Newdigate Accounts, 1763–1796.

77. See the bills contained in LA NRW R AA0606 Nesselrode-Ehreshoven 1804, 2166, 2294.

78. For an example from the year 1805/1806, see StAL PL 12 III Bü 151, fol. 218–229.

79. RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 5. Account book and bills 1765; RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 7. Account book and bills 1770.

80. H. Berry, 'Prudent Luxury. The Metropolitan Tastes of Judith Barker, Durham Gentlewoman', in: R. Sweet / P. Lane (eds.), *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century Britain. 'On the Town'*, Aldershot 2003, 130–154; Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex*.

Joseph Schnitzler who supplied them on an almost daily basis with biscuits, macarons and sugared almonds. Schnitzler's bill was settled monthly, just like those of the two butchers delivering meat to the Salm-Reifferscheid family at Schloss Dyck.⁸¹ The Adelmans enjoyed the services of the grocer Georg Häfelin in Ellwangen who supplied them with coffee, lemons, olive oil and other specialities, for which he billed them roughly every four months.⁸² More usual were quarterly accounts, like those that Mary Leigh ran with several Kensington retailers, including the butcher Roger Buckmaster, the coal merchant Samuel Kingston and the chandler James Wheble.⁸³ Similarly, in Stockholm, Carl von Fersen kept quarterly accounts with the saddle makers Stenlajj (in the 1760s) and Hammarström (1770s). These were due to Fersen's office as the head hunting-master of the royal court. A longer period of credit was extended to Fersen by a shopkeeper called Zuast who regularly delivered mineral water and sent an annual bill.⁸⁴ Similarly, Märta Helena Reenstierna had annual accounts with several Stockholm tradesmen, including a wine merchant, an ironmonger, a spice shop, a jeweller and a florist. However, a key difference between an affluent courtier and a manor owner with a modest income was that the tradesmen sent their bills to Count Fersen and awaited payment, whilst Mrs Reenstierna went personally to the shopkeepers to settle her accounts for the past year.⁸⁵

In addition to the credit extended to them by retailers and artisans, aristocratic families could take a further period of credit by delaying payment once the bill had been presented. In some ways, this reflects the stereotype of the aristocracy as bad payers.⁸⁶ Hickee parodied such behaviour in *The Gentleman Instructed* by relating a story about a young man who, on being pursued for an outstanding debt, complained that 'the Rascal [...] duns me for Debt of ten Years standing; as if I enter'd his Books only Yesterday'. He opined that 'A Taylor's Right wears out with his Merchandize [...] a Taylor should no more think of asking a Debt, than a Gentleman of paying it'.⁸⁷ In reality, most members of the elite put off paying rather than avoiding it altogether and many paid their bills very promptly.

In some instances, payment was immediate. The Salm-Reifferscheids in the Rhineland patronised several shoemakers and tailors in the vicinity, mostly for making the servants' attire and occasionally also for themselves. These artisans usually presented smaller consolidated bills and were then paid on the spot in the steward's office.⁸⁸ More commonly, there was at least a short delay. We have already seen that Elizabeth Purefoy encouraged her suppliers to send their bills along with the goods and promised to pay promptly – in practice within a week or two. In this process, she was helped by having suppliers in London who would effectively operate as agents on her behalf, most notably Thomas Robotham and Peter Moulson, in whose hands Purefoy left money to settle her London accounts.⁸⁹ In Sweden, Carl von Fersen generally paid his bills very promptly, with

81. LA NRW R AA0606 Nesselrode-Ehreshoven 989; ASD Rentamtsbücher No. 1–35 (Ausgabe an den Metzger).

82. See assorted bills in StAL PL 12 II Bü 1927.

83. For a fuller discussion of these arrangements, see J. Stobart, 'So Agreeable and Suitable a Place'. The Character, Use and Provisioning of a Late Eighteenth-Century Suburban Villa', in: *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39 (2015), 89–102.

84. RA, Stafundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 5. Account book and bills 1765; RA, Stafundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 7. Account book and bills 1770; RA, Stafundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 9. Account book and bills 1775.

85. Nordiska museets digitala arkiv, Årstafruns dagböcker. 22 January 1799.

86. See Crowston, *Credit, Fashion, Sex*, 174–175.

87. Hickee, *Gentleman Instructed*, 497.

88. See, for example, the bill presented and receipted by Heinrich Fischer, Aldenhoven, on 16 January 1815, for work carried out between 8 January and 12 December 1814. The payable amount was the significant sum of 49 *Rtl*. ASD Rentamtsbuch No. 15.

89. Eland, *Purefoy Letters*, 214–238.

most of them being settled more quickly than the two months it took to pay the account for mineral water presented by a supplier called Zuast on 26 April 1765.⁹⁰

Long delays were very rare, but not unknown. Carl von Fersen took over a year to pay a tailor his bill for 453 *koppardaler*, which was presented on 5 June 1764 and covered work completed between October 1763 and April 1764.⁹¹ Even more striking is the delay in payment experienced by James Cope, a London coachmaker. He presented a consolidated bill for £225 6s. which was dated 27 June 1764. It included a chariot for Edward, fifth Lord Leigh, costing £130 (supplied on 11 April 1764) and a new set of coach harnesses at £22 5s. (on 13 May), as well as £90 18s. for a post coach and harnesses for Mary Leigh. The last item had been supplied 3 years earlier and a copy of the original bill, dated 16 June 1761, was enclosed.⁹² In February 1765, Cope received £100 on account but had to wait until August of the same year before the bill was finally settled in full – over 4 years since supplying Mary with her new coach. As noted at the beginning of this article, suppliers to German nobles at times also had to demonstrate the virtue of patience. This was true both for imperial knights and court nobles. For example, the mercer Gottlieb Ch. Spaeth presented a bill of over 108 *fl.* to Karl von Dillen on 2 November 1812. Almost half of the amount was the remainder of a bill presented on 2 December 1811. A couple of years later, the sums involved were somewhat higher, with Spaeth presenting a bill of over 208 *fl.* 12 *str* on 23 September 1813. This bill was only settled on 10 February 1815, as part of a new bill that Dillen had run up between May and September 1814.⁹³

