

## **Sex in Public On the Spectacle of Female Anatomy in Amsterdam around 1700**

Rina Knoeff

This paper is on early eighteenth-century wombs, ovaries and vulvas, and particularly about the ways these were publicly exhibited in anatomical cabinets, talked about at the market place and exploited in slanging matches over the right representation of the female body. It brings to the overall theme of “Spectacle and Staging” the question of how the materiality of the female organs of generation<sup>1</sup> and their physical presence in the early eighteenth-century public sphere reflected and manipulated the gendered anatomy of the doctors of Amsterdam around 1700.

Thomas Laqueur has famously argued that at the turn of the seventeenth century the so-called one-sex model was confronted with a powerful alternative:

