

IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING FROM THE MODEL: DOROTHEA ERXLEBEN (1715– 1762), THE FIRST GRADUATED FEMALE DOCTOR IN GERMANY

HISTOIRE

*L'IMPORTANCE D'APPRENDRE GRÂCE À UN MODÈLE :
DOROTHEA ERXLEBEN (1715-1762), LA PREMIÈRE FEMME
MÉDECIN DIPLÔMÉE D'ALLEMAGNE*

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ABSTRACT

Role models can encourage modern women to pursue their careers in many professional areas but especially in the field of medicine. Biographical insights can provide doctors with examples of how they can develop their goals and follow them. One of such role models was Dorothea Erxleben (1715–1762) who became the first graduated female doctor in Germany. The paper presents her life and work in times when science and medicine were primarily a man's domain. Through her diligence, open-mindedness and persistence, Dorothea Erxleben was able to study, conduct a successful medical practice and provide for her family. She was also a great supporter of women's education. Her achievements were already appreciated during the Age of Enlightenment and, to this day, she remains a role model for both women and men.

RÉSUMÉ

Un modèle peut encourager la femme moderne à poursuivre sa carrière dans bien des domaines professionnels mais surtout dans le domaine de la médecine. Un aperçu biographique peut fournir aux femmes médecins des exemples de la manière dont elles peuvent développer leurs objectifs et les suivre. Dorothea Erxleben (1715-1762) était un tel exemple : elle était la première femme médecin diplômée de l'Allemagne. Cet article présente sa vie et son travail à l'époque où la science et la médecine étaient essentiellement le domaine des hommes. Grâce à son assiduité, son ouverture d'esprit et sa persistance, Dorothea Erxleben a su étudier, pratiquer avec succès la médecine et subvenir aux besoins de sa famille. Elle était aussi grande défenseuse de l'éducation des femmes. Ses exploits étaient déjà appréciés au siècle de Lumières et, à ce jour, elle demeure un modèle pour les femmes et les hommes.

KEYWORDS

Dorothea Erxleben, Women's Education, Enlightenment, Halle (Saale), History of medicine.

MOTS-CLÉS

Dorothea Erxleben, L'éducation des femmes, Les Lumières, Halle (Saale), Histoire de la médecine.

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Bronze bust „Dorothea Christiana Erxleben“ by Marianne Taub, 1994, erected at the entrance of the University Hospital Kröllwitz on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Martin-Luther-University (Source: MLU Halle-Wittenberg, Central Art Collection).

Human medicine is a woman's domain. When we look at today's gender proportions, the current situation is split: in Germany, approximately 70% of all students in the field of human medicine are female but the share of women in executive positions is noticeably low – less than 10%. Therefore, many women are 'lost' on the way to the leadership level. Role models can encourage women to pursue their career path with determination. Biographical insights demonstrate strategies, career advantages but also the obstacles, as well as factors that promote or hinder such endeavors. Biographies of women who followed their path convey from the first hand their experiences: how happy they are, what they sacrificed for their career, or, in general, how they mastered the great challenge of balancing work and family life. Learning from role models is widely accepted. We depend on learning from role models in our daily professional routine. Good models can bring us forward; they help to develop own goals and to pursue them successfully.

Once again, it is worth to cast a medico-historical glance, since from its beginning there were important and influential women in the field of medicine. One of them was Dorothea Christiana Erxleben (1715–1762). She was the first female doctor in Germany

who obtained a medical degree. This paper is based on my own work¹ and other important preparatory works.²

Dorothea was born in Quedlinburg on 13.11.1715. She had three siblings: Maria Elisabeth (1712–1797), Christian Polycarp (1717–1791) and Johann Christian Justus (1720–1794). Her father, Dr. Christian Polycarp Leporin (1689–1747), worked as a doctor in Dorothea's birth town. Her mother, born Meinecke, bore the name Anna Sophia (1681–1757). Dorothea, together with her older brother Christian Polycarp, received education in natural sciences, languages and medicine from their father, who was highly literate and deeply interested in science. In addition to his medical practice, her father published at his expense a number of pamphlets. These publications led to controversies and fierce clashes with his medical colleagues.