It is difficult to discern the specific reason for these delays as the sources do not reveal the motivation for the delay. Sometimes bills might have been simply forgotten or mislaid, and in other instances a shortage of cash might have been a factor. The diligent Clemens Wenzeslaus von Adelman certainly made it a point to pay off tradesmen when he received larger sums of cash, either through loans or rents from his tenants. As the latter were collected in November, he tended to settle accounts towards the end of the year.⁹⁴ The same might have applied to Karl Franz von Nesselrode-Ehreshoven who usually paid his trusted supplier Farina in gold, even if not always promptly.⁹⁵ The important point is that, regardless of highly idiosyncratic behaviours and certain delays, all these aristocrats did pay up in the end. Just like anybody else, they simply made good use of the different arrangements common in the world of commercial credit.

6. Conclusions

We saw at the start of this article how all three members of the social elite in three very different parts of Europe engaged in credit arrangements with suppliers. Their financial position and the nature of their purchases varied considerably, but each of them received credit and, in the end, paid their debts. In the process, they mirrored the prevailing notions and customs of early modern economics, and they were no different from any other participants in the marketplace. Their attitudes and actions were informed by what they read in the conduct literature, picked up from their parents or peers and above all, learned iteratively from previous engagement with commercial credit. These attitudes and everyday practices of commercial credit were persistent in their nature; rather than changing over time, there was a continuum of economic behaviour mirroring the

90. RA, Stafsundsarkivet, Carl Reinhold von Fersens arkiv, vol. 5. Account book and bills 1765.

91. *Ibid.*

92. SCLA, DR18/5/4350.

93. HStAS Q3/13 Bü 3.

94. See the personal account books in StAL PL 12 II Bü 1856; StAL PL 12 II Bü 1858.

95. LA NRW R AA0606 Nesselrode-Ehreshoven 2166.

gradual emergence of capitalism. In examining the practices of these people – and a range of other members of the Swedish, German and English aristocracy – we have focused on their detailed credit arrangements to exemplify much wider issues. Our analysis has provided a different view of the aristocracy from the prevailing picture that has thus far been much informed by studies of the French metropolitan and court nobility.

To be clear, the aristocracy formed a particular type of consumer, who were made powerful through their spending power and more particularly by their social status. This has led to the assumption that they were above the norms of commercial credit: that is, they either occupied a separate world of the traditional system of personal credit or were exempted from meeting their obligations to those who supplied goods and service in good faith. Indeed, when dealing with household servants, aristocrats regularly made good use of the hierarchical gap to turn outstanding wages into a servant's voluntary contribution to the household, which was graciously accepted by the master.⁹⁶ However, in the more public realm that was being shaped by the mechanisms of nascent capitalism, nobles ultimately had to abide by the rules of commercial credit and settle their accounts, as we have demonstrated: Sometimes they did so promptly, usually in a timely manner and only occasionally after being pursued by their creditors. Naturally, there were exceptions, but those who were spendthrift and errant comprised a tiny minority in all three countries. This established and widespread practice undermines bourgeois critiques of an aristocracy that was immoral and un-modern. In general, they were neither of these: like most other households, they drew on commercial credit and sometimes tried the patience of shopkeepers, but they ultimately paid for the things they had received. The specific motivations for the social elite to pay their shop debts varied from the hope for better service to the protection of their own or their family's honour.

What all the credit arrangements had in common was trust: suppliers clearly believed that they would receive payment. Many of them were willing to wait before presenting their bills, sometimes for several months after the purchases had been made; others were happy to run regular accounts with aristocratic customers. They did so with the unwavering belief that their customers would pay the bills, sometimes soon after they were presented, but more often several weeks or months later. This additional period of credit may have stretched some suppliers, but they trusted their aristocratic customers, as is apparent when this trust was stretched to breaking point by excessive delays, leading to irate letters such as those written by Bros. Mohr to the Adelmans and the litigation threatened against Newdigate.

To an extent, the ability to delay payment was a product of economic and social capital. Indeed, it is notable that those most anxious to pay their debts were from the lower reaches of the aristocracy. However, it is apparent that individual character and age also played an important role, in the same way as they did in aristocratic spending more generally. There were spendthrifts but also plenty of aristocrats who nurtured their resources and enhanced the estate that they passed on to future generations. Similarly, there were those, like the very wealthy Fersen family, who generally paid promptly and others, like Dillen, who often took a long time to settle their accounts. In the end, however, ideas of noble patronage did not absolve them from their financial obligations.

Overall, then, our article has repositioned the aristocracy into the mainstream of commercial credit, arguing that they were 'modern' consumers in their credit arrangements just as they were innovative in their consumption practices. We have offered an outline of these credit arrangements and relationships and illustrated our argument with material on a small number of families. What


96. See S. Kühn, 'Masters as Debtors of Their Servants in Early Modern Brandenburg and Saxony', in: L. Kolb/G. Oppitz-Trotman (eds.), *Early Modern Debts, 1550–1700*, Cham 2020, 53–82.


our approach offers is a framework for further and broader analyses that draw on other parts of Europe and offer a more detailed comparison of economies. These will advance the reintegration and normalisation of the aristocracy in economic history.

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