



VI ORE (1694-1696)

Briefly, as we try to penetrate deeper and deeper into the secrets of Nature, we become more and more aware that we shall not arrive at the great hidden mystery which is in it, though many people, when they look through a good magnifying glass, foolishly think that nothing can remain concealed from our view.

Antoni van Leeuwenhoek

. . . Since, because of the material at hand, Nature could not bring forth a man who was immortal, the Maker of the universe, so as to succor the frailty of the human race, contrived what he could in the way of immortality. He thought not to sustain a man for a few thousand years but rather to prolong his existence for eternity in the form of ever new offspring. With this as His end He constructed divers organs by which the work necessary might be performed and he did such a workmanlike job that with full justice we can proclaim that here if anywhere, Almighty God left a great testimony not only of His providence but also of his marvellous wisdom. Quite ridiculous therefore is the opinion of Chrysippus who thought that Nature fully equipped the male sex and added the female only as a sort of appendage like the peacock's tail. No less insultingly does Aristotle call the female an incomplete male, or, as the barbarian philosophers say, an animal which just happened. We ourselves think that Nature had her mind on the job when generating the female as well as when generating the male, for without females there would be no generation of any animal. And indeed being female is a kind of perfection of individual forms. So much for that. . . .

Regnier de Graaf



THE COSTS OF OUR SPECULATIONS

In the end, it was his awe at all Our Maker's Creation that preserved my father's honor. Although he searched unsuccessfully all spring and summer for the male of the fruit lice, he wrote finally to Baron Reede van Renswoude of these curious female creatures because here too he saw evidence of God's perfection, and he could not refrain from sharing his amazement any longer.

"What appeared curious to me," he wrote, "were the enormous number of young each creature carried live inside her belly." They were, it is true, less fecund than the human louse, but prodigious all the same. My father extracted forty young from one mother, forty-nine from another, and sixty from a third.

"But what seemed extraordinary to me," he wrote boldly to the Baron, "was that whenever I dissected animals of the normal size, I extracted young unborn animals from their bodies, and though I repeatedly selected the thinnest animals, imagining that if there were males among them it must be those with the thinnest bodies, it never happened that I came across any of these, or of the two preceding kinds of animals, which I considered to be male."



For the past few years, I have calculated the most private cost of my father's speculations to those around him, the enormity of his debt. I cannot stop myself. Every time I pass Cornelia's tomb, or Heer Vallensis', the calculations begin again—and I open my hands, shake my head, helpless to reduce the mounting interest. But my father like a careless spendthrift just charges ahead, oblivious, eager to make good on all the effort he has expended so far. To be honest, I rejoice when to his dismay he discovers in his garden yet another variety of these voracious *female* lice on the leaves of his medlars



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POWDER OF SYMPATHY

I was not home that afternoon when Predikant Grebius brought his cousin to the Golden Head. I had been called to the bedside of Gerrit, the engraver's apprentice. I have yet to piece out exactly what was said. I only know the results, glittering and bright as splintered glass.

Grietje was absent also when they arrived. She was bent on my business, she told my father. She left my father, against his wishes or his expectations, bent on hers.

"Why didn't you tell me," he reprimanded me when I returned.

"I informed you of everything, Father. It is my practice."

"Not that you'd meant to marry her off within the month."

"You weren't listening! I can feel my tongue shape the very words, Father."

"You did not tell me he was a simpleton."

"I would not tell you so this minute."

"I met him, Maria. A cast in his eye, a simpering mouth."

"Father, you did not forbid it?" I sat down, dizzied by the heat, the rush of air my father created with his endless pacing.

"He said the marriage might appear beneath him, save for the beauty and industry of the young woman, which he had observed himself, and the honor of her connection with the famous Heer van Leeuwenhoek. I told him, why should I not, that the fame would not rub off. He'd get exactly what he'd contracted for. A pretty girl in good health—a body broad enough for easy childbirth, should the Creator have so determined. It was dower enough, I said."

"Father, you have done harm. I promised him—"

"So I then heard." My father glared at me with his bright, stony blue eyes. "Half your own fortune," he said.