DOROTHEA ERXLEBEN: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ROLE MODEL
FOR TODAY’S WORKING PARENT

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I dedicate this thesis to my two beautiful children, Elisa and Garrett, from whom I stole many hours for its completion. Thank you both for enduring countless “just one more minute’s” and “hold on’s.” More than any old thesis, you know Mommy loves you best. Besides, without you, I would not have had a reason to write it.
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INTRODUCTION

I first became acquainted with Dorothea Erxleben in the fall of 2001 through a graduate seminar at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. The theme of the seminar, taught by Dr. Jürgen Sang, was female authors of eighteenth-century Germany. All the women presented throughout the semester were outstanding figures, overcoming great societal pressure to remain in restrictive traditional female roles. Sophie von La Roche, Marianne Ehrmann, Luise Adelgunde Gottsched, Charlotte Henriette Hezel, Ernestine Hoffman, Emilie Berlepsch, and Fredericke Helene Unger, to name a few, were authors, editors, publishers, and exemplary public figures in the peaceful struggle for women’s rights. Dorothea Erxleben stood out among them in the extent of her accomplishments. In an era when women were expected to remain in the traditional roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper, she studied medicine, was published at the age of twenty-four, supported her family by running a medical practice, and earned a doctorate while raising a family of nine! She managed to fulfill effectively customary female roles while sustaining not just any career, but one of the most challenging: medicine. This ignited my interest and prompted deeper investigation into her history.

I discovered that Erxleben is not well known outside of Europe. When recognized at all, it is for her status as Germany’s first female doctor. Most resources available were narrowly focused, indifferent timelines of her life, emphasizing specific periods
of her education and career or centering on her place in the struggle for women’s
righds. These resources disregarded or presented in a tainted light the crucial
circumstances under which she accomplished so much and the motivations behind her
choosing to marry and then raise children and have a career simultaneously. Male
and female scholars alike have exalted her as the ideal career woman, having a
profession, but remaining feminine, which is code for “never forgetting her womanly
duties.” One of these is arguably the most widely-cited work on Erxleben, Werner
Fischer-Defoy’s Die Promotion der ersten deutschen Ärztin, Dorothea Christiana
Erxleben, und ihre Vorgeschichte (1911). It is an excellent reference tool, containing
correspondences reproduced in full between Erxleben and the three doctors who
accused her of quackery, but Fischer-Defoy largely omitted the vital details of her
personal dealings, specifically her decision to marry. Ignoring the most significant
aspects of her life, he concluded by pronouncing her the “true German woman” (461).
In a similar vein is the second most frequently cited Erxleben reference, Lotte
Knabe’s Die erste Promotion einer Frau in Deutschland zum Dr. med. an der
Universität Halle (1952). Knabe provided a thorough and (for the most part) accurate
record of Erxleben’s education and career, advocating a well-rounded education for
women (she does not mention men) in her conclusion, but her work is missing the
insight into Erxleben’s choices as a career woman, wife, and mother that one could
expect or hope for from a female author-observer.
Anton Hermann Billig, in his dissertation entitled *Dorothea Christiana Erxleben, die erste deutsche Ärztin* (1966), noted that Dorothea’s name “appears from time to time in medical journals, together with unimportant dates and declarations, but until now there has not been an attempt to analyze the person and her position in German intellectual life” (Billig 5). He proceeded to discuss Erxleben’s intellectual works thoroughly, but as for “the person” Dorothea, he dedicated only eleven pages to her, in which he, too, laid out only the basic facts and dates of her life.

Billig, though he did not remedy the situation, recognized the deficiency of substance in the academic writings on Erxleben, and he was not the last. Andrea Scheffold, in her dissertation *Dorothea Christiana Erxleben, geb. Leporin (1715-1762): Leben und Legende der ersten deutschen promovierten Ärztin* (1995), gives a much more comprehensive biography and does address the driving forces behind Erxleben’s choices. She goes as far as to critique and categorize previously written biographies based on their interpretation of her motives. This critique, which will be discussed in more detail later, although thought-provoking, is flawed in its ultra-feministic analysis.

In addition to a narrow or distorted focus, I encountered inaccuracies in available research, from misgiven dates to critical data mistakes propagated by earlier secondary sources. Examples of these are Knabe’s (113) and later Kaiser’s (131) listing her number of stepchildren as four, Petschauer’s stating that Erxleben was a
student with her brother at university when in reality this was not the case (Education 234), and consistently misstating Erxleben’s age at the time of occurrences, including the publishing of her book in 1742, “when she was twenty-eight years old” (Education 233). She was actually twenty-six.

However, the most serious deficiency I discovered in available Erxleben research was that her potential as a role model for working parents had never been explored. I realized that this was where my most significant contribution could be made. In Dorothea Erxleben I personally discovered a valuable role model. Mothering two young children while pursuing my own education and career has often been trying. Erxleben’s success in harmonizing professional life with family is an inspiration for one who understands the frustrating battle of the working parent. Erxleben’s blending of typically female and male roles has already been recognized, but always accompanied by loaded critiques or validations. She has been set before female students as an example for women who never let her studying get in the way of “being feminine.” She has been presented as the “harmonizing of opposites,” which begs the acceptance of the incorrect notion that traditionally male and female roles are indeed in opposition to one another. She has been put on a pedestal as the noble woman who, in spite of her learning, was a wonderful wife, mother, and housekeeper. Removing Erxleben from the biased contexts that have accompanied a majority of the assessments of her life reveals a legitimate role model for those striving to fulfill successfully traditional as well as non-traditional roles.
It was evident that their focus, scope, and accuracy were lacking, yet the potential of Erxleben's story was clear. It deserved to be presented as accurately as possible. It also deserved a more impartial treatment, removed from the ultra-traditional or the ultra-feminist. In addition, it needed to encompass the background necessary to understand the magnitude of her accomplishments and the reasoning behind her decision-making. If presented in this way, an estimable role model is revealed. The objective of this thesis is a re-presentation and analysis of Erxleben pursuing these goals.

First, to compile the most accurate biographical information possible, I will examine and compare extensively first and secondary literature on Erxleben. I located over fifty resources, ranging from Internet sites to books, articles, and microfiche obtained from various American and German universities. To my knowledge, this will be the most thorough and comprehensive research an analysis of Erxleben's biography to date. Mistakes and omissions of data across already available sources will be cited and where possible, corrected, in this work. I will not include in full all of the available documents involved in Erxleben's life story. This would necessitate more time, space, and permission than I possess. Instead, I refer to existing biographical works, like the aforementioned article by Fischer-Defoy, which re-print or reproduce many of these in part or entirely. I also glean from them and make use of their most vital passages and quotations. I will present Erxleben's challenges, ideological
development, and motivations chronologically, from her birth in 1715 to her death in 1762. I will describe and compare the details of her biography as recorded in numerous secondary sources and in her own vita. Description, comparison, and analysis will be supported by existing biographical and autobiographical sources and related references on women's studies.

It is necessary to understand the role of women and the standard extent of their education in eighteenth-century Germany to fully appreciate Erxleben's accomplishments, specifically her obtaining an education and having a career in the first place. To this purpose, the political position of females in Erxleben's society, their function in the home as daughters, wives, and mothers, and the amount and nature of their learning will be discussed first. The changing attitudes toward women's education over the course of the eighteenth century will be examined, along with an overview of select figures responsible for influencing those attitudes, including Johann Christian Gottsched and his wife Luise Adelgunde, Marianne Ehrmann, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mary Wollstonecraft and Theodor Gottlieb Hippel, preceded by selected personages from the 1600s, such as Comenius and Schurman, whose ideas set the stage for the turn of the next century. Among those considered will be Erxleben's female contemporaries\(^1\) who pursued an

\(^1\) I use the word “contemporaries” loosely here to designate other women who lived and worked during the eighteenth century, not necessarily during the same years as Erxleben. True professional contemporaries of Erxleben, that is, other female doctors, cannot be presented because of the uniqueness of her unprecedented case, which was not repeated until 148 years after her graduation.
occupation during this highly restrictive period and found it difficult or impossible to sustain a career and raise a family at the same time.

An analytical biography of Dorothea Erxleben will follow, beginning with a chapter on her childhood and her unique dual education, being educated in the medical field as well as in traditional female duties. Her academic education and the precarious circumstances surrounding her request to Fredrick the Great to attend university will then be covered. Her first publication and a description of its content will be outlined. The following chapter on career and family will contain the core of the biography, entailing discussion of her life-altering decision to marry Johann Erxleben, a widower with five children, and her subsequent role as working mother. The unique treatment of her critical decision and undertaking of motherhood is central to this thesis, setting it apart from other works on Erxleben and lending new perspective to its evaluation. Next, the plagiary of her first book and the accusations of quackery that prompted her to seek a legitimizing degree will be dealt with, followed by details of her acquisition of a medical doctorate from the University of Halle, the submission of her dissertation, and her formal exam. Revealing first-hand reports will be used to illustrate the details of this exam and promotion ceremony. In the last chapter, what is known about her final years will end the biography.

Following the conclusion, I will close with a word on the need for and relevance of Erxleben as a role model for working parents of today. Particular demand for such a
role model in the Hawaiian islands will be put into perspective, as well as the surprising concordance of Erxleben’s eighteenth-century, western philosophies with the ancient Hawaiian concepts of *pono* and *po’okela*.

In re-presenting an Erxleben history, there are certain limitations involved. First is the hindrance of physical distance from many primary resources. Original correspondences to and from Dorothea Erxleben, for example, as well as original copies of her published works are located in the Quedlinburg Ratsarchiv (Knabe 120). I have obtained reproductions of many of these, but there remain documents that cannot be referenced for this work due to their remote location. Second, as mentioned above, certain resources are inaccurate or incomplete, necessitating the comparison of data from available primary sources and reliable secondary materials. Another difficulty is the inability to consult current sources and living individuals. Because Dorothea Erxleben died 240 years ago, reliability in confirming information is limited. Finally, it is impossible to understand completely the cultural arena of Erxleben’s eighteenth-century German society. With the aid of records and writings from and about Germany during this period, we may attempt to form a framework for contextualizing her biographical information, however, true cross-cultural, trans-temporal understanding is never fully achieved. It is important to be aware of and guard against the inadvertent projection of our own values and belief systems onto another society of another era. Calling this tendency to the forefront, it is my intention to acknowledge that, just as it is impossible to present even a modern-day
biography without bias, certain suppositions must and will be made here. To illustrate, in my statement that Erxleben is an inspiring role model for working parents of today, I do not propose that her motivations or belief system are the same as those of working parents in our present society. It is quite possible for her to be an excellent role model without that assertion. Let it be said that though her motivation and values cannot be fully understood today, quotations from Erxleben and her contemporaries, along with historical background information, will be incorporated to lend to the comprehension and contextualizing of the facts involved in her life history.
The role of women from the middle class and lower aristocracy in the eighteenth century revolved around the home. Occupations and activities in the public sphere were specifically reserved for men. This was reflected in laws stating that women were banned from civic and public service, could not hold magisterial office, could not sit as a voting member on a council, bring any matter before a court, etc.  

Girls learned at home how to knit, cook, clean, sew, and supervise a household: the skills necessary to succeed as wife, mother, and housekeeper one day. This was what a husband looked for in a wife, and since marrying well was the most a young girl should aspire to, these were the abilities cultivated in women. There were other occupations women could enter, but they were not as respectable as a good marriage.

Reading, writing, and enough arithmetic to manage household finances were
restricted to the educated middle to upper classes. Daughters in wealthy families had more leisure time and often learned to play a musical instrument or sing. Some women, particularly aristocrats, were also taught French (Knabe 112). More extensive education was considered pointless, as a woman’s central duties were to bear children, raise them, take care of the household, see to it that virtue prevailed there, and obey her husband (Feyl 5). A woman who sought further education endangered her chances for marriage as she “was seen as inappropriately defying her sex and encroaching on male prerogatives” (Dawson, Contested 52).

Most female learning took place in the home. Mothers passed on their practical knowledge while any additional education was usually under the tutelage of an educated father. In some cases, tutors were provided, but women were almost never permitted a formal education. School was thought an improper place for females, who were labeled weak-minded, easily corrupted, incapable of reason, and essentially second class citizens, if soul-possessing beings at all. There were serious discussions as to whether women should even be considered human (Billig15).

Despite this poor estimation of women, there had been support for women’s education previous to the eighteenth century. One such advocate was Amos Comenius (1592-1670), the Czech theologian and pedagogical pioneer who wrote Didactica magna in 1631 (Feyl 6). The work, first written in Czechoslovakian, in which he promotes the acceptance of the female sex into the arts and sciences, was
translated in 1657 into Latin, thus becoming common property of the literary world (Billig 12). He argued that women were also made in God’s image and there was no sufficient reason why the female sex should be kept from studying. He wrote that women acquire knowledge often more easily than “our sex” and that men had no right to bar them from learning, as women had often been called to rule countries, serve as counselors to kings and princes, be healers and prophets, and do many other services which benefited mankind. He even went as far as to criticize the words of apostle Timothy, “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (1 Tim. 2.12). Unfortunately, Comenius’ ideas, in such opposition to the norms of the day, were neither accepted nor put into practical use by his contemporaries (Billig 12).

Anna Maria von Schurman (1607-1678) also spoke out during the seventeenth century on behalf of education for women. Born in Köln, the daughter of an educated Dutch nobleman and a German lady, von Schurman showed promise early on under the tutelage of her father. She understood fourteen languages and could speak and write Hebrew, Chaldean, Syrian, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Latin, French, English, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Batavish, and German. With her extensive knowledge of astronomy, history, and geography, besides philosophy, she was known as the Wunder des Jahrhunderts, or “Miracle of the Century” (Schwerin 29). Her dissertation of 1638, entitled Whether Feminine Christians are Suited to Scholarly

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4 Ebert, J. C. cited in Billig 9 and Schwerin 29.
Study, defended women's God-given right to study. It brought logical counterarguments against arguments in opposition to female education, using a structure similar to that of Erxleben’s later work on the same theme. Against the claim that women are not men’s equals, Schurman made reference to the Bible, as Comenius had, stating that women, too, had been “made in God’s image with a countenance lifted heavenward.” Therefore, women also have an inherent desire to understand the heavenly and the sublime, not just the common household tasks that were required of them. Countering the argument that the female nature is too weak and changeable, she asserted that if the female nature is indeed so, women are in even more need of the edifying benefits of the arts and sciences. Where many insisted that it was senseless to educate a woman because she would never make use of her knowledge, she maintained that arts and sciences develop and enhance capacity for reason, awakening a greater glorification of God and arming one against false teachings.

After a twenty-one year break between publications, Schurman wrote *The Learned Maid, or Whether a Maid may be a Scholar?* (1658). The long break was due to the fact that her “womanly duties,” became too time-consuming with her marriage and

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5 It is unclear whether Erxleben had the chance to “sharpen her young mind on Schurman’s mature thought,” because copies of Schurman’s work were not to be found when Erxleben was being educated a century later (Schiebinger 270). Her father mentions in the preface to his daughter’s book of 1742 that despite his best efforts, he could not procure a copy of Schurman’s work (Leporin, section 9). However, in preserved letters from Tobias Eckhard to Dorothea Erxleben, there are references to his sending her a copy of Schurman’s *Opuscula* (Scheffold 90).
the arrival of children (Sang). She was forced to put off scholarly activity until the latter were grown.

**Early Eighteenth Century**

Though feminist issues had begun to surface in the 1600s, most women who did obtain an education still hid their knowledge. A learned woman was considered unattractive and an affront to men. This was particularly obvious is the case of Maria Margaretha Kirch née Winkelmann (1670-1720). Born in Panitzsch and educated by her Lutheran pastor father and her uncle, astronomer Christoph Arnold, she was already a highly educated lady when she married Gottfried Kirch, Germany’s top astronomer at the time. She worked closely with her husband with her own scientific discoveries being published by him under his name, but later publishing astronomical pamphlets in her own name. When he died in 1710, she continued his work, as many “wife-assistants” did in the eighteenth century. However, though already a respected, famous astronomer in her own right, she was not allowed a paid position at the Berlin Academy of Sciences, lest she “further tarnish the reputation of the academy” due to the prejudice against her sex. The position was given to a younger, inexperienced man who would privately solicit her help while denouncing her in public (Schiebinger 82-93).
Around the time that Winkelmann was trying to gain recognition in her craft, Christian Franz Paullini and Johann Caspar Ebert were bolstering support for women’s education by publishing their works in favor of learned ladies. Paullini published the first edition of his *Learned German Ladies* in 1705 (Billig 15). He recommended education for women for many reasons, one among them because they already showed promise even within the realms of the works they must do at home. Holding women in such high esteem, he raged against Euripides who wrote, “I hate a learned woman who knows more than is befitting for a woman to know; one had better not step across my doorstep.”6 In his book he lists alphabetically all the learned German women known to him. Noteworthy here is that there were still so few that they could all easily fit in one volume. A year later, Ebert released his *Eröffnetes Cabinet des gelehrten Frauenzimmers* (1706), which was a much more thorough work than Paullini’s. He, too, alphabetically listed all the known learned ladies from the past to present, but he included more sources and critique in his 384 pages. His opinion was that the sexes should be judged equally: women, like men, are not all good or worthy.7

During the years that followed, a few enlightened souls would go as far as to make bold proposals for schools for women. In 1707, Halle professor Nicholas Gündling wrote *Vorschlag einer Jungfern Academie (Proposal for a Young Women’s School),*

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6 Cited in Billig 15, author’s translation.
7 In Ebert’s own words, “Es ist ja wie mit den Männern, sie taugen nicht alle, sie gerathen nicht alle” (cited in Billig 16).
and in 1744, Louise Adelgunde Gottsched proposed a Frauenzimmer Academie (women’s school) in Königsberg. Johann Michaelis petitioned Fredrick the Great in 1747 with his Allerunterthänigste Bittschrift an seine Königliche Majestät in Preussen, eine Anlegung einer Universität für das schöne Geschlecht (Most Humble Petition to His Royal Majesty in Prussia for the Establishment of a University for the Beautiful Sex) (Schiebinger 252). Von Justi made a similar pitch with his “Proposal on the Establishment of an Academy for Women” (Petschauer, Education 264).

Erxleben’s father, Dr. Christian Polycarp Erxleben, was, not surprisingly, an active promoter of schooling for females. He published a work in 1724 in which he suggested that cities found tuition-free schools open to both sexes. It did not gain popularity, largely due to the too energetic, often aggressive presentation of his views that managed to turn many of his colleagues into enemies (Böhm 20). Among them were the three Quedlinburg doctors who would eventually wrongly accuse his daughter of quackery.

While early attempts to found schools for “the beautiful sex” failed, literacy among females continued to grow at a phenomenal rate throughout the eighteenth century. Of the twenty-three million inhabitants of Germany, twenty percent of city-dwellers could read. Impressively, by 1770, a full ten percent of those were women, despite

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8 His work was entitled Unmaßgeblicher Vorschlag, wie fast alle Städte gleichsam zu Academien zu machen, und eben dadurch die Aufnahme derer Studien gar merklich befördert werden.
the fact that they were not allowed to attend school (Sang). Women's reading repertoire expanded quickly from the Bible, hymnals, and cookbooks to include, most commonly, magazines and novels, but also anything else they could get their hands on. Women became such a ravenous constituent of the reading public that their Lesewuth, or "reading frenzy," was a frequent topic of discussion. It was frowned upon by many—men and women alike. It was thought that the more women read, the more they would neglect their duties. Husbands feared untidy houses and no dinner on the table, and indeed, reading had its effect on many households. In an era without modern conveniences, when laundry had to be washed by hand, cloth spun on a spinning wheel, and bread made from scratch, women's work was overwhelming. So, to avoid angering husbands and neglecting housework or children, women who desired to find time to read were encouraged to sleep less, make fewer social visits, spend less time gossiping and listening to gossip, and avoid superfluous cleaning or primping.9

As literacy and extensive reading increased among females, so did their recognition as a lucrative reading public. Publishers began to produce works for and by women. In 1725, Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700-1766), an enlightened pastor's son from East Prussia, founded the magazine Die vernünftigen Tadlerinnen. It was written for and, in part, by women, dealing with such topics as the "proper" upbringing for women, their aptitude for studies, their role as homemakers, and suggestions for the

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9 Leporin, section 354-360.
betterment of women, including a women’s library (Becker-Cantarino 263).

Gottsched’s magazine presented the public with positive female role models to emulate, such as Anna Maria von Schurmann and his own wife, Luise Adelgunde Gottsched nee Culmus (1713-1762) (Dawson, Contested 51). Die vernünftigen Tadlerinnen was a springboard to notoriety for many women and for some, even to fame. It was a publication familiar and possibly even empowering to Dorothea Erxleben.

The “Gottschedin,” as Gottsched’s wife Luise Adelgunde was known, was a prolific writer, translator, poet and playwright in her own right. Similar to Erxleben, she was born into a doctor’s family and showed early talent and facility for learning (Becker-Cantarino 266). The Gottschedin was given an education, but unlike Erxleben’s, hers did not include learning medicine from her father. Her interests were literary, which made her marriage to writer-publisher Johann Christoph in 1735 particularly appropriate and, to an extent, fortuitous. She worked with him, at his side, but chiefly in the background, acting as secretary, translating his literary works and occasionally contributing to them (Becker-Cantarino 267). She published several plays, but the majority of her time was spent assisting her husband with his work-related endeavors and tending to her duties as wife and homemaker. After her death, her husband wrote that she had been attentive to the “household concerns, to cooking, washing, and
clothing...without a complaint and in the most orderly manner.”10 She herself recorded that her labor as secretary, assistant, and housekeeper, together with her own literary efforts, turned her life into “an endless chain of work.”11 With her incredible workload, there was no time or energy left for children. In 1742 she confided to a friend, “From early morning until late in the night, there are few hours left over to dedicate to the most necessary needs of life.”12 Her plight is exemplary of that of other learned women in the eighteenth century. It was often a strain just to manage domestic affairs and care for a husband’s basic needs, let alone those of children, if one engaged in intellectual pursuits.

The efforts of the Gottschedin were likely known to and respected by Erxleben. The few women who were openly learned provided encouragement for those who desired to be so (Sang). Across the Alps to the south came more of this kind of encouragement in the form of one Laura Maria Catharina Bassi (1711-1778). Erxleben was sixteen when her Latin instructor excitedly told her of Bassi’s promotion to doctor of philosophy at the University of Bologna on May 12, 1732. Though Erxleben would later be referred to as “the German Bassi” (Feyl 55), the two never met. Bassi’s academic success was nevertheless an inspirational factor in Dorothea’s struggle to obtain her own degree.

10 Cited in Becker-Cantarino 267, author’s translation.
11 Cited in Becker-Cantarino 268, author’s translation.
12 Ibid.
Mid to Late Eighteenth Century

During the period Erxleben was promoted to doctor (1754) and after her death (1762), the state of women’s rights regarding education and rank in society remained problematic. In the latter half of the century, educated women continued to face the same discrimination and injustices Erxleben had. This was due to many factors, including prejudice given new life by philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1781), and socio-economic changes that were brought about by pre-industrial development.

Rousseau’s influence on pre-French Revolution thinking in respect to women involved his belief in sexual complementarity, or the theory that “man and woman are not physical and moral equals but complementary opposites” (Schiebinger 217). This theory relieved males of admitting their oppression of the “opposite sex,” because nature had done that for them. Subscribers to complementarity furthered a predetermined, biological division of labor that justified the domestication of women and invalidated their desire for further education. Division of labor was furthered by emerging industrialism. Before this pre-industrial era, many middle class women had assisted in their husband’s trade by managing a household that served simultaneously as workplace, residence, and living accommodations for employees and apprentices. With specialization of labor and the appearance of Manufakturen, or factory-like businesses, the workplace began to shift away from the home (Sang). Division
between public and private life became more distinct, and women no longer had to
tend to their husband’s workplace and employees in addition to their other duties.
These women suddenly found themselves with much more free time. Many used this
time for reading and contemplation about female self-improvement. It was in
opposition to such activities that complementarity arose. The female population had
begun to show itself much too independent and educated. Cases in point were
Schurman, Winkelmann, and Erxleben herself. Rousseau, in his novel, *Emile*, set
before the public the “natural” ideal woman: obedient, pious, submissive, ever-
patient, humble, and unswervingly attentive to her duties as wife, mother, and
homemaker. Rousseau’s ideal lowered the status of women back to “a something
without a name or rights; a sex that is raised to serve the other sex.”

Not everyone accepted complementarity. Dorothea Schlözer was raised as a sort of
guinea pig by her father, August, who educated her in hopes to disprove Rousseau’s
ideas about women’s natural intellectual capabilities (Schiebinger 257). In 1787,
thirty-three years after Erxleben was promoted to medical doctor, Schlözer became
the next woman to receive a doctorate in Germany, graduating from the University of
Göttingen. Like Erxleben, she had never actually attended university. Also like
Erxleben, her mother taught her the necessary “women’s work,” while her father
impacted to her a classical education from the age of five. She learned Plattdeutsch,

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13 “...ein Etwas ohne Namen und Rechte; ein Geschlecht, das für das andere Geschlecht erzogen wird.” (Feyl 11), author’s translation.
French, English, Swedish, Italian, Dutch, and, of course, Latin and Greek and was also an expert in mineralogy, Euclidian geometry, algebra, trigonometry, optics, botany, zoology, religion, and ancient and modern history (Schiebinger 257). Dorothea Schlözer and her learning were kept mostly hidden from the public. Her father allowed that she be awarded a degree, for example, but she was not allowed to appear at the public ceremony. After the promotion, she was “praised” for her feminine achievements:

Usually one thinks of a learned woman as neurotic. And should she ever go beyond the study of literature into the higher sciences, one knows in advance that her clothing will be neglected and her hair will be done in antiquarian fashion, that she understands the culinary arts of the ancient Greeks but cannot cook a simple egg, that she forces her way into circles of men for whom she is nothing more than a book…Mlle Schlözer sews, knits, and understands household economy perfectly well. She is healthy and loves to dance; she speaks freely with those of her own sex. One must gain her confidence before one comes to know the scholar in her.14

When praised for their accomplishments, women’s scholarly learning was rarely the focal point. Instead, their talents in the domestic arts were touted. Scholarly occupation was not attractive in a woman. Kant, in his Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1766), declared:

Tedious study, or painful brooding, even if a woman should attain great success in it, extirpates the advantages peculiar to her sex. And even though such a woman may become

14 English translation cited in Schiebinger 259.
the object of cold admiration, such intellectual activities will simultaneously weaken those charms by which she exerts her great power over the other sex.¹⁵

For the most part, Schlözer’s scholarly efforts ceased after her marriage to Matthäus von Rodde, though she did manage to publish a series of letters on metal production and a cookbook in 1818 (Schiebinger 259). For women, marriage was all-consuming. Dawson expresses marriage’s effect on women thus: “Marriage was an institution expected to consume the time, energy, creativity and identity of wives (unlike husbands). Neither scholarship nor serious writing had a place in the usual script” (Contested 71).

In their few hours of leisure, many women turned to magazines such as Gottsched’s Die vernünftigen Tadlerinnen for entertainment, edification, and encouragement. Gottsched’s was but one of numerous publications for ladies. Several of these were even edited by women. These female editors, who could have taken a stance conducive to the emancipation of their sex, did not all do so. First, they feared offending their readers, of whom there were just as many men as women. Second, many female editors genuinely accepted and endorsed the very ideologies, such as complementarity, that oppressed them. They were comfortable with the male chauvinistic belief system with which they had brought up. Ernestine Hoffmann,

¹⁵ English translation cited in Petschauer 280.
editor of *Fur Hamburgs Tochter*\textsuperscript{16} (1779), subscribed to the philosophy of the day that women had a specific, service-oriented destiny that centered on family and home. Traugott Christiane Dorothea Lilien, editor of *Papiere einiger Freunde*\textsuperscript{17} (1780-1783) provided principally entertainment in her publication and avoided serious intellectual or philosophical discussion. Her general omission of the "prodesse" of Aristotoles recommendation for literature, *prodesse et delectare* (instruct and entertain), was acceptable to men at the time and acceptable on a broader scale because entertaining was (and still is) such important part of writing. Fredericke Helene Unger did take a stance on issues of female improvement and emancipation, though not a forceful one. She attempted to weaken the patriarchal division of the sexes with the light content of her *Vermischte Erzahlungen und Einfaelle zur allgemeinen Unterhaltung*\textsuperscript{18} (1783).

Marianne Ehrmann, editor of *Amaliens Erholungsstunden. Teutschlands Töchter* geweiht. *Eine Monatschrift*\textsuperscript{19} (1790-1793) was perhaps the most fervent advocate of women’s rights and had the most turbulent career of all the female editors in eighteenth-century Germany. At the outset of publication, the objectives she claimed for her magazine were quite acceptable to men. She professed to want to educate women "until we have attained the mental level which makes us into lovable wives,

\textsuperscript{16} For Hamburg’s Daughters
\textsuperscript{17} Paper’s From Some Friends
\textsuperscript{18} Assortment of Accounts and Ideas for General Entertainment
\textsuperscript{19} Amalien's Hours of Leisure. Dedicated to Germany's Daughter's. A Monthly Periodical.
tender mothers, reasonable companions, worthy housekeepers and good Christians.”

Ehrmann’s inclusions in the periodical did not, however, always coincide with this initial proposition. She boldly attacked male as well as female weaknesses, which did not please Cotta, her publisher. He interfered with her work, removing articles he felt were too controversial and replacing them with ones he found less offensive to male readers, without her consent. Ehrmann was extremely vocal in her fight against these injustices. In one issue of *Amalias Erholungsstunden*, she fumed:

> Also, Sie, mein Herr, hätten den Muth nicht, das weibliche Geschlecht zu bessern? Welch ein liebloser Machtanspruch! Entweder ist es Ihnen und ihresgleichen gedient, daß es ungebessert bleibt, oder sie halten uns Frauenzimmer für hoffnungslose Geschöpfe, bei denen jede Mühe verlorengeht. Da denk ich denn doch von meinem Geschlechte ein bißchen billiger als Sie, mein Herr Weiberverdammer!

> So, you, Sir, do not have the courage to improve the feminine sex? What a hateful usurpment of power! Either it serves you and your kind that it remains unimproved, or you take us ladies for hopeless creatures on whom all effort is lost. In that case I esteem my sex a little higher than you, my Sir Damner of Women!