The family house was full of books and Dorothea used this opportunity by eagerly reading and trying to understand them. In such way, Dorothea discovered also the writings of young Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) who first pleaded for educational competence and value of education for girls and women. Dorothea, together with her brother, was allowed to accompany her father on sick calls, during which she learned the art of healing. Her health during this time was depicted as weak; however, in such a description one certainly has to think about its topical content, that is, the frailty of a woman qua feminine nature. We can read about this period in Dorothea's autobiographical note, which was included in the German publication of her dissertation:³

“For my blessed father had noticed that I could bear my persisting weakness much calmer, and scarcely felt the half of my paroxysms when I was allowed to

¹ Florian Steger: Dorothea Christiana Erxleben (1715–1762) – eine Frau, die ihren Weg gegangen ist. In: Martina Oldhafer (Hg.): *Spitzenfrauen! Medizinerinnen in Führungspositionen und Top-Management*. Berlin 2017, pp. 10–21.

² Eva Brinkschulte, Eva Labouvie (Hg.): *Dorothea Christiana Erxleben. Weibliche Gelehrsamkeit und medizinische Profession seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*. Halle 2006; Gudrun Gründken (Hg.): *Dorothea Erxleben: Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das weibliche Geschlecht vom Studieren abhalten, bearbeitet und mit einem biographischen Vorwort von Gudrun Gründken*. Zürich, Dortmund 1993; Kornelia Steffi Gabriele Markau: *Dorothea Christiana Erxleben (1715–1762)*. Die erste promovierte Ärztin Deutschlands. Eine Analyse ihrer lateinischen Promotionschrift sowie der ersten deutschen Übersetzung. Univ. Dissertation Halle 2006; Städtisches Museum Quedlinburg (Hg.): *Dr. Dorothea Christiana Erxleben. Erste deutsche promovierte Ärztin*. Halle 1999.

³ Dorothea C. Erxleben: *Academische Abhandlung von der gar zu geschwinden und angenehmen aber deswegen öfters unsichern Heilung der Krankheiten*. Vor einiger Zeit als ein Specimen Inaugurale der hochlöbl. Medicinischen Facultät zu Halle übergeben, jetzo aber aus Verlangen ins Deutsche übersetzt, und hier und wieder vermehret von Dorotheen Christianen Erxlebin der Medicin Doctor. Mit einem Anhang einiger Beylagen, welche sich auf die Promotion der Frau Verfasserin beziehen. Halle 1755, p. 122 and 128.

take part in the lessons of the older among my brethren; and so, he approved willingly that I would be his student, as often as he teaches him elements of religion and scholarship, to be educated at the same time with me was so pleasant for my brother that he, through these joint lessons, developed an even greater taste for learning (...). After I had been thoroughly educated in litteris humanoribus (basics of human knowledge), I began to study medical science, which was always so agreeable to me. Hence, I made diligent use of the learnings of my blessed father, at the time, when he prepared my brother for his academic studies, and went with him through the practical as well as theoretical aspects of medicine."

Above all, it was Dorothea's extraordinary open-mindedness and pleasure in learning that provided her father with an incentive to introduce her to the science of medicine and to encourage her to pursue education. This was by no means customary for this time, when educating girls, especially in arts of a useful science, was anything but a matter of course. Thus, Dorothea's older sister Maria Elisabeth (1712–1797) received only the typical education for girls, without any useful contents.

Dorothea was educated at an academic gymnasium in Quedlinburg, where she learned Latin. She was tutored in particular by the rector Tobias Eckhard (1662–1737) and by the deputy rector Heinrich Bernhard Prillwitz (1684–1768), who himself had been educated in the milieu of August Hermann Francke (1663–1727). In 1698, through establishment of the "Glaucha Institutions" in Halle (Saale), Francke had laid the foundations for the school education of children, regardless of their social origin and also included girls in his educational concept. Education for girls was integrated in the school system of the "Glaucha Institutions".

Dorothea's autodidactic skills and her diligence played also an important role. She was not permitted to enroll at a university to obtain a degree. As it is generally known, women in Germany were admitted to university study only at the beginning of the 20th century, first in Baden in 1899/1900 and in Prussia not until 1908. An exception was an impressive women and pioneer of women's education Hope Bridges Adams Lehmann (1855–1916), who had taken the medical state examination in Leipzig in 1880. Later she worked as a doctor in Frankfurt at Main but was also influential as a woman, mother, wife and a political reformer. Another exception was Agathe Streicher (1520–1581) who has been approved by the Council of the city of Ulm in 1561 as a practicing doctor and who was revered with greatest honors. It was she who was summoned to Emperor Maximilian II. in 1576, when he suffered from heavy gout during the Imperial Diet in Regensburg.

Considering the extensive knowledge Dorothea had acquired, it is not surprising that in 1740, on the occasion of the hereditary homage to the Prussian king, Friedrich II. (1712–1786), she submitted a petition asking to exempt her brother from the military service and to be admitted, together with her brother Christian Polycarp Leporin, to the Medical Faculty of the Fredericiana for doctorate (the medical examination). Friedrich II. granted her request on 24.4.1741. Still under her maiden name Leporin, Dorothea Erxleben presented an eloquent testimony of self-confidence and emancipatory charisma – equality of the mind and gender-independent educational capacity – in a work that was published by Rüdiger in 1742 in Berlin under the title: "A thorough examination of the causes that prevent the female sex from studying and show its irrelevance, and how possibly would it be important and useful for this sex to occupy oneself with learning".⁴ Her father contributed a preface to her work. He also made the publication possible. As Dorothea wrote in the foreword, she had contented herself with composing this work:

"As I, more than four years before, in many divided hours, set down this essay on paper, it was not my intent to provide it for the public. It was more than enough for me that I could have an opportunity to put my thoughts in order in this so necessary and useful effort, and to practice myself."⁵

In her writing, Dorothea dealt with refuting the prejudices against women's education. In short: women can also receive education and such schooling is urgently needed. She presented a concept of education for women and thus confronted the prejudices against women. In particular, Dorothea tried to show in a pragmatic way that a study for women is feasible in practice, by all means reconcilable with other tasks of a woman and, ultimately, also useful. In doing this, she had her own life situation in mind: spouse, wife of a pastor, mother and practicing doctor. Even if the direct criticism to her work was sympathetic, the book sold sluggishly, and a medium-term reception of it failed to appear.

When the war between Prussia and the Habsburg Empire over Silesia broke out, her brother Christian deserted from the army, forcing her father and her oldest brother to leave the country. Dorothea, not least for the reasons of her own financial security, took over the paternal practice in Quedlinburg and led it without any official title. In addition, she occupied herself with the writings of important physicians,

⁴ Dorothea C. Leporin: *Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das weibliche Geschlecht vom Studiren abhalten* (Berlin 1742). Wettin 2004.

⁵ Dorothea C. Leporin: *Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das weibliche Geschlecht vom Studiren abhalten* (Berlin 1742). Wettin 2004, p. 3.

all of whom worked at the newly established university in Halle (Saale), for example. Johann Juncker (1679–1759), Friedrich Hoffmann (1660–1742), Michael Alberti (1682–1757) and Georg Ernst Stahl (1659–1757). Her medical examination, which she successfully passed later on, is an eloquent testimony to her comprehensive knowledge of these protagonists of medicine and their texts. However, her practical activities could not last long on this unofficial basis, without a final examination and proper degrees. When her cousin, Sophia Elisabeth Erxleben, born Meinecke, died in 1742, Dorothea married the thus widowed deacon Johann Christian Erxleben (1697–1759). He had five children from the previous matrimony and Dorothea bore and raised with him four own children. In her dissertation that was published in German, one can read in the attached autobiographical note:

“On the advice of my benefactors, I have arranged the matter immediately, and suspended my examination at the highly praised medical faculty in Halle and with it the doctor grade and freedom to practice medicine, in accordance with ways provided to me by our Lord. His very special providence, which I adore humbly, arranged that in year 1742 I was married to Joh. Christian Erxleben, deacon at the St. Nicolai Church in Quedlinburg. Although I was immediately convinced, by the experience, that a marriage do not prevent woman’s education, but that in the company of a rational spouse it is even more pleasant to study, my intended doctorate was delayed for the time being by my marriage, by me being unable to attend (my studies), and care for the upbringing of five juvenile children, whose entrustment to me I saw as a foremost pledge of my husband’s love, and I had to experience in this happy marriage that sad and joyful coincidences often alternate.”⁶

