



# The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany

*Barbara Duden*

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Despite historians' interest in cultural representations of the body, we tend to think of human anatomy and physiology as scientific fact, not historical artifact. In this study Barbara Duden asserts that the most basic biological and medical terms that we use to describe our own bodies - male or female, healthy or sick - are indeed cultural constructions. She sets out to cross the traditional boundary between history and nature by gaining access to the inner existence of a group of women who lived in bodies very different from our own. These women were the patients of Johann Storch, a physician who lived and worked in the town of Eisenach, Germany, during the first half of the 18th century. Storch meticulously documented the medical histories of approximately 1800 women of all ages and social stations, often in their own words. This rich and unique record of complaints, symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments reveals an alien understanding of the female body and its function. Physical processes - digestion, menstruation, pregnancy - were not associated with discrete internal organs. Blood ebbed and flowed rather than circulated; pregnancy did not exist until quickening; menses could be discharged in the form of tears. Physical examination was not necessary to medical care, and in many cases the doctor had no direct contact with his patient. Barbara Duden uses his material to reanimate the female body that Johann Storch treated and that his patients inhabited, showing that its structure, function and meaning - and therefore those of our own bodies - belong to history as well as to nature.

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