Cotta replaced Ehrmann with a male editor and unabashedly changed the name of her magazine to *Flora. Teutschlands Töchtern geweiht.* Although extremely angry and frustrated, Ehrmann began a new monthly periodical, *Die Einsiedlerinn aus den Alpen. Für Deutschlands und Helvetiens Töchter* (1793). She moderated her writing as not to upset the new publisher, but continued to oscillate between

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21 Cited by Sang, author’s translation.
22 *Flora. Dedicated to Germany’s Daughters*
23 *The Hermit from the Alps. For Germany and Switzerland’s Daughters.*
conventional and radical viewpoints. Seeking approval from the conservative masses, she would explain her career away by describing it as a financial necessity in an unusual situation and justify it with the facts that she was childless and her husband was a writer (Dawson, Emerging 163). At other times she would seek equal treatment for women, lamenting, “I want to cry when I see our sex eternally being led like a toddler, completely without culture, merely sensual or infected by some nonsense…” Ehrmann’s seemingly conflicting viewpoints at different times demonstrate how difficult it was for women to align beliefs about women’s rights and emancipation with their traditional upbringing. For early feminist pioneers like Ehrmann, it was not easy to develop and defend opinions that so drastically conflicted with those they had been raised with.

Luckily, Ehrmann was one of many daring groundbreakers. The last quarter of the eighteenth century saw such compelling female and male champions for women’s rights and education emerge as Olympe de Gouges in France (1745-1793), Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel in Germany (1741-1796), and Mary Wollstonecraft in England (1759-1797). Olympe de Gouges penned the Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne (Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Citizen) (1791) in which she asserted women’s rights and even included a “Form for a Social Contract Between Man and Woman.” Her revolutionary views and her audacity in making

\[24\] English translation cited in Dawson, Emerging 160.
such demands unfortunately won her swift and dramatic attention. She was arrested, tried, and executed by guillotine on November 3, 1793.

Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, born in Erxleben’s native Prussia, wrote Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber (On Improving the Status of Women) in 1792. He recognized that “his culture and society first postulated that women were innately inferior and then forced women to conform to that view” (Dawson, Emerging 158). He also thought it fair to open up all professions to women. He wrote, “Women should be appointed to public service, for which they indisputably have a divine calling.” Once public service he especially advocated for women was medicine, since they had already proven their talents in the medical arts and had practiced even when it had been forbidden them (Hippel 161-164). He was likely familiar with Dorothea Erxleben’s case. The year his Verbesserung was published, so was London-born Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman. In her work she proposed co-ed public education for all and defended women’s rights, logically presenting reasons why these rights were not upheld by either sex. She criticized both men and women for propagating the attitudes and behaviors that sustained female subjugation.

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25 Feyl 12 and Dawson 73.
26 “Mann solle die Weiher zum Staatsdienst vociren, wozu sie unstreitlich einen göttlichen Ruf haben” (Hippel cited by Sang).
Over the course of the eighteenth century, German society was influenced by socio-economic shifts that began to redefine women's roles and by numerous historical figures who represented both sides of the struggle for women's rights. Dorothea Erxleben's life was played out during this era of great change and conflict. To understand her story, it is essential to comprehend the incredible collective pressures on women and the ideologies affecting prevailing attitudes of her time. Only then can one truly value her achievements.
Dorothea Christiana Erxleben, née Leporin, was born on November 13, 1715 in the Prussian city of Quedlinburg. Her father was the well-known though not well-to-do doctor, Christian Polycarp Leporin (1689-1747). He descended from an educated Protestant pastor’s family, an important detail, given that education was a privilege reserved for a fortunate few, and considering that the Protestant parsonage, or Pfarrhaus, as it is known in German, was a center for learning. Being born into a pastor’s family significantly improved one’s chances for education (Sang).

Erxleben’s mother, Anna Sophia Leporin, born Meinecke (168?-1757) was also a pastor’s daughter. Although she did not receive a scholarly education, she did know how to read and write.

The fact that both her parents were products of Pfarrhäuser and that they were members of the educated middle class, was to young Dorothea’s advantage. Her parents’ education helped pave the way for her own. According to Petschauer, educational level of parents and belonging to the educated middle or upper class were

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27 He was the son of Christian Wichman Leporin (1640-1714) and his wife, a clerk’s daughter, Maria Böttcher (1658-1730) (Beaucamp 82).
28 She was the daughter of Quedlinburg’s Pastor Albert Meinecke and Dorothea Maria Heimberger (Knabe 110).
two of the most significant common denominators among women who achieved higher learning and independence in eighteenth-century German society (Christiana 128-29). Erxleben had these in common with, among others, Maria Winkelmann, Sophie von LaRoche, and Dorothea Schlözer. The other principle factors Petschauer lists are individual intelligence and drive and placement in birth order. The former two, as will be shown, Erxleben undoubtedly possessed. The latter is difficult to pinpoint due to the uncertainty of most secondary sources surrounding her position amongst her three siblings. Her words in a letter penned to Fredrick the Great explaining her desire to study at university with “the older of my two brothers” have been misconstrued over the years. They have been mistakenly interpreted to mean that one or both of her brothers were older than she. Based on this, many sources place her as the second, third, or even fourth child. Others, even Böhm in his highly accurate, precisely documented work, simply avoid the adjectives “older” or “younger” when making reference to her brother Christian. In reality, Erxleben was the second child, following three-year-older Maria Elisabeth Kramer, née Leporin, who was born August 25, 1712 (Scheffold 12). Only two sources uncovered are accurate concerning the birth order of the Leporin family. One correctly refers to Christian as Erxleben’s “two-year-younger brother” (Reitzammer 198) and the other,

29 Leporin cited in Kaiser 178, author’s translation.
30 Billig states, “Dorothea Christiana was the third child from this marriage. Christian was the older brother, then came Maria Elisabeth, Johannes was the youngest” (27), author’s translation. According to Scheffold, “...Dorothea Christiana was the third or fourth child of the Leporin family” (12), author’s translation.
31 It is ironic that he avoids giving birth order information, since he cites and evidently had access to many sources located in the Quedlinburger Ratsarchiv and the archive of the city’s St. Nicolai church, where records of the Leporin family are located.
the only one to provide his year of birth, indicates that he was, indeed, two years younger, having been born in 1717.

In any case, the question of birth order in Erxleben's success does not factor in exactly as it does in the lives of other famous learned women of the eighteenth century. Petschauer's interest in birth order involved the degree of attention and, consequently support, daughters received. First- or only-born daughters were the most likely to receive the attention necessary. Though Erxleben was not the oldest, she was one of a small number of children and was singled out by her father, who doted on her, giving her both the attention and support she needed to initiate her intellectual and personal development. The question of birth order is of interest here less for its weight in distinguishing the quantity and quality of parental attention Erxleben received than for its demonstration of the inconsistency and inaccuracy in sources that deal with her. It is but one example of fundamental information on Erxleben's life that has been misconstrued. Minor misrepresentations such as this to gross inaccuracies as the ones to be discussed over the course of this thesis have afflicted many of the works on Erxleben and her accomplishments.
Erxleben’s childhood was plagued by sickness. One ailment after another left her often confined to bed, which was actually one of the conditions allowing for her education. She was too weak physically to take part in the domestic duties girls normally learned from their mothers, but her mind was sharp. While her older sister, Maria, surely spent her hours at her mother’s side, learning how to cook, clean, sew, and manage a household, Dorothea lay in bed, reading her father’s medical texts. To fight against boredom, Dr. Leporin had given her books on Latin, Botany, Anatomy, and, of course, the Bible. She learned quickly.\(^{32}\) With little instruction, she could read by the age of four or five. By eight, she was taking part in the lessons Leporin gave her brother Christian. Her thirst for knowledge pleased her father, who had long spoken out against the neglect of the female intellect.

Young Dorothea studied diligently at Christian’s side until he began his studies at the Quedlinburger Ratschule. She could not accompany him, as females were not allowed to attend school with males and, although founding schools for the “beautiful sex” had been proposed, none had yet come to be.

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\(^{32}\) "...und ohne daß solches beabsichtigt war, faßte sie (den Unterricht) unmerklich, leicht und bald” (Friedrich Erxleben cited in Beaucamp 19).
In 1724, when Erxleben was nine, her father asked the headmaster of Christian’s school, Tobias Eckhard, for advice and assistance. Eckhard was an old friend of the family who had been Leporin’s teacher in 1708. He was eager to help and decided to send his students’ Latin lessons home with Christian so that Erxleben could receive further instruction. He personally corrected her work and was impressed early on by her talents. He arranged for additional lessons, possibly in French and history, with Herr Prillwitz (Knabe 110), another teacher at the school.

Dorothea’s exceptional intellect and abilities were foremost in her academic success, but certainly without the assistance of these men in her life, her education never would have been promoted. From her father to Eckhard and Prillwitz, and later on Fredrick the Great, the backing of open-minded patriarchal figures was crucial in each step of her advancement toward her doctorate. Women were dependant on male supporters to validate and further their cause (Dawson 30). Without male endorsement, women were powerless in the public sphere, of which schooling was part. Dorothea recognized this fact, just or not, in her own situation and expressed her gratitude toward these men in the biographical sketch included in her dissertation:

[Meine] kränkliche Zustand machte mich so glücklich, daß ich von der zärttesten Jugend an in allen denen Wissenschaften, dazu mein Alter fähig war, fleissig unterrichtet wurde... Um dieser Ursachen willen wendete mein seliger Vater nicht nur selbst den äussersten Fleiß an meine Unterweisung, sondern er sorgte auch davor, daß ich mit meinem Bruder zugleich von geschickten Lehrern nicht nur in Sprachen, sondern auch in nützlichen Wissenschaften fleißig unterwiesen wurde... Solchergestalt gelangte ich ohne Mühe so weit, daß verschiedene gelehrt Männer...übernahmen so gar die Mühe, sich meinem Unterrichte, besonders in der lateinischen Sprache, zu unterziehen...
[My] sickly condition made me so happy that I, from the most tender youth on, was diligently instructed in all the sciences suitable for my age... Not only did my father apply himself diligently to this purpose in instructing me, but he also saw to it that I, along with my brother, was instructed not only in languages, but also in useful sciences... In this way I came without difficulty to the point that various learned men...took my instruction, especially in Latin, upon themselves...

She goes on to thank Eckhard and Prillwitz by name (Knabe 110).

Over the years, Eckhard continued to teach her Latin and Greek. He foresaw great achievements in Dorothea’s future and made no secret of his enthusiasm. In March 1731, he wrote almost reverently to his fifteen-year-old pupil:

Durch die Zierde der Tugenden sehr geschmückte und sehr verehrte Jungfrau! Nicht ohne Vergnügen habe ich Deine lateinische Übungen gelesen, auch die in bündiger Sprache deutsch geschriebenen. Ich habe diese so vorbereitet gefunden, dass sie die jungen Männer, die allein darauf bedacht sind, die Wissenschaft zu behandeln, zu einem Wettstreit reizen können. Ich gratuliere Dir deshalb und bewundere die Fähigkeit Deines Geistes, auch die Begierde, diese Wissenschaft zu behandeln und bewundere Deinen Fortschritt.

Esteemed maiden, highly adorned by the grace of virtue! It is not without pleasure that I read your Latin exercises, also those written in fluent German. I found them to be so well prepared that they could stimulate competition in the young men who are only intent upon obtaining knowledge. I congratulate you for this and admire the ability of your intellect, also your desire to take up these studies and your progression.34

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33 Cited in Reitzammer 200, author’s translation.
34 Eckhard cited in Beaucamp, Wer war Dorothea, author’s translation.
Eckhard was deeply impressed by this young girl whose work surpassed that of his male students. Over a year later, in a letter dated June 11, 1732, he encouraged a now sixteen-year-old Dorothea:

Ich schicke die Übungen zurück, in denen kaum etwas ist, was beanstandet werden könnte. Deshalb gratuliere ich für den Ertrag der Sorgfalt und wünsche ein weiteres Wachsen dieser fein gebildeten Sprache. Ich schicke griechische und lateinische Briefe der Olympia Fulvia (1526-1555), einer gleichermäßen sehr frommen und gebildeten Frau.

I’m returning the exercises in which there is hardly anything that could be objected to. For this I congratulate you on your attention and wish you further growth in your well-refined language. I’m sending Greek and Latin letters from Olympia Fulvia (1526-1555), a lady as pious and educated.35

In the same letter he informed her of the promotion of twenty-year-old (Zaunick 782) Laura Bassi to doctor of philosophy at the University of Bologna, “I hope, noble maiden, that you will also achieve such fame in science and – if not in the common academic manner – you will still adorn yourself with the title of doctor.”36 Already at sixteen, Dorothea was encouraged to reach for the highest level of education.

It was approximately at this age that Erxleben began to learn medicine with her father. She observed and assisted him in his practice and studied medical texts such as M.A. Alberti’s *Introductio in universam medicinam*, Georg Ernst Stahl’s *Theoria medica vera*, Johann Juncker’s *Conspexitus physiologiae, pathologiae, therapiae*

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
universalis er specialis, and Lorenz Heister's *Compendium der Medizin*. All were leading medical manuals of the day that she poured over, valuing each immensely (Schwerin 35). She could not have imagined then that two of the authors of her prized medical texts, Juncker and Alberti, would one day sit on her doctoral examination committee or that the presentation of her degree would even be held at Juncker's personal residence.

A Dual Education

As Erxleben's health improved, her mother began to participate more and more in her education. Similar to the mothers of many other famous learned women of the eighteenth century, her mother did not entirely approve of her scholarly learning. That kind of learning was not befitting to the female sex as the education she wished to impart to her daughter was. She was happy when little Dorothea was finally healthy enough to learn a woman's responsibilities in the household. Even Dr. Leporin, who was delighted with her enthusiasm and wished to see her progress in

37 Fischer-Defoy 441; Beaucamp, *Johann* 83; Billig 28-29; Feyl 48.
38 The mothers of Anna Luise Karsch, Friderike Koch, Frederika Baldinger, Charlotte Einem, and Sophie von LaRoche, for example, wanted to restrict their daughter's learning in favor of learning "women's work" (Dawson 57-60).
her studies\textsuperscript{39}, recognized that it was necessary for their daughter to learn "women’s work" if she were to marry one day. As marriage was a woman’s highest aspiration, her parents knew that she would need to be equipped with skills in the traditionally female duties.

Dorothea disappointed neither mother nor father. She completed her tasks in the household and managed to find time to continue her studies. Similar to other women of the day who had to incorporate time for reading with domestic duties, the clever girl found means to work and study at the same time. Friderika Baldinger, an eighteenth-century female writer who, like Erxleben, had to combine women’s work with studies early on, said, “Since I could read so well, I put my book on my left knee and did the spinning with my right hand."\textsuperscript{40} Erxleben herself boasted that she could clean with one hand and hold a book with the other:

Ob ich gleich mit zunehmenden Jahren, nachdem sich mein Gesundheitszustand merklich gebessert, beständig viele häusliche Geschäfte zu verrichten hatte, welchen ich mich weder entziehen konnte, noch wolte; so vermochten diese nicht, mich vom Studiren abzuziehen, und ich fand, daß es sehr wohl möglich sey, bey verschiedenen häuslichen Geschäften so wol ein Buch mit nutzen zu lesen...

Though with the coming years, after my health had significantly improved, I had more and more household tasks to perform, which I neither could nor wanted to shun—these were not

\textsuperscript{39} "...(Ihr) starker Trieb und eine standhafte Neigung, sich mit höhern Wissenschaften zu beschäftigen, und von Seiten ihres Vaters, das Vergnügen, das ihm selbst ihre Unterweisung machte, und darneben auch Rath und Aufmunterungen würdiger und gelehrter Freunde bestimmte ihren Vater sie zu medicinischen Kenntnissen anzuführen...” (Friedrich Erxleben cited in Scheffold 21).