In this statement, she remains loyal to her conviction that it is possible to balance professional competence with household chores; an argument, which she already pointed out in the work published in 1742 (§ 353): “Understanding of the household is a duty which no woman is allowed to evade, and all her knowledge would be nothing, if one could blame her of ignorance in obligation to the household.”⁷

⁶ Dorothea C. Erxleben: *Academische Abhandlung von der gar zu geschwinden und angenehmen aber deswegen öfters unsichern Heilung der Krankheiten. Vor einiger Zeit als ein Specimen Inaugurale der hochlöbl. Medicinischen Facultät zu Halle übergeben, jetzo aber aus Verlangen ins Deutsche übersetzt, und hier und wieder vermehret von Dorotheen Christianen Erxlebin der Medicin Doctor. Mit einem Anhang einiger Beylagen, welche sich auf die Promotion der Frau Verfasserin beziehen.* Halle 1755, p. 130f.

⁷ Dorothea C. Leporin: *Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das weibliche Geschlecht vom Studiren abhalten* (Berlin 1742). Wettin 2004, p. 209.

In 1747, with the death of her father, Dorothea Erxleben took over his practice, even though, according to the Prussian medical order, she was not formally allowed to treat internal diseases. In addition, at the same point, her husband, the deacon, fell ill for a long period of time. Dorothea Erxleben wrote about the death of her father in the autobiographical note attached to the German publication of her dissertation: “For soon after my marriage, I had to see my beloved father die, which was all the more painful to me because I wept not only for a faithful father, but for a skillful and cautious physician, and for an untiring teacher whose ashes I justly honor.”⁸

On 16.3.1750 Dorothea Erxleben gave birth to her daughter Anna Dorothea. Because of her successful practice, Dorothea was exposed to the disapproval of numerous colleagues. Later she was accused of “medical quackery” and finally reported to authorities. On 5.2.1753, three doctors from Quedlinburg, Dr. Johannes Tobias Herweg, Dr. Heinrich Wilhelm Graßhoff and Dr. Andreas Adolph Zeitz, approached the protector of the cathedral (Stiftshauptmann) baron Paul Andreas von Schellersheim (1711–1781), who was representing the Prussian state in Quedlinburg and reported to him a violation of the Prussian medical order through unauthorized medical treatment. Dorothea Erxleben was explicitly accused of ‘medical quackery’. She was also blamed for the death of a female patient. Main reason for this denunciation was an increasing number of Erxleben’s patients. Her practice posed an economic competition for other physicians in Quedlinburg and, because of this, she was the object of envy. However, extension of the practice became necessary, since her husband had fallen ill and she had to provide for the family. Dorothea Erxleben had to react to the allegations and she did this confidently and quickly. She even offered to be examined by the three Quedlinburgian doctors but the men refused to do so. In order to continue to practice, she was required to take the medical exam within the next three months. Because of the birth of her fourth child, Johann Heinrich Christian in 1753 (who would later become vice-chancellor of the University Magdeburg), she was once again granted a postponement. On 6.1.1754 she handed over to the protector of the cathedral von Schellersheim her doctoral thesis written in Latin and entitled “*Quod nimis cito ac iucunde curare saepius fiat caussa minus tutae curationis*”. He, in turn, handed the work to king Friedrich II. The

⁸ Dorothea C. Erxleben: *Academische Abhandlung von der gar zu geschwinden und angenehmen aber deswegen öfters unsichern Heilung der Krankheiten. Vor einiger Zeit als ein Specimen Inaugurale der hochlöbl. Medicinischen Facultät zu Halle übergeben, jetzo aber aus Verlangen ins Deutsche übersetzt, und hier und wieder vermehret von Dorotheen Christianen Erxlebin der Medicin Doctor. Mit einem Anhang einiger Beylagen, welche sich auf die Promotion der Frau Verfasserin beziehen.* Halle 1755, p. 131.