\textsuperscript{40} Cited in Dawson, Contested 58.
able to keep me from studying, and I found that it was quite possible, while doing various household tasks, to read a useful book... 41

She valued each type of training she received, the scientific as well as the domestic, and learned from what each parent had to offer. This unique opportunity for a “double education” during her formative years lent her a unique perspective on life that was a blend of feminist and traditional values. In the society Erxleben lived, the consensus was that a learned woman could not be a good housewife. Women who studied could not possibly have enough time to tend to their feminine responsibilities in the home. Truth be told, there was logic to this reasoning. Women spent countless hours washing clothes by hand, spinning their own cloth, sewing and knitting articles of clothing for themselves and their family, making bread from scratch, and cleaning their houses without the aid of vacuums and self-wringing mops. Time for even casual reading was a special treat, and it was not to be indulged in too often (Sang).

Amazingly, Erxleben managed to harmonize “women’s work” with studies and purports to have found neither a burden. “Purports” is the operative word here given that women often were inclined to overemphasize their acceptance and enjoyment of domestic work to make themselves appear less threatening and still “feminine” to men. As long as a woman made it clear that she did not intend to “overstep her bounds,” and as long she continued doing their female work, she was considered

41 Cited in Reitzammer 201, author’s translation.
more acceptable than if she boldly forsook all that was considered proper for her sex.
This tendency to downplay learning aside, Erxleben’s statement that she neither
could, nor wanted to shun household tasks is likely a valid one. In all probability, she
recognized the inherent benefits of having domestic skills. Cooking and cleaning
were just as important as any other knowledge, in her estimation. After all, what use
are any persons, male or female, who can read Greek and Latin but cannot even
prepare a meal for themselves? In her vita she expresses the opinion that, “all young
women should be instructed in their studies just as attentively as in things of the
household.” 42  Though her intention in this context is to accentuate the importance of
scholarly studies in an age when they were so neglected in female training, she does
put them on the same level. The physical as well as the spiritual and intellectual
needs had to be attended to. She realized that people of either sex had to be versed in
how to do both.

It was this attitude that helped set Erxleben apart and ahead. Instead of fostering a
one-sided character, she developed characteristics that were at that time considered
“masculine” as well as those considered “feminine.” While the men of her society
would not touch “women’s work” and most women were afraid to admit to reading or
scholarly learning in the rare case they actually were educated, young Dorothea saw
early on that openly embracing both types of education not only aided her acceptance
and progression in a world generally hostile to educated women, but also, more

42 Erxleben cited in Reitzammer 200, author’s translation.
fundamentally, helped build the balanced character necessary to the self-realization of either sex.

Request to Study at University

In 1735, Erxleben’s brother Christian was drafted to serve in the military. Five years later, in the spring of 1740, he was released from the Marwitz Regiment number 21 to study at the University of Halle (Zaunick 782). Once there, Doctors Alberti and Junker accepted him immediately without examination due to the exceptional level of learning he had already attained (Scheffold 25).

Because a formal education was not permitted to women, Dorothea had to stay behind in Quedlinburg while her two-year-younger brother was allowed to go to university. She expressed her longing to join him there in the following manner, “How often have I wished to enjoy the same fortune and hear those teachers whom I have always revered with such high esteem!”43

In their three-story home at Steinweg 51, she continued studying medicine and assisting her father with patients who visited the exam rooms there (Feyl 43). She

43 Cited in Schwerin 35, author’s translation.
even accompanied him on house calls, becoming a familiar, respected caregiver among the townspeople. With Christian away in Halle, Dr. Leporin needed her help more than ever.

One of the patients they often visited was Maria Elisabeth, Duchess von Holstein-Gottorp (1718-1755), the abbess of Quedlinburg. Dr. Leporin was the abbess’ personal physician. Erxleben herself was also active in treating the abbess and other Stiftsdamen (Beaucamp, Johann 13). The abbess became quite partial to Erxleben and encouraged her to request permission of the present king to study at Halle.

Asking his father, Fredrick the First (1688-1740), would have been useless. Thirty years prior, Maria Winckelmann had requested Fredrick the First’s permission to study at university and had been denied (Schiebinger 251). He opposed education for women. However, since his death in June 1740 and the crowning of his somewhat enlightened son, Fredrick II, or Fredrick the Great (1712-1786), as he was known, the unthinkable was now possible. Although his practices at court bordered on misogynistic, he loved demonstrating openly “enlightened” attitudes toward his people (Bergner). In addition, the Leporin family lavished ample flattery upon the new king that ensured their voices would be heard. In Fredrick’s honor, Doctor Leporin was inspired to compose a tribute (Fischer-Defoy 443), proclaiming Fredrick

44 He banished his wife to a distant castle and never allowed her to live with him or even visit him at Sans Souci (Fraser 37-42).
the greatest philosopher of his time, capable of nothing else but ruling well
(Reitzammer 199).

Almost immediately after being crowned, Fredrick invaded Silesia and war with
Austria was imminent. Prussian troops were mobilized, and young men were
required to report for military duty, with the exception of students. The king issued a
notice on December 1, 1740, stating that all students of the University of Halle were
freed from military service (Brencken 46).

This law should have spared Christian, newly matriculated at the University of Halle,
but his old regiment demanded his return. Despite attempts by Halle’s academic
commission to defend their new student’s right to remain (Zaunick 782), Captain
Wagenschütz of the Marwitz Regiment appeared at Halle to claim Christian, whom
the army unjustly regarded a deserter. He was forced to flee Prussia into Saxony to
avoid being captured. This compelled the captain to order Dr. Leporin to substitute
him with his sickly younger son, Johannes, who worked as a shopkeeper’s apprentice
in Quedlinburg. For a short time, both Dr. Leporin and Johannes also had to take
refuge beyond the border in Kursachsen (Scheffold 26). This left the three women of
the house, Erxleben, her mother, and her sister, alone. Erxleben was obliged to take
over the medical practice completely to provide for them.
Meanwhile, officials had been sent to Quedlinburg to carry out ceremonies in recognition of Fredrick’s succession, as the king could not personally appear in every city for that purpose. The officials sent to Quedlinburg to oversee the ceremonies were Regierungskommisar von Lüderitz and Stiftshauptmann von Plotho (Brencken 42, Fischer-Defoy 443). With the abbess’ blessing and recommendation, Dorothea was permitted to present them with a copy of her father’s tribute and her own flattering letter in French verse in which she glorified the king, knowing French was Fredrick’s preferred language, though not his best. 45 To these gratifying icebreakers, Dorothea added a painstakingly written plea for her brother’s release from military responsibility so that he could continue his education and, secondarily, a request for permission to join him at university herself. She made it clear that the most important issue was “the liberation of my brothers, for I am certain that in the case that that this is not obtained, I will soon see myself robbed of my parents who are almost perishing from worry.”46 Her letter demonstrated genuine concern for the welfare of her family and was “politically correct” coming from a female in downplaying her aspirations to study. Showing herself too eager to enter the academic world men deemed to be strictly theirs could have endangered her chances. Hers was a carefully formulated request that Stiftshauptmann von Plotho, who was also partial to the spirited young

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45 Voltaire, who was invited to Fredrick’s court at Potsdam, complained about the task of correcting the king’s written attempts at French: “I had to wash his dirty laundry.” This fact makes Dorothea’s clever flattery all the more amusing.
46 “Das erheblichste meiner wehmütigsten Angelegenheiten betrifft die Befreitung meiner Brüder, denn da ich gewiß bin daß wo dieselbe nicht zu erhalten, ich auch meiner in Kummer fast vergehenden Eltern mich bald beraubet sehen würde...” (cited in Reitzammer 198), author’s translation.
lady, supplemented with an endorsement and additional request that the Leporin family be exempt from paying tuition, as they were of very limited means.

It is not known to what degree Dr. Leporin’s tribute and Erxleben’s flattering poetry effected Fredrick the Great’s decision, but in a letter dated March 30, 1741, from the Prussian Department for Intellectual Affairs Erxleben and her brother were granted permission not only to study, but to do so tuition-free (Scheffold 27). Von Plotho, who received the letter in his official capacity, related the good news to Dr. Leporin, recently returned from exile, and his family on May 2, 1741.

The royal decree to the University of Halle dated April 24, 1741 (Fischer-Defoy 443) allowing the siblings to study there was received positively. This reaction at Halle was influenced by the attitudes of Dean Juncker, who deemed that a woman’s right to study was provided for by law. He argued that Roman law excluded women from holding public office, but since attending university and practicing medicine were not technically in the public domain, these two activities were perfectly suitable and lawful for the female sex to engage in.\(^\text{47}\)

\(^\text{47}\)“Es meinen zwar einige, dergleichen Gesetz (I. z.D. de R.I.) zu finden, und thun sich darauf recht was zu Gute. Es heißt daselbst: ‘Die Weibspersonen sollen von allen bürgerlichen und öffentlichen Bedingungen ausgeschlossen seyn, und daher sollen sie kein obrigkeitliches Amt führen, noch in dem Rate sitzen, und darin ihre Stimme nicht geben; sie können auch nicht advociren, keines andern Sache vor Gericht führen, noch procuriren’. Diese behaupten, man könne hieraus schließen, daß dieses Gesetz dem weiblichen Geschlechte die Heilkunst zu lernen und auszüubn untersagte, und es von der Doctorwürde ausschloß” (cited in Reitzammer 205).
The king’s permission mentioned nothing about the release of the Leporin sons from military duty, so in a letter dated May 3, 1741, Dr. Leporin solicited Fredrick’s attention once more. The answer was again affirmative. What else could Fredrick do but “rule well”? The Leporin men were finally liberated from all military responsibility. 

Dorothea had managed to set things straight, enabling her brother to return to his studies and her father and younger brother to be united with the family. However, the same generosity, compassion, passion, and self-assuredness she displayed in her requests to the king were the same that contributed to her forgoing the opportunity of his bequest. Unusual circumstances, to be discussed later, would lead her down another path.

**Publication of *Grundliche Untersuchung***

Before making the decision that would steer her at least temporarily away from Halle, Dorothea was persuaded to share her thoughts on the reasons that kept most women

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48 In her article, Margrid Reitzammer states that by this time, Christian had already returned to his regiment in fear of the military tribunal (199). Hers and Schiebinger’s are the only references found that make this claim. Unfortunately, their source for this information is unclear, nevertheless it can be assumed to be true, based on the painstaking accuracy of the rest of Reitzammer’s work.
from studying in the first place. She had recorded these thoughts three years prior, at the age of twenty-three, in a work she would entitle *Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das weibliche Geschlecht vom Studiren abhalten, Darin deren Unerheblichkeit gezeigt, und wie möglich, nöthig und nützlich es sey, Daß dieses Geschlecht der Gelahrtheit sich befisse, umständlich dargeleget wird* (Inquiry into the Causes Preventing the Female Sex from Studying, in Which Their Irrelevance is Shown and How Possible, Necessary, and Useful It Is That This Sex Apply Itself to Learning Is Formally Presented).

At the time she penned this work, it is highly probable that she imagined her ideas would one day be published. In keeping with the prescribed notions of feminine modesty of the day, however, she attempted to convince the public that she had no intentions of ever publishing. She *had* written in secret, noting in her introduction, “One was not used to seeing me creep into a corner, yet when one would unexpectedly come upon me, one would see the way I quickly pushed something written off to the side.”49 She explained in her introduction that only under pressure from her father did she meekly submit to its publication, finally exposing her “wretched work” (“elende Arbeit”).50 Erxleben also professed to fear she would offend men as well as women with her ideas. She realized that some men would “feel as if I am declaring war on them, or at least attempting to deprive them of their

49 “Man war an mir nicht gewohnt daß ich zu Winkel kroch, und dennoch wenn man unvermuthet mich übereilte, so sahe man wie ich was geschriebenes eilig über die Seite schaffte” (Leporin, section e3).

50 Section e4.
privilege” and men and women who had not studied would think she was placing herself above them.51

Given the confident, straightforward writing style that prevails throughout the rest of the book, her self-effacing front was most likely a feminine defense mechanism. For a woman’s words to be considered at all, she knew they must be swathed in the mild, subservient cloak prescribed the “weaker sex.” She conformed to this expectation as far as necessary to gain the public’s trust, namely, throughout her introduction. However, beyond that point her writing takes on the witty, ironic manner characteristic of all her writing and revealing her bright personality and sharp intellect.

Her writing style is regarded generally more logical and refined than her father’s. His fifty-four-page foreword has been described as “dispensable” (Knabe 120). Zaunick writes of Dr. Leporin’s inferior writing style in contrast to his daughter’s fine use of irony (783). In fact, an anonymous plagiary without Dr. Leporin’s foreword was published seven years later as a complete work.52

51 "Nur bedaure ich, daß, wie ich zum voraus sehe, vieles wieder meine Absicht gedeutet werden. Aus dem männlichen Geschlecht dürften vielleicht welche seyn, die da achten werden, ob kündigte ich ihnen den Krieg an: oder suchte wenigstens ihren Vorrecht was zu entziehen; unser Geschlecht wird am mehresten zürnen, nicht nur vermeynend, ob wollte ichs ihm zuvor thun, sondern weil es auch vieles wieder sich deuten wird, da ihnen doch das Wort geredet worden: viele aber von beyderley Geschlecht, die nicht studiret haben, wenn sie, wie es zu geschehen pflegt, das eine lesen, das andere aber überlauffen, werden mich in den Verdacht ziehen, ob wäre mein Satz, daß bey keinem, der nicht studiret hat, weder Verstand, noch Erkäntniß Gottes anzutreten” (Leporin, section e4).
52 This plagiary will be dealt with in chapter three.

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Dr. Leporin personally paid for the printing of his daughter’s work, as he had done with his previous works, surely one of the factors in the family’s depleted funds. Andreas Rüdiger in Berlin published the 343-page book in the spring of 1742.\footnote{Such a lengthy tome hardly classifies as a “booklet,” as Petschauer wrongly calls it (Education 264).} As far as we know, it was well received. One review from the *Leipziger gelehrten Zeitung* commended, “the entire little work…was composed with good literacy and pleasant writing style…”\footnote{Cited in Fischer-Defoy 442, author’s translation.}

The book’s structure is similar to that of Schurman’s *Whether Feminine Christians are Suited to Scholarly Study: A Logic Exercise* (1659), published over a hundred years earlier. Like Schurmann, Erxleben stated the most common arguments against women’s education and proceeds to discredit them one by one. In answer to the question whether females are capable of learning, she wrote that they possess all the powers of reason men do, being also made in the semblance of God (sections 24-37). She then laid out the benefits of learning, including personal pleasure and knowledge of God, oneself, and other people (sections 180-195). The prejudice that women are too weak physically and mentally to learn, Erxleben countered with the argument that women were not given the opportunity to prove themselves in this area but needed to be, as they would benefit and be much improved by studies (sections 111-119, 140). Along with scholarly studies, she held that women (she dared not suggest this for
men) must also have knowledge of the domestic arts, to ensure a truly rounded, harmonious personal development (sections 161, 165). In addition, she asserted that studying and marriage could be compatible and a woman’s learning could even benefit her husband (sections 161-178). Regarding whether a woman should study medicine or receive doctorates, Erxleben argued that they should and had, listing the women who had earned their doctoral degrees up until Laura Bassi (sections 240-244).

In the second, shorter part of her book, Erxleben named and argued against further reasons hindering the study of females, including miserliness (in that parents only wanted to give money toward the education of their sons), laziness, pride, and fear of making others envious. Lack of time for study was another topic she discussed. She wrote that women would have much more time for study if they would only sleep less, make fewer social visits, spend less time gossiping and listening to gossip, and avoid superfluous cleaning or primping (section 354-360). She then closed her work with a poignant concluding statement on the attainment of her goals in the work and the consequences thereof:

Es sind nicht nur die Vorurtheile, sondern auch die übrigen das weibliche Geschlecht vom Studiren abhaltende Ursachen beydes angezeigt, und auch zu Schanden gemacht, und ich stehe in denen Gedanken, es sey für die, welche in der Unwissenheit vorzüglich bleiben wollen, keine Entschuldigung mehr übrig...

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Not only the prejudices, but also the rest of the reasons hindering the female sex from studying have been indicated and put to shame, and I am of the mind that for those who purposely remain in ignorance, there is no excuse left... 

55 Section 409, author's translation.
CHAPTER 3
CAREER AND FAMILY

Erxleben’s handling of marriage, motherhood, and professional life was truly unique, especially when understood within the context of her society. As her decision to marry and combining of traditional and non-traditional roles are dealt with in the following sections, it is important to be aware of the different functions of marriage and its effects on women in eighteenth-century Germany.

For women of the educated middle class, like Erxleben, marriage was typically not a simple matter of falling in love and deciding to be wed. Marriage had specific purposes, with love generally being secondary to practicality. For the female sex, the goals of marriage were numerous. For some women (and their families), it was an instrument of social advancement, usually mediated through a couple’s parents. For others, it was merely a means of self-preservation. It was a necessary bridge between childhood and adulthood, as a woman was provided for by her father while young and by her husband as an adult.

It was not suitable for a woman to have a profession; therefore, a proper lady had no way to support herself. She was always a dependant: her father’s, her husband’s, or another benefactor’s. In some instances, a woman inherited money and was able to
survive alone, but if she chose to marry, control of that inheritance transferred to her husband. If he decided to divorce her, she no longer had rights to what had been previously hers (Sang). In the more common case that there was no large inheritance to sustain a woman’s needs, she was forced to marry, whether she loved the groom or not. Baldinger likened this unfortunate practice to prostitution:

I often had...opportunities to make my fortune and happiness by marrying, if you can call it making a fortune when, in exchange for food and drink, you sell your body for life to a man whom you do not love.  

Many parents worried about finding a husband for their daughters. Particularly as a father aged or became ill, marrying daughters off was essentially an insurance policy. Once they were wed, a father could rest assured that they would continue to be supported after he had passed on.

Another function of marriage was providing support for other female family members. Mothers often used their daughters’ eligibility to their advantage after their husbands had died. If they could secure an advantageous marriage for their daughter, it was likely they would also be taken care of. Mothers-in-law were “part of the package” in many instances. Women like writer Ernestine Reiske needed assurance that their mother would be supported before they agreed to marriage (Sang).

56 Baldinger cited in English in Dawson, Contested 63.
Not all practical goals of marriage involved solely the physical upkeep of the female spouse. Women also married in order to further their education and sometimes even have a career at the side of their learned husband. Examples of these women have already been mentioned, such as Luise Gottsched and Maria Winkelmann. Their marriages were functional, benefiting them intellectually and professionally.

Reinterpreting a Controversial Decision: Erxleben’s Agency

With a successful book to her credit and Halle awaiting her arrival, it seemed that nothing stood in Erxleben’s way to claiming the *Doktorhut* (doctor’s hat). However, she was not destined to study at Halle.\(^\text{57}\) This decision to remain in Quedlinburg and not go to university has been criticized as well as commended. The motives behind her decision are the key to comprehending the woman herself and until now, when dealt with at all by scholarly sources, they have received only partial or tainted treatment. Because they are so crucial to understanding Erxleben the person, an analysis of primary sources and past interpretations of her decision follows which presents her motives in a new light.

\(^\text{57}\) Compare with Petschauer’s completely inaccurate line: “her brother, a student with her at the university, spared her ridicule” (*Education* 234).
In comprehending the nature of Erxleben’s motives, it is best first to consult the source. An explanation of the reasons behind her decision can be found in one of the letters she wrote against unfounded charges of quackery brought against her in 1753. After explaining that she had been granted permission by the king himself to study, she goes on to clarify why she never went to university:


To follow through with this most benevolent royal decision, I would have immediately sought my degree at the time if my marriage, which followed soon thereafter, and several children, with which God blessed me from time to time in my married life, along with various grave and difficult sicknesses of my dear husband, the death of my blessed father, and these kinds of considerable causes, had not delayed it until now.58

Up until 1742, Erxleben had been intent on joining her brother at Halle. However, destiny had something else in store. When she made her request to the king, she could not have foreseen the events that would transpire to keep her in Quedlinburg. One of these was the sickness of her father. She mentions his death (1747) in the above passage. Before his passing, she was the most qualified person to care for him and perhaps the only one who would do it properly, especially in a town whose other three physicians were not exactly friendly with outspoken, unconventional Leporin and his upstart daughter who fancied herself a doctor. Added to the responsibility she

58 Cited in Fischer-Defoy 447, author’s translation.
felt to care for her father, Erxleben also became increasingly more responsible for the family’s income as her father’s deteriorating health required her to take over most of the practice and she became primary breadwinner. There was no way she, a practicing physician who had dedicated her life to the well-being of others, could abandon her family. She subscribed to the doctrine of Enlightenment philosopher Christian Thomasius (1655-1728)\(^5\), who taught that service to the world and to society is the stipulation for the saving grace of God, which obtains true happiness (Scheffold 90).

Caring for her father and providing for her family were not the only unforeseeable undertakings that kept Erxleben from university. Even more significant were the consequences of the death of her maternal cousin and close friend, Sophie Elisabeth Albertine Meineke. Sophie had married the town’s pastor, Johann Christian Erxleben, when she was only fifteen.\(^6\) She bore him six children and died tragically on September 22, 1741 (Billig 31) after the birth of the sixth. Dorothea became caretaker to her cousin’s five\(^6\) surviving children, Magdalena (8), Friedrich Georg Christian (7), Sophie (5), Auguste (4), and Hannelore (infant).\(^6\) The partially

\(^5\) Erxleben refers to the philosophies of Christian Thomasius throughout her *Gründliche Untersuchung*.
\(^6\) This was uncommonly young even for the eighteenth century. The average age for marriage in the middle class at that time was twenty-two (Dawson, *Contested 66*).
\(^6\) Kaiser writes of the “four children of the widowed deacon,” (179) which is incorrect. Unfortunately, as it is important whether her final count of children was eight or nine, Kaiser’s work is cited by many tertiary sources, that further propagate this misinformation.
\(^6\) Beaucamp 12.
\(^6\) Hannelore (3) had died earlier that year.
orphaned children needed a mother. Over the months she cared for them in her
cousin's stead, Erxleben realized this and decided to accept the calling she felt to that
role. As to her feelings for their father, perhaps they had come to love each other as
well.

Johann Christian and Dorothea were wed on August 14, 1742. The bride moved into
the parsonage, at the address Kaplanei 10, and began her life as Dorothea Erxleben,
pastor's wife and instant mother of five. She writes of her union in her vita, referring
to a "happy marriage," and explaining that she would have begun her studies
straightaway after receiving permission in 1741 had "...the Lord not gone with me
down other paths. His very specific providence, which I most humbly revere,
ordained that in 1742 I be wed to Joh. Christian Erxleben, Deacon of the St. Nikolai
Church in Quedlinburg."64

This attribution to "providence," is typical of the Protestant and Pietist belief systems,
in which destiny played a central role. God's divine purpose was one of the most
vital compelling factors in Protestant Germany, particularly in Pietist Halle and
Quedlinburg. Interpretations of fate determined almost every facet of society.
"Destiny" established division of labor and gender-based social rank, while biblical
references reinforced women's supplementarity to men. "Destiny," "fate," or

64 "...wo nicht der Herr damals andere Wege mit mir gegangen wäre. Seine ganz besondere
Erxleben; Dia. an der St. Nicolaikirche in Quedlinburg, verehelicht wurde" (cited in Reitzammer
201), author's translation.
“providence” governed each individual’s personal path and purpose on Earth. Though Erxleben offers “providence” as a viable explanation for the manifestation of her opportunity to marry, her given reason does not explain the concrete causes behind her decision. In fact, her reference to providence has left her motives wide open to various interpretations, each of which reflects the personal agenda of the interpreter. These range from the negative to the slanted positive, from those dubbing her hesitant quitter to selfless female ideal to self-confident activist.

One interpretation of Erxleben’s choice not to matriculate at Halle is that she was afraid of failure and studying with possibly antagonistic male students there. She chose the “easy way out,” reverting to the “expected” female path. Many interpretations center less on her reasoning for choosing marriage over university than on the outcome. That outcome is their idealized “real feminine woman” or “blending of opposites.” These interpretations, based on an overemphasis of Erxleben’s femininity, stress the importance of her “never forgetting her role as a woman” or remaining “all woman” despite her career (Scheffold 93-107). They are presented in the guise of “positive” assessments, but are inherently tainted. Generally these have been produced by men who put Erxleben on a pedestal before other women who would dare venture outside their female role to pursue a career. Education and career are acceptable, as long as women do not forget to fulfill their traditional female roles as well.

65 Herweg, Grasshoff, and Zeitz cited in Fischer-Defoy 452.
Halle Professor Rudolph Zaunick concluded the article he wrote in 1954 for the 200th anniversary of Erxleben’s promotion with a sermon addressed to the “female students of our university.” He admonished them to learn from Erxleben and not “let their intellectual-scientific education stunt the feminine, that is, to achieve harmonious edification of their whole being. The woman who strives for that in the society of today and tomorrow will find her secure path.” 66 He unabashedly avoided directing his otherwise sensible advice about the “harmonious edification of the whole being” at “our male students.” Instead, his interest in Erxleben was for her exemplification of how women should not forget “the feminine.” In essence, they should not forget their domestic role, a role that ultimately benefits men, particularly those who want no part of domestic work. Werner Fischer made a “compliment” similar to Zaunick’s in his interpretation: “Despite her predisposition to studies she did not forget that she, as a woman, had still other obligations to fulfill. Many of her fellow female students today could learn from this example, who, often at the moment when they begin to compete with men, cast off the ‘eternally feminine,’ and assume a convoluted masculine pose.” 67

66 “Unsere Studentinnen könnten daraus vieles lernen für ihre innere Haltung und ihr äußeres Streben, sich so allseitig wie möglich zu bilden, doch über der geistig-wissenschaftlichen Ausbildung nicht das Weibliche verkümmern lassen, also harmonische Bildung ihres ganzen Menschen” (786).
Andrea Scheffold, in her categorization of the many types of Erxleben interpretations, considered positive only those that presented her as a pioneer for women’s rights. In particular, she approved of Edith Heischkel’s evaluation of Erxleben’s crucial decision: “In 1742 she married and not only did she have to be mother to the children of his first marriage, she bore him another four children herself.”  

Scheffold found especially acceptable the “have to be” in Heischkel’s statement, as these words defied the previous “glorifications of homemaker and mother.” Scheffold recognized that Erxleben could not be seen as a true women’s rights activist, as her path was a “very individual and private one.” She had no true contemporaries as a female doctor; neither did she have an immediate following. However, Erxleben’s categorization as a “pioneer” in women’s rights was for Scheffold the correct, non-discriminatory one.

Removal from biased interpretation is necessary to profit from the full value of Erxleben’s history. When the details of her life, specifically her decision to marry, are viewed without anti-feminine or ultra-feministic bias, what remains is the inspirational portrait of an independent woman. Why would she choose to marry instead of going to Halle? The answer does not lie in pigeonholing her actions

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68 Cited in Scheffold 106, author’s translation.
69 Scheffold 106, author’s translation.
70 Ibid.
71 It took 148 years for another woman to graduate with a Ph.D. in medicine in Germany.
according to a prescriptive feminine ideal. The answer is found in recognizing that she used her agency to act as she did.

It is necessary to look at the nature of her marriage and the terms of her motherhood in order to illustrate her use of agency. Though he was eighteen years her senior, Johann and Dorothea Erxleben enjoyed a happy and mutually satisfying partnership. The advantages the marriage held for each were obvious. In Dorothea, her husband found a competent mother for his children, a skilled housekeeper, a proficient organizer at the helm of his Pfarrhaus, and another breadwinner to increase the family’s income. She was for him, in his estimation, an ideal companion, but few men in their society would have agreed, due to her extensive education and “masculine” career. In Johann, Dorothea found an unconventional companion, unintimidated by his wife’s knowledge and unusual in his support of her continuing study and career.

Erxleben’s marriage was voluntary. No one forced her to take on a “feminine” role and give up her chance to pursue a “masculine” education. One way women who desired to pursue an academic education often protected their right to do so was by remaining single. They knew that marriage and children would leave no time for study, so they put it off or never married. Erxleben married and took on

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72 Dawson 64. Also Erxleben herself refers to this practice in her first publication (Leporin, section 167).
motherhood willingly. Attention to this fact devalues the perspective that she remained true to her feminine role "despite" her career, because she never had to take on the feminine role in the first place. It was the "feminine" role that was the voluntary, conditional one. Though she valued the "feminine" domestic arts from her youth, she was not obligated to devote her life to them, nor did she in the end. She continued to practice medicine at the same time she was wife and mother.

Erxleben's specific choice of partner also reveals the independence typical of her actions. She could not have married a man opposed to learned women, so she chose one she knew accepted her as such. As an educated woman with strong opinions, she could not have settled for less. Even in this day and age, many men still cannot accept women with more education or more lucrative or illustrious careers than their own. She considered herself lucky to have found a secure, liberal-minded companion.

But why marry in the first place? How could accepting a life of hard work as a wife and mother be preferable to studying at Halle and concentrating on her medical career? With so much opportunity at her fingertips, she had to have had a strong conviction that marriage was the right path for her. It was this prerogative that made her decision so revealing. She knew she could find a fulfillment in marriage and motherhood that she would not find anywhere else. This is the angle ignored in the ultra-feministic interpretation of her decision. She did not have to be a mother or
wife, as Heischkel and Scheffold put it, she wanted to. Feyl explains it best, saying that in addition to her education, Dorothea also:

\[\text{...Wants the other, she wants to love and be loved, to live intellectually as well as emotionally, she wants to have children and raise children. She marries and sees in that no impediment to her plans. Contrary to the perspective of many women who see in marriage a certain end of their life, a forgoing of personal desires, who sacrifice themselves or inwardly put themselves into the role of endless sacrifice, the young Frau Erxleben viewed marriage as an appropriate platform for individual development (47).}\]

Women, whether they like it or not, have been delegated by nature the joy and pain of bearing children. When they do chose to have them, to the extent that they are equipped with the means to suckle and nourish them, they have even been given the responsibility to care for and nurture them. Whether a woman decides to embrace this role is a personal choice. Some women do not find it at all necessary in their happiness or pursuit of self-realization. Others, like Erxleben, accept and welcome the pleasures and trials that are motherhood and recognize them as indispensable to their individual progression.

After her marriage and initiation to motherhood, Erxleben by no means forgot the importance of education, neither her own nor that of her children. In fact, in her vita she wrote that marriage does not relieve women from studying. On the contrary, she believed that wives “in the company of sensible husbands should study even more
contentedly.  