king approved the submission on 6.3.1754. The protector of the cathedral shortly afterwards made clear to the medical faculty in Halle (Saale) that the doctoral theses were approved without any reservation and he asked for the quick authorization of the candidate. Thus, Dorothea Erxleben was able to pass her doctoral examination at this still quite young university. As the faculty had no previous experience with examination of female candidates, Dorothea Erxleben was not granted the approval as soon as she had passed her exams, as it was customary, but once again Friedrich II. had to be consulted on how to process. In this request, the acting dean Johan Juncker argued that Dorothea had exhibited the same capabilities as a man. After the royal authorization had been obtained to grant Dorothea Erxleben her doctorate in medicine, her license to practice was given to her shortly afterwards, on 12.6.1754.

Erxleben published one year later in 1755 (the same year in which her son Christian Albert died) the German translation of her revised doctoral work with some changes to the content, entitled "An academic treatise on the much too rapid and simple, and thus often uncertain, healing of diseases".⁹ With regard to the content, Dorothea Erxleben focused in her dissertation on the thorough treatment of diseases including tracing the causes and not only dealing with the symptoms. With this attitude, Erxleben was very much in tune with her times. In her doctoral thesis, she successfully summarized the state of knowledge of the era, even if she did not break new ground. She wrote her German publication for laymen who were interested in medicine but lacked any medical training. Dorothea Christiana Erxleben was thus the first female doctor in Prussia who was officially permitted to work as such.

In the remaining days of her life – in 1762 she fell seriously ill and died shortly after – Dorothea Erxleben remained faithful to Quedlinburg as wife of

⁹ Dorothea C. Erxleben: *Academische Abhandlung von der gar zu geschwinden und angenehmen aber deswegen öfters unsichern Heilung der Krankheiten. Vor einiger Zeit als ein Specimen Inaugurale der hochlöbl. Medicinischen Facultät zu Halle übergeben, jetzo aber aus Verlangen ins Deutsche übersetzt, und hier und wieder vermehret von Dorotheen Christianen Erxlebin der Medicin Doctor. Mit einem Anhang einiger Beylagen, welche sich auf die Promotion der Frau Verfasserin beziehen.* Halle 1755.

a pastor, mother and a physician. In 1759 died her husband Johann Christian. After that, her son energetically supported her in her practice. She was also able to pass on her knowledge to her children. It is certainly her merit that both of her sons, Johann Christian Polycarp Erxleben (1744–1777) and Johann Heinrich Christian Erxleben (1753–1811), studied and even taught at universities of Göttingen and Marburg, one as a natural scientist, the other one as a lawyer. Dorothea Christiana Erxleben died on 13.6.1762.

One of her oldest daughters took care of her both youngest biological children, who were nine and twelve years old at the time. Her 17-years old son Christian Polycarp was taken by an uncle, who carried the same name. He too became a doctor.

Dorothea Erxleben created history of medicine, history of universities, as well as gender history as the first graduated female doctor in Germany. In this, she could become a role model for many women and men, even today.

At the end, I would like to present a stanza by Johann Joachim Lange (1699–1765), who in the years 1723–1765 was *Matheseos Professor Publicus Ordinarius* in Halle (Saale) and who, on the occasion of Erxleben's promotion, wrote a 14-stanza poem about her.¹⁰ Through this work, Lange, professor of mathematics, promoted women's education – even in the 18th century and in times when the male as a cultural being was considered a creature of higher order than a female as natural being:

"Hygea gives a free rein to delight:
And crushed Morbona flees in expanse.
Through your council many sick stand upright,
Strengthened by medicine and by thy glance.
Our world will be envied in posterity:
Your fame will carry you into eternity." ■

¹⁰ Florian Steger: Johann Joachim Lange: Glückwunschgedicht anlässlich der Promotion von Dorothea Erxleben am 12.6.1754, der ersten promovierten Ärztin in Deutschland. In: *Jahrbuch Literatur und Medizin* 9, 2017, pp. 153–162.