The “sensible husband” allowed for her being allowed to pursue education to begin with. Erxleben believed that women made much better mothers when they were educated. This belief was cultivated early on by her father. In his introduction to her *Gründliche Untersuchung*, he wrote:

Die von Einsichten sind werden selbst gestehen, das Kinder erziehen eine gantz ungemein wichtige und grosse Kunst ist und viele Weisheit erfordert... der Vater hat nicht Zeit der Kinder sich anzunehmen, und die Mutter ist kaum geschickt ein Kalb aufzuziehen, vielweniger ein Kind...(Die Mutter) hat Zeit und Gelegenheit dazu und die Kinder die mehresten Zeit um sich, hätte sie nur selbst was gelernt, wie grossen Nutzen könnte sie ihren Kindern schaffen. Da fehlt es, sie müsten studieret haben... In Wahrheit die Kinderzucht gehet niemals geseegnet von statten, als wenn die Mütter zu derselben recht geschickt befunden werden.

Those of good judgment will admit that raising children is an extraordinarily important and great art and necessitates much wisdom... the father has no time to take care of the children and the mother is hardly qualified to raise a calf, much less a child...(The mother) has time and opportunity and has the children around her most of the time, if she had only learned something, what a great advantage she could provide her children. This is lacking, they must have studied first... In truth, raising children is never more blessed than when the mothers are found to be quite adept for it.

Being raised by a father who held women’s education in such high regard deeply affected Erxleben’s perspective. She tended to her own education and busied herself with the task of educating her children, giving them lessons in physics and natural history (Scheffold 34). They could not have asked for a mother who was more educated, in both senses of the word.

73 “...in der Gesellschaft eines vernünftigen Ehegatten noch vergnügter studiren lasse...” (cited in Reitzammer 202), author’s translation.
74 Christian Leporin, introduction, section 90-92, author’s translation.
Erxleben dedicated herself willingly first to the acquisition of scholarly knowledge, then to the roles she later adopted of wife, mother, and homemaker. Her decisions were voluntary and conscious and made with agency in the pursuit of individual happiness and fulfillment.

Erxleben as Working Mother

The saying “all mothers are “working” mothers,” was as true if not more true for non-elites in the eighteenth century than it is today. Whether she chooses to stay at home or enter the paid work force, a mother’s tasks are endless. Besides the overwhelming amount of hands-on housework Dorothea Erxleben was obliged to do, she also ran a medical practice out of her father’s home. Knowing how difficult it was to fit it all in, what kind of a mother was this career woman? How did she care for her children? Did her professional principles suffer under the time constraints and stress of motherhood? These are significant questions, but Erxleben’s role as working mother has to-date not yet been analyzed. The majority of sources on her mention, as a kind of side note, that beside her career she was also the mother of nine children. Some extol her virtues as an ideal “feminine” woman who made certain she fulfilled all her duties as woman, not the least of which was motherhood, but ignore her role as “working mother.” Scarcity of autobiographical references to her personal
experience as mother makes the topic difficult, but not impossible, to approach. A combination of the opinion of her stepson of her as a mother, excerpts from her vita and letters on her reasoning for putting off study, her reputation and personal philosophies as doctor, and the successes of her own children can be used to enlighten the subject.

The first and most obvious tribute to her abilities as a mother is the following quote from her stepson, Friedrich Erxleben:

(Ihre Ehe) zeuget solche Mut und Entschlossenheit in ihrem Charakter nicht allein, sondern auch von der Zärtlichkeit ihrer Liebe gegen eine verstorbene Freundin, deren Stelle sie bey 5 noch unerzogenen Kindern als Mutter zu vertreten sich entschließen konnte, und solche wirklich so vertrat, daß solche den frühen Verlust ihrer leiblichen Mutter nicht fühlten; noch da ich dieses schreibe, einer von diesen fünf, schlägt mein Herz vor Liebe und Dankbarkeit gegen diese ewig theure und geliebte Mutter...

(Her marriage) bears witness to not only such courage and determination in her character, but also to the tenderness of her love for a departed friend, whose place as mother to five young children she decided to take, which she actually did in such a manner that they did not even feel the early loss of their biological mother; and even as I, one of these five, write this, my heart pounds with love and gratitude toward this eternally cherished and beloved mother. 25

Who, if not one of her children, can judge what kind of mother Dorothea Erxleben was? Remarkable is that these words came from a stepson and not even a biological child. Friedrich’s homage to her is evidence of the love and attention she paid to all of her children, stepchildren as well as natural children.

Next, Erxleben’s words in her vita testify to her dedication as a mother. She wrote that she would have taken advantage of the king’s bequest were it not for “the attention to the rearing of five young children” that did not allow for her absence:

…I was convinced) that I would do wrong if I would pursue the studies that constantly remind me of my duties in such a way that I put aside the duties that oblige me as a wife and mother.76

Today, Halle is an easy commute from Quedlinburg by car, but in the eighteenth century, it involved a lengthy coach ride. Continuing her studies would have meant leaving her new family and her ailing father to reside in Halle. Raising her children took priority. Even if the university had been in Quedlinburg, it is doubtful that she would have chosen to study right away. Raising many young children while attending to all her duties in the home as wife and homemaker, and away from the home as doctor, was more than enough to tackle at once.

Examining Erxleben’s role as “working mother” involves the “working” as well as the “mother.” The effect of her motherhood on professional performance must also be considered. With so many children to raise and so many duties to perform, did her practice of medicine suffer? Statements from those on the committee that examined

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76 “…(ich war überzeugt), daß ich übel handeln würde, wenn ich die Studia, die mich meiner Pflichten beständig errinerten, auf eine solche Art treiben wolte, daß ich dabei die Pflichten ausser Augen setzte, die mir als einer Ehegattin und Mutter oblagen…” (cited in Reitzammer 202), author’s translation.
her for her doctorate at Halle answer to the negative. They point to the exceptional quality of Erxleben’s education and practical employment of medical knowledge and techniques. These statements will be reviewed in the section on her doctoral exam, as well as her thesis, which is further proof of her professional excellence.

Personal comments from Erxleben on the quality of her practice of medicine are few and far between, as “tooting your own horn” was not proper, especially for a woman. However, one modest reference to her work can be found in a letter she was forced to write in 1753 in her own defense against charges of quackery:


It is enough for me that I am firmly convinced that I never administered a treatment out of dishonorable causes or that it would lead to the harm of those who entrusted their health to me, rather I did it always with the most upright intentions to serve my fellow man to the best of my ability with that which I righteously learned, and I always stood true to the rule that le Clerc extols in l’historie de la Medicine P. I. L. 4. C. I. p. 247 from Hippocrates, who was even pagan: Il faisoit la medecine par un principe d’humanité et non pas simplement pour en tirer du profit et de la gloire. 77

Erxleben at the very least “served her fellow man to the best of her ability” and “practiced medicine out of a sense of humanity and not just to obtain profit or glory.”

77 Erxleben cited in Fischer-Defoy 450, author’s translation.
She was just as conscientious of the responsibilities of her career as she was of those of parenthood.

Erxleben’s workload increased with each birth of her own four children. Amazingly, she continued to treat her patients throughout her pregnancies, prompting the doctors who accused her of quackery to criticize her for “fancying that she could be a doctor in and out of the childbed.”

Erxleben gave birth to her first child on June 22, 1744. Given the name Christian Polycarp after his grandfather, this son earned the most lasting distinction of all her children. After receiving his first lessons in physics and natural sciences at home from his mother, he studied these subjects together with medicine at the University of Göttingen. He earned a doctorate of philosophy in 1767 and a doctorate of physics in 1771 there before being promoted to professor. The same year he founded the first Veterinary Institute and presented the first courses in veterinary science. Today he is regarded as the founder of scientific veterinary medicine.

Without his mother’s initial instruction and support, it is unlikely that Christian Polycarp would have gone so far. The area of medicine in which he excelled is also noteworthy as it is one that requires compassion and empathy for creatures commonly

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78 Cited in Fischer-Defoy 452, author’s translation. Note: “childbed” is the postpartum recovery period, translated here from Wochen Bett.
considered secondary. Learning empathy and respect for others, even “secondary”
creatures, a classification extended to women, was likely a part of the Erxleben
children’s education. Their mother was a living example of how unfounded prejudice
against those regarded as “secondary” could be. In addition, Erxleben herself
demonstrated compassion and service to others daily in her medical practice.
Whether her children were conscious of it or not, having such an exemplary model
before them had to have had its positive effect throughout their upbringing.

Less is known about Erxleben’s second and third biological children, Christian Albert
Christoph Erxleben (September 9, 1746 –September 16, 1755) and Anna Dorothea
Erxleben (March 16, 1750-?). Christoph surely took part in the lessons Erxleben
imparted her older children before his untimely passing at the age of nine. It is not
known whether Anna Dorothea did as well. One might think Erxleben would have
promoted Anna Dorothea and her other daughters’ learning, but this is not necessarily
the case. Like many career women of her time, Erxleben could have viewed herself
at that point as an exception to a general rule. Despite the fact that she was the author
of a work that demolished the reasons keeping women from studying, it is possible
that she adapted the attitude that Marianne Ehrmann and Sophie von LaRoche would
later display, advocating their own education because they held their circumstances
unique or special.
Another reason Erxleben might not have insisted on her daughters studying is the realization of the incredible extra strain it put on a woman. Erxleben was the first to know what pursuing academic learning entailed. For the eighteenth-century woman, it meant she would have the burden of women’s work plus her studies. There was also no guarantee that her daughters would find a husband as freethinking and understanding as their father had been. On the other hand, Erxleben knew what joy learning could bring. With her own love for learning and its direct link to her personal happiness (Reitzammer 207), it is easy to imagine that she would have wanted to pass this on to all her children, daughters and sons alike. Having publicly acknowledged that higher learning could improve the quality of a person’s life, even better them in their roles as parent, citizen, and manager of a household, it would be surprising if she had not taught all her children equally.

In Anna Dorothea’s case, by the time she was old enough to be taught, Erxleben had already begun suffering from the illness that would take her life prematurely.79 Erxleben’s declining health may have helped determine whether she taught her youngest daughter anything beyond reading and writing. She could have begun her education in an effort to broaden her mind and opportunities for the future or she might have withheld further education in fear of leaving the girl with a half-education she might not be able to continue. No matter what her decision was, it is certain she made it as a concerned and loving parent with her daughter’s best interests in mind.

79 The nature of this illness will be covered in chapter 4.
Erxleben’s youngest son, Johann Heinrich Christian Erxleben, was born on March 14, 1753 –1811. He, like his older brothers, went on to university study after receiving his first lessons from his mother at home. He studied law and later became a professor of law at Marburg (Beaucamp, Johann 16).

A final quote from stepson Friedrich’s work, Die erste promovierte Medizinerin in Deutschland (The First Promoted Female Doctor in Germany), confirms Erxleben’s success in balancing motherhood with career:

...(Sie) verdiente es, nicht zu vergessen [sic], sondern im Andenken erhalten zu werden. Nicht weniger aber verdiente ihr edles Herz, und ihre mütterliche Gesinnung gegen den Verfasser dieses Aufsatzes und dessen Geschwister auch diese Art der Erkenntlichkeit, mit welcher er hierdurch zu Erhaltung ihres Andenkens in der gelehrten Welt beyzutragen, den Versuch gewagt.

...(She) deserved not to be forgotten, but to be held in remembrance. And no less did her noble heart and her maternal attitude toward the author of this composition and his siblings earn also this kind of recognition, with which he dares the attempt to preserve her memory in the learned world.80

80 Cited in Scheffold 33, author’s translation.
Plagiary

One incident in Erxleben’s life that best demonstrates her forthright, indomitable spirit is her reaction to the plagiary of her first book, Inquiry into the Causes Preventing the Female Sex from Studying. It was pirated in 1749 under the title Vernünftige Gedanken vom Studieren des schönen Geschlechts (Sensible Thoughts on the Studies of the Beautiful Sex) (Sheffold 88). A review in Die Staats- und Gelehrte Zeitung des Hamburgischen unpartheyischen Correspondenten from October 11, 1749, alerted the public to the plagiary, “This writing has its value and deserves praise because it flowed from the feather of a sensible lady, and we remember already having spoken about it.”

Today it is not difficult to imagine the indignation and outrage the spirited Dorothea must have experienced. The custom of the day for women authors was anonymity and meekness. Despite this, Dorothea aired her own reaction to the literary theft in a letter to the Hamburger Freye Urtheile und Nachrichten zum Aufnehmen der Wissenschaften und Historie dated September 28, 1749:

Was kann niederträchtiger seyn, als erndten wollen, wo man nicht gesät hat, und ohne Scheu den Nutzen einer fremden Arbeit sich anmaßen?...Nur dieses einzige kann ich Ihnen nicht bergen, daß die daselbst von Ihnen recensirte und mit einem günstigen Gutachten begleitete

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81 “Diese Schrift hat ihren Werth und verdienet Beyfall, weil sie aus der Feder eines vernünftigen Frauenzimmers geflossen ist, und wir erinnern uns, damals davon geredet zu haben” (reproduced in Böhm 11 and reprinted in Scheffold 88), author’s translation.
What could be more vile than to reap where one has not sown and boldly assume the benefit of a stranger’s work?...Only this one thing I cannot conceal from you, that the very work you have revised and accompanied with a favorable conclusion is not a new one from an unknown; rather I am its author and I edited it back in 1742 with the publisher H. Joh. Andr. Rüdigers...

Although incensed at the nerve of the wrongdoers, her words then take on a compassionate, even maternal tone, as if slapping them on the wrist and refraining from condemning them absolutely:

...auf wie mannigfache Weise der Neid, der Eigennutz, schlechte Einsicht und andere dergleichen tadelläte Eigenschaften sich gegen dieses Buch, oder vielmehr gegen mich, bey desselben ersten Bekanntmachung geschäftig bewiese, ...Ich sehe diese Elenden mit Mitleiden an, ich übersehe ihre Thorheiten mit Großmut...Ich begnüge mich damit, daß vernünftige Männer besser von meiner Schrift geurtheilet haben...

...by what diverse means are jealousy, selfishness, bad judgment and other such reproachable traits actively demonstrated against this book, moreover against me, by its publication, ...I view these wretches with sympathy, I overlook their folly with magnanimity...I am content with knowing that sensible men have judged better of my work...

In such an elevated manner did she denounce the wrongdoing, but pardon the offenders. Not only did she once again dare to speak out on her own behalf, she did it in an admirable way. This type of honest conduct, so characteristic of Dorothea

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82 Reproduced in Böhm 12 and reprinted in Kaiser 179, author’s translation.
83 Cited in Scheffold 89, author’s translation.
Erxleben and the humane code she lived by, was impossible for even her conservative contemporaries to find fault with.

Accusations of Quackery

In the winter of 1752, thirty-seven years old and pregnant with her last child, Erxleben “treated” an older lady by the name of Wegener from nearby Neundorf. That is, she never actually saw the patient; she only prescribed a treatment for her. Unfortunately, the patient died shortly thereafter. This was the opportunity the Quedlinburg Doctors Johann Tobias Herweg, Henricus Wilhelmus Grasshoff, and Andreas Adolf Zeitz had waited for. They had never approved of a woman practicing medicine, much less a woman without a medical degree. On February 5, 1753, they jointly composed a letter of complaint to city officials accusing Erxleben of quackery, lumping her together with the “rest of the quacks,” including “army surgeons, bathers, barbers, midwives, and others” (Schiebinger 253). They demanded that the medizinische Pfuscherey (medical quackery) of which Deacon Erxleben’s wife was guilty be controlled by imposing a fine of ten Reichstaler (the currency of the day) on citizens who received treatment from anyone other than a licensed doctor. They

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84 Another breach in available Erxleben information can be found in the very fact that there are records of her medical practice and its effect on her male contemporaries. Compare to “Unfortunately we know nothing of her activities as doctor and also nothing of the reaction of the male doctor colleagues of that time” (Dorothea Erxleben), author’s translation.
claimed that quackery had ruined their legitimate practices, preventing them from making a living. In addition, they complained that Erxleben “openly visits patients and boldly allows herself to be called ‘Frau Doctorin.’”85

Their letter found its way into the hands of Paul Andreas von Schellersheim, who was von Plotho’s successor as Quedlinburg’s Stiftshauptmann from 1744-74 (Fischer-Defoy 445). Erxleben found an ally in von Schellersheim. This was possibly because his wife was among the Stiftdamen she cared for over the years. She was likely already a familiar, trusted friend of the von Schellersheim family. Despite this supposed connection and his indisputable predisposition toward Erxleben, von Schellersheim felt obligated as Stiftshauptmann to respond officially to the doctors’ grievance. To this purpose he wrote a short letter to Erxleben on February 16, 1753, requesting that she answer to the death of Frau Wegener within eight days and in the meantime refrain from treating patients. The same day he also issued a public notice that all army surgeons, bathers, barbers, midwives, and others cease treating patients or they and their patients would be fined ten Reichsthaler (Fischer-Defoy 445).

Erxleben’s answer came only four days later in the form of a sixteen-page letter denying all the charges put forth by “meine Herren Gegner” (“my opposing gentlemen”). She argued that her medical qualifications were fully in order, even though she did not yet possess a doctorate. She also brought up the fact that she had

85 Herweg, Grasshoff, and Zeitz cited in Fischer-Defoy 444, author’s translation.
been given permission to seek her degree by the king himself and, though she had not done so, had in the meantime finished a dissertation that she was ready to defend, mentioning it by name. As to the death of Frau Wegener, she admitted to having treated her, but added that she had never actually seen the patient and even if she had, with such a "dangerous sickness" there would probably have been no way to prevent her death. Erxleben reproved, "My adversaries are bold indeed to call my cures quackery; let the doctor who has never had a patient die cast the first stone." 86

To the charges that she let herself be called "Frau Doctorin" she objected, "I can hardly bring myself to comment on the ridiculous accusation that I allow myself to be called 'Frau Doctorin.' These gentlemen have never brought forward anyone who called me that, or heard someone call me that, without being severely reprimanded." 87

Against the doctors' insistence that Erxleben's practice was damaging to theirs, she numbered three simple facts that disproved this. First, her patients came to her of their own free will. Second, most of them were counted among those too poor to pay for treatment. Third, the ones who paid gave precious little, and who was to say that if they had not gone to her, they would have necessarily sought the services of one of the three protesting doctors? 88

86 Erxleben cited in English in Schiebinger 254.  
87 Ibid.  
88 Erxleben cited in Fischer-Defoy 450.
Erxleben concluded her defense with a daring suggestion. She wrote that if her “opposing gentlemen” were still not satisfied with her explanation and could not wait until the day she would be tested at Halle, she would be glad to submit to an examination there in Quedlinburg, as long as all three of them would administer it. 89

As to be expected, Herweg, Grasshoff, and Schellersheim were not satisfied with Erxleben’s explanation. She had thoroughly and clearly defended herself on all accounts and disproved their accusations. This was a humiliation they were not about to endure, particularly not from a woman. On March 6 they wrote an insolent letter full of biting ridicule directed at Erxleben personally. They claimed that the only way she had gotten royal permission to study was through her much too indulgent relationship with Stiftshauptmann von Plothen and the abbess and they criticized her for not taking advantage of her opportunity to study while she was single. It was in this letter that they mocked her for “fancying that she could be a doctor in and out of the childbed.” 90 They insulted her intellect, writing, “...The dear lady, by her feminine understanding, considers herself a doctor just because she can throw around some broken Latin and French.” 91 But they did not leave the abuse at that. The three gentlemen deemed it necessary to insult Erxleben’s departed father as well, alleging

89 Schiebinger mistranslates this section, writing that Erxleben’s condition was “that her accusers also take the exam” (254). However, Erxleben was not this insulting. Her condition was simply that her three accusers examine her, as is evidenced by the impertinent comment in their next letter, “Sie wollte Sich von uns Dreien examiniren laßen, und Sich auf erfordern dazu sistiren, es müßten aber alle 3 ihre Gegener beysammen seyn. Hoho! es wäre ja an einen genung” (cited in Fischer-Defoy 453).

90 Cited in Fischer-Defoy 452, author’s translation.

91 Cited in Fischer-Defoy 454, author’s translation.
that it was no wonder Erxleben had let her patient die of *Friesel* if she had learned medicine from him, since he had not understood how to treat the disease either.

There was no other choice but for von Schellersheim to require Erxleben to legitimize herself at Halle. In a notice dated March 10, he informed all parties that she had to report to Halle within three months if she wanted to continue practicing medicine (Fischer-Defoy 454). It was impossible for Erxleben to meet the deadline, as she was in her ninth month of pregnancy. The long trip by coach to Halle was out of the question in her state and would have been too much with a newborn.

On June 6, 1753 she wrote again to von Schellersheim, laying out her circumstances and requesting an extension. Evidently she was granted another six months, judging by the date of her next correspondence with von Schellersheim, January 6, 1754 (Fischer-Defoy 455). Along with the letter that announced her readiness to go to Halle, she delivered up her dissertation, *Quod nimis cito ac jucunde curare saepius fiat causaminus tutae curationis* (Concerning Swift and Pleasant but for that Reason often Unsure Treatment of Sicknesses). Von Schellersheim sent his own request along with Erxleben’s dissertation on to the royal court and on March 15, the answer was given: Erxleben again was granted permission to seek her doctoral degree at Halle.
In 1754, Erxleben was only eight years away from her premature death. Though she wrote in her defense that she planned to earn her degree eventually from Halle, there is no telling whether she would have done so before her death without her “opposing gentlemen’s” timely accusations of quackery. They undoubtedly caused her undue stress at a difficult time, but they were actually a blessing in disguise. Without the charges against her, she may never have had the opportunity publicly to defend and prove herself. In reality, she had the good doctors to thank for setting in motion her plans for professional advancement and securing her place in history as Germany’s first female medical doctor.

Doctoral Dissertation and Exam

Today, copies of the dissertation Erxleben presented as partial fulfillment of her degree requirements are rare. However, the work made quite an impact when it was published in 1754. Erxleben had so many requests for it that she was compelled to translate and re-publish it in German a year later. It dealt principally with the overuse of drugs and the over-intrusive methods used in healing. In it, she suggested an exact

92 The few Latin and German copies that still exist are located in the special literature collections of a small number of libraries and may not be borrowed. Among copies located were those in Latin at the University of Tübingen (call number: J11 141.4), the American National Library of Medicine (call number: W4 H18 1754 E.1), and those in German at Herzog August Bibliothek (call number: Wt 288, Signaturformel [1] 5 A-K8 M4), University Library of Halle Merseburg (microfilm, call number: Fi 5135 R), and the Niedersachische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (call number unknown).
diagnosis before the prescription of drugs and warned against purely symptomatic
treatment; she argued that it was the cause of the sickness that must be tackled. She
also objected to many doctors’ exaggeration of the seriousness of their patients’
ailments for the purpose of enlarging their reputation (Renker 4). She protested
doctors’ undue eagerness to intervene and discussed the proper use of purgatives,
medications to promote urination or menstruation, and the proper use of opiates
(Schiebinger 256).

Erxleben’s progressive dissertation of 250 years ago dealt with many topics that are
still debated in medicine today. Excessive and improper intervention and over-
prescription of drugs continue to be problems in western medical treatment\(^3\), though
the evidence in favor of less intrusive, more holistic cures is mounting. The fact that
Erxleben already knew what western medical science is just now discovering is proof
that she was not only forward-thinking in the realm of women’s rights, but also ahead
of her time in terms of medical philosophy.

To Erxleben’s dissertation were added her vita, Johann Juncker’s *Programma*, four
letters from former teacher Tobias Eckhard (Reitzammer 200), and “hymns” and
poems honoring her from professors Johann Joachim Lange, Johann Friedrich Rahn
and two who were on her committee, Philipp Adolf Boehmer and Andreas Elias

\(^3\) As opposed to eastern healing methods (acupuncture, herbal remedies), which embrace a more
natural, holistic approach.
Büchner (Knabe 119). These additional resources are some of the most helpful in providing information about Erxleben’s history. It is from the included vita that a majority of her autobiographical information originates. Juncker’s *Programma* is the primary source for piecing together the events of Erxleben’s exam and graduation celebration.

The renowned Dr. Johann Juncker, whose medical text Erxleben had studied already in her youth and who had administered the doctoral examination to her brother Christian, was deeply impressed with the lady who stood before him on May 6, 1754. Other members of Halle’s medical faculty, including Prorektor Alberti and deans Böhmer, Büchner, and Hoffman Jun. (Knabe 119), had gathered for the momentous occasion and were anxious to see if this female could withstand the rigorous and extensive questioning that would be put to her in Latin. The following quote from Juncker’s *Programma* illustrates how remarkable Erxleben’s performance was on that May morning.

Eine Matrone... welche die Pflichten einer Ehegattin, einer Mutter, einer Hauswirthin also verwaltete, daß sie andern zum nachahmungswürdigen Beyspiel diente; ein solch geehrtes Frauenzimmer überreichte eine Probeschrift von ihrer Arzneygelerhtheit, woraus eine sehr gründliche Wissenschaft und eine grosse Erfahrung hervorleuchtete; ja, sie unterwarf sich der Prüfung einer medicinischen Fakultät... damit sie auf eine rechtmäßige Art die Doctorwürde erlange, und öffentlich zeigen möchte... Sie hat allein zwei ganze Stunden hindurch die an sie gethanne Fragen mit einer bewunderswürdigen Bescheidenheit und Fertigkeit angenommen, gründlich und deutlich darauf geantwortet, und die vorgelegten Zweifel mit der größten Richtigkeit aufgelöset. Hierbey bediente sie sich eines so schönen und zierlichen Lateins, so daß wir glaubten, eine alte Römerin in ihrer Muttersprache reden zu hören. Eben so geschickt und geschwind zeigte sie ihre zusammenhängende und gründliche Erkenntniss in der Lehre von der Gesundheit des Corpers, in der Wissenschaft von den Krankheiten desselben, und in

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A matron...who managed the duties of a wife, a mother, and homemaker that she served others as a model worthy of emulation; such an honored lady gave us an example of her medical erudition, from which a very thorough knowledge and great amount of experience radiated; indeed she subjected herself to the examination of a medical faculty so that she could legitimately obtain and openly display the title of doctor... For two hours straight she altogether thoroughly and distinctly answered the questions put to her with an admirable modesty and skill, and answered all presented questions with the greatest accuracy. All the while she made use of such a beautiful, delicate Latin that we believed we were hearing a lady of ancient Rome speaking her mother tongue. She proved equally skilled and swift her related and thorough understanding of the precepts of the health of the body, in the knowledge of its diseases, and in their healing; also the *materia medica* and the way to write prescriptions were not unknown to her.  

Juncker’s opinion was shared by the rest of the faculty, who unanimously agreed that Erxleben should receive her degree. In fact, they wished to bestow it upon her immediately. However, being that it was an unprecedented case, they felt it necessary once again to seek the king’s approval. They wrote to court that she had answered all questions in Latin so “thoroughly and modestly, that one could not have expected better from the most skilled of medical candidates.”  

Meanwhile Erxleben returned to Quedlinburg, possibly somewhat disappointed, but hopeful. Her husband and younger children, Sophie (18), Auguste (17), Hannelore (13), Johann (10), Albert (7), Anna Dorothea (4), and her one-year-old baby, Johann Heinrich, anxiously awaited her homecoming.

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95 Medical Faculty of Halle cited in Fischer-Defoy 458, author’s translation.
Only twelve days after her exam, on May 18, an answer was already on its way from court. Fredrick the Great had again given his approval. He “permitted with pleasure” that Halle give Erxleben her degree and even signed the authorization with his own hand, simply: Friedrich (Knabe 119).

The graduation ceremony took place at Große Brauhausstraße 14. This was the address of the Juncker’s personal residence. It was quite the grand celebration with those present who “were necessary to the proceedings… and many other distinguished guests of both sexes and not a small number of our studying youth.”

Erxleben took the oath and was pronounced doctor by Juncker’s authority.

Afterward, she gave a short speech in Latin, in which she expressed “her thanks owed to God, the king, and the faculty.” Part of this speech is reprinted in Böhm (22) and Scheffold (50-51):

Sind auch meine Kräfte nur gering, mangelt es mir auch an der Kunst der wohlgesetzten Rede, zumal aus einem so ungewohnten Anlaß, wie ich ihn nie erwarten durfte, so muß ich trotz aller dieser Schwierigkeiten doch um Redeerlaubnis bitten.

Ich will den Empfindungen eines dankbaren Geistes, der sich über empfangene Wohltaten herzlich freut, Ausdruck verleihen; freilich wird diese Freude durch das Bewußtsein der eigenen Mängel gedämpft. Heute, da ich mich zwischen verschiedene und geradezu

96 “deren Gegenwart bei dieser Handlung nothig war… wozu sich noch viele Vornehme beiderlei Geschlechts und eine nicht geringe Anzahl unserer studierenden Jugend einfand” (Juncker cited in Fischer-Defoy 459), author’s translation.
97 Ibid.
My powers are limited and I lack the art of well-turned phrases, especially on such an unusual occasion, the likes of which I couldn't have expected; despite all these difficulties I must ask for permission to speak.

I want to express the sentiments of a thankful spirit that heartily delights in blessings received; naturally this joy is subdued by the consciousness of my own deficiencies. Today, finding myself positioned between various downright opposing feelings, I hardly know what I should do, what I should not, or where I should turn.

Thus, I feel all of my weaknesses, not only those from which no person is free, but also those attributed to the weaker sex. At the same time I admire in humble reverence the wise guidance of the Almighty. From the time I was in my cradle he has steered my destiny so that I could reach a point that hardly a woman before me has been lucky enough to reach, which even I could not have imagined.

Obedient to this providence, it has always been my resolution to do nothing without reflection and nothing with arrogance; but also fear seemed inappropriate.  

Following Erxleben’s modest words, the remainder of the evening was filled with celebration, all the guests taking time to express to her their heartfelt congratulations (Reitzammer 204).

The uniqueness of Erxleben’s examination and ceremony must be noted. They are truly remarkable when compared with those of Dorothea Schölzer thirty-three years

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98 Author’s translation from German rendering (from original in Latin).
later. In 1787, Schlözer was examined in German, rather than the customary Latin, by the faculty of the University of Göttingen. She received her degree, but was not allowed to attend the public celebration. Instead, she watched the proceedings through a broken window between the library and the church, where the ceremony was held (Schiebinger 259).

For Erxleben, a woman, to be allowed a university exam in 1754 was in itself truly extraordinary. For her to take and pass it in Latin was even more striking. Finally, her presence at the ceremony and ability to make her acceptance speech in Latin were noteworthy occurrences as well. None of these circumstances would soon be repeated. The next woman to receive the title of doctor from the University of Halle’s School of Medicine would do so 148 years later, on March 20, 1901 (Fischer-Defoy 461). It was 1908 before women were formally admitted to study medicine at German universities (Schiebinger 256).
Little is known about Erxleben’s activities after her promotion in 1754. A letter from the archives of the famous Klopstock family, also of Quedlinburg, is one of the last concrete references we have to her practice in the eight years between her promotion and her death in 1762. In a letter dated August 18, 1755, from Georg Karl Klopstock to his brother, Theodor Johannes Klopstock, Georg mentions that Erxleben had cured the Princess of Holstein-Ploen of smallpox.99

Less than a month after the Klopstock letter was written, we know Erxleben experienced the loss of her second biological son. Nine-year-old Christian Albertus Christoph Erxleben died on September 16, 1755. The family mourned his unfortunate early passing only a year after they had celebrated Erxleben’s promotion together (Beaucamp, Johann 14).

In the years following her promotion, Erxleben “practiced medicine with honor with particular success with women and children and was named the personal physician of the abbess. She continued further study diligently, namely physics and natural

99 “Sonsten weiß ich nichts zu berichten, außer daß auch der hiesigen Princesse von Holstein-Ploen Durchl mit denen Blattern jedoch ohne Gefahr befallen und von der Frau Doct: Erxleben, eines hiesigen Diaconi Eheliebste, glückl curiert worden” (section of letter reproduced in Böhm 24, transcribed in Scheffold 52).
science, in which subjects she instructed her now famous son who subsequently became professor in Göttingen.\footnote{100} Friedrich Erxleben recorded that during his stepmother’s last years, she “used her talents and knowledge in the healing arts to do much to benefit her fellow man.”\footnote{101} From Erxleben’s handwritten entries in the St. Nicolai church’s records, it is also known that she assisted her husband in an unofficial capacity with church business (Beaucamp, \textit{Wer war Dorothea?}).

Erxleben’s mother, whom she probably cared for in her later years, died on October 19, 1757, followed by Erxleben’s husband, Johann Christian. He departed at the age of sixty-two on March 26, 1759, leaving his wife and children, the youngest only six years old, behind. The family most likely had to move to make room for the new pastor. It is supposed that Erxleben moved back to her childhood home that was also the location of her medical practice, Steinweg 51. Maria-Elisabeth Kramer, her sister, is recorded in Quedlinburg records to have owned the home at this time (Beaucamp, \textit{Johann 14}).

The effect the death of her husband and the probable move had on Erxleben is not recorded. The next known detail of her biography is the date of her death, June 13, 1762. Quedlinburg’s St. Nicolai church records indicate she took the sacrament for

\footnote{100} Chronik der Familie Schwalbe cited in Scheffold 52, author’s translation.\footnote{101} Ihr Stiefsohn berichtet, sie habe nach ihrer Promotion “...ihre Gaben, die ihr eigene Geschicklichkeit, und die auf eine gesetzmäßige Art erlangte Freiheit solche in der ausübenden Heilkunst anzuwenden, zum Wohle vieler ihrer Nebenmenschen noch einige Jahre nützlich gebraucht” (Scheffold 52).
the last time earlier that day. Not yet forty-seven, she died only three years after her husband, who was significantly older. Her cause of death is another debated element of her history. Most sources agree that there was hemorrhaging involved, though its cause is debated, ranging from breast cancer (Erxleben) to Phthise (Fischer-Defoy 460) to the most accepted, tuberculosis. According to church records, “Frau Doctor” Erxleben was buried next to her husband the following day, June 14, 1762, after the church bell tolled two o’clock. At three o’clock there was a procession consisting of the ministry and the school’s faculty demonstrating “once again the good ties of the Leporin-Erxleben family with the Stift and the esteem of the Frau Doctor.”

The loss of an amazing woman was lamented in the Berlinischen privilegierten Zeitung and in the Berlinischen Nachrichten on July 6, 1762:


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102 Zaunick 785, Scheffold.
103 Reprinted in Böhm 29, author’s translation.
104 “Dieses Ehrengeleit des Ministeriums und des Schulkollegiums belegen wohl noch einmal die guten Verbindungen der Familie Leporin-Erxleben zum Stift und das Ansehen der Frau Doktor” (Scheffold 53), author’s translation.

88
This city regrets the loss of a rarity of the beautiful sex, which it has suffered through the early death of the highly-learned and highly-experienced woman, Mrs. Dorothea Christiane Erxlebin, née Leporinin, doctor of medical erudition. This woman, renowned as much through her noble character and unfeigned piety as through good and thorough knowledge, wrote with equal facility in the German, French, and Latin languages, both in prose and ligata oratione, and received the title of doctor's on June 12, 1754 at the University of Halle. Indefatigable in easing the suffering of her poor fellow man, she exercised the practice of medicine with fame, fortune, and God's blessing. As this extraordinary woman had done in all of life's misfortune, so did she prove herself full of courage in dying. Without fear she faced death, announced its arrival to her children, put her house in order and died sitting up, softly and blessedly, on June 13, 1762, of hemorrhaging caused by a dangerous injury to the breast in the 47th year of her glorious life; if only it had pleased God to double these years!  

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105 Cited in Fischer-Defoy 460, author's translation.
CONCLUSION

This re-presentation of Dorothea Erxleben has demonstrated the full potential of an amazing eighteenth-century woman's biography. A more accurate compilation of information, removal of the subject from extremely biased assessment, and additional biographical analysis have been provided here to create a work that surpasses previously available research on Germany's first female doctor. The progression of her ideological development has played a central role in this thesis. This has included the circumstances surrounding her academic instruction, the beliefs and philosophies stemming from her dual education, the expression of these in her *Gründliche Untersuchung*, and the determiners involved in her ultimate decision to marry.

Through analysis of her choice to postpone university in order to have a family, it has been revealed that she made use of free agency, setting herself apart from other educated women of her time. She distinguished herself as a truly unique lady who, even at the risk of suffering public ridicule, was unafraid of upholding personal values.

Erxleben's accomplishments are extraordinary even by today's standards. Studying, publishing, maintaining a medical practice, caring for a sick father, and mothering several young children all by the age of twenty-six is no small feat, no matter what century one lives in. Seen from an eighteenth-century perspective, her achievements
are more impressive still. The social climate of eighteenth-century Germany has been illustrated and taken into consideration throughout this work. The influence of philosophies promoted by the likes of Schurman, Gottsched, and Rousseau, as well as the socio-economic shifts contributing to their ideologies' development, has been examined. This historical background has lent to the optimal appreciation of Erxleben's successes. All this has been done for the purpose of revealing an ideal role model for working parents. Despite adversity and hardship, Erxleben persevered. This biography has shown that she managed to realize simultaneously and successfully her professional as well as domestic goals. Erxleben's life story provides an inspirational example for those who wish to pursue both family and career as she did. This thesis has provided a new platform from which her life story may be reevaluated and her full potential as role model recognized.

From childhood, Erxleben proved herself to be an exceptional individual. Her beginnings appeared anything but auspicious, with poor health and extensive bedrest allowing her time for reading. Erxleben's facility for learning and thirst for knowledge were supported by her father, who tended to her academic education, even teaching her the practice of medicine. Erxleben's mother ensured that her daughter's domestic training was not neglected, however. Young Dorothea received a dual education and learned to value both academic and domestic pursuits. By twenty-six she was already published, having written a book that, not surprisingly, dealt with the reasons keeping others of her sex from academic study. The same year her book was
put into print, she was forced to make the most consequential decision of her life: whether she should study at Halle or stay in Quedlinburg to marry, have children, and nurse her ailing father. Though Erxleben’s educational and professional aspirations were high, she chose to delay formal study and assume the roles of wife, mother, caretaker, and provider. Comprehension of this misunderstood decision offers new perspective on Erxleben. She chose conscientiously to further her own self realization and benefit those around her, proving that her seemingly oppositional goals could, indeed, be harmonized, even if they had to be rearranged, temporarily deferred, or not come to pass in the customary sequence.

Erxleben’s book was pirated in 1749. In retrospect, this plagiary demonstrates the relevance and social import of Erxleben’s work at that time. Four years later, Erxleben was the target of another injustice, but one that served her in the end: accusations of quackery. The three Quedlinburg doctors who wrongly accused her intended to rid themselves of their female concurrent. In actuality, they only expedited the process of her seeking and receiving her doctoral degree from the University of Halle. Under the false accusations, Erxleben was required to legitimize herself, so she was tested and promoted to doctor of medicine in 1754. First hand reports of her examination and promotion ceremony have been included in this thesis.

Erxleben lived and worked for only eight more years until her death in 1762. Little is known about the period between the time she received her degree and her passing.
We do know that she continued to practice medicine successfully and also assisted her husband in his position at the church. She survived a son and then her husband, who expired two years before she did. Her own death was caused by some type of hemorrhaging, perhaps from tuberculosis or breast cancer.

Erxleben’s passing was mourned in Germany, as her exploits were well-known and her triumph in overcoming social barriers widely touted. With her departure, the world lost a most extraordinary woman. Luckily, her story has survived to reach and inspire us today.
AFTERWORD

It is extremely difficult to raise children while pursuing an education or career. Just as they were in the eighteenth century, working parents are caught in a vicious tug-of-war. Feelings of guilt for not spending enough time with children are echoed by the perception of falling short at work. This is what makes Erxleben’s story so amazing. How did she do it? There are only twenty-four hours in a day and a working parent constantly struggles with how to divide them. When work is demanding, children still need to be loved and nurtured—they also need their clothes washed, teeth brushed, hair combed, rear-ends wiped, rooms tidied, to be bathed, band-aided, cooked for, driven to school, picked up from school, cared for when sick, taken to the doctor, assisted with homework, disciplined, and have countless other needs attended to each day. Some needs have changed since Erxleben’s time, but the gist is the same—children are a lot of work.

This was something Erxleben, with her nine little ones, understood all too well. She also had to have appreciated the lighter, more pleasant, but equally necessary parental duties, like reading to children, rubbing their little backs to help them fall asleep, telling them goodnight stories, playing with them at the park, and as they grow older, attending various important events, from school plays to athletic games to helping a daughter get ready for her first date.
Parenthood brings with it many joys. It is not, however, everything. Dorothea Erxleben’s studies were indispensable to her happiness even after and perhaps especially after she was married and became a mother. Her learning was something all hers, something more pleasurable than the necessary housework and breaking up sibling fights. As a mother, I, too, felt the desire to seek personal fulfillment that reached beyond changing diapers and enduring my daughter’s “Barney” video ten times a day. That is why I never gave up my education or my career. As rewarding as parenthood is, mothers and fathers have needs and goals that reach beyond it. A career can satisfy some of these. However, it must be recognized that personal fulfillment is the ideal reason for working outside the home. Unfortunately, it is often financial need that drives both parents out into the work force. This is all too often the case in Hawai‘i. High cost of living on the islands makes it necessary for many parents to work outside the home who might not otherwise choose to. The large number of working parents in Hawai‘i makes Erxleben’s story particularly relevant here. Knowledge of a real life figure like Erxleben who succeeded in having a career and a family at the same time would be of value to them.

Erxleben’s philosophies and the life-choices she made in eighteenth-century Germany were, ironically, in complete concordance with the ancient Hawaiian concepts of *pono* and *po‘okela*, making her an even more acceptable role model in this archipelago. *Pono* is defined as:

95
The Hawaiian word for working, living, and loving in total and accountable alignment with
the land, our family, our ancestors, and the Higher Power. It also means living with goodness
and morality, and doing things correctly and in the proper way that benefits all others and the
land. (Pearsall 334)

Not every language has such a suitable word for “harmonious existence.” As a
doctor, so much of what Erxleben represented can be summed up in the word *pono*.
Her chosen occupation was to heal people, to do things in a way that “benefits all
others.” She “worked, lived, and loved” in harmony as well. She achieved important
symbolic advancements in the struggle for women’s rights, but always peacefully.
She did not “fight” for women’s rights.

*Po‘okela* is described as:

Hawaiian word meaning excellence accomplished through shared values rather than personal
objectives. It is the hundreds-of-years-old Hawaiian model of leading a life that causes shared
success to happen. (Pearsall 334)

Erxleben exemplified *po‘okela* in the acceptance of the role of her cousin’s children.
Even before she was married to their father, she cared for them for an entire year.
This was possibly the most important factor in her giving up the chance to study at
Halle. Instead of thinking of herself and her own immediate gratification, she
understood that her cousin’s five children needed a mother. Erxleben also remained
in Quedlinburg because of her father, whom she cared for until his death.
Though her “personal objective” was to join Christian at university, she realized that, for the situation of the people around her to improve or at least not become worse, her presence was needed. Her decision, as already discussed, has been interpreted many ways. It has been seen as an act of fear or an act of the “true feminine womanhood” so prized in the German women of that era. I argue that it was the act of a woman with a choice. In the context of poʻokela, she willingly gave up Halle for the greater good of her community. Her father’s health and the happiness of her cousin’s children, not to mention the prospect of her own happiness as their father’s wife and mother to their future children, depended on her postponing that goal. Though she could not characterize them by that name, her actions were completely representative of pono and poʻokela.

Erxleben conducted herself in the spirit of pono and poʻokela, in a way that would have been acceptable to a people on an island chain in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, halfway across the world. Today those people and those islands are host to modern, western culture, where the lives of women like Dorothea Erxleben are studied at the University of Hawai‘i. With the issues of “working parenthood” now relevant in Hawai‘i, eighteenth-century Erxleben, in a very poʻokela and pono manner, could conceivably contribute to the community and the well-being of her fellow human beings here. In my personal situation, that has already been the case. It is my hope that through this work, she might continue to do so.
APPENDIX A: PUBLICATIONS (ERXLEBEN’S WERKVERZEICHNIS)


Dissertatio inauguralis medica, exponens, quod nimis cito ac jucunde curare saepius fiat caussa minus tutae curationis. Halle, Magdeburg: Johann Christian Hilliger, 1754.


Handwritten letters to and from Erxleben located in Quedlinburg Stadtsarchiv.

According to Fischer-Defoy (459), copies of doctoral diploma located in personal collection of Erxleben family and in the Quedlinburg Museum. Handwritten letters to and from Erxleben located in the Quedlinburg Stadtsarchiv.
APPENDIX B: MEMORIALS

* Erxleben’s birthhouse inherited by the *Klinikum Dorothea Erxleben*. To be transformed into small medical history library and historical bed and breakfast. (1997)

* *Erxlebenstraße* (Erxleben Street) named in the Altlglenicke district of the city of Treptow. This street connects *Mohnweg* and *Lehmusstraße* in an area where many streets are named after female doctors. (September 3, 1997)

* German Federal Post Office issues a stamp of a portrait of Erxleben.

* *Dorothea Erxleben Gymnasium*. Located at August-Bebel-Ring 19 in Quedlinburg. (November 10, 1998)

* Kindergarten Dorothea Erxleben. Located on the *Dorothea-Erxleben-Straße* 9 in Braunschweig.

* *Dorothea-Erxleben-Professeur*, University of Magdeburg. A year-long guest professorship that helps young scientists on their way with their career.

* *Dorothea-Erxleben-Preis*, Martin Luther University Halle Wittenberg. To honor worthy achievements of budding scientists of this university.

* *Klinikum Dorothea Erxleben* academic teaching hospital of the Otto-von Guericke University in Magdeburg. 562 beds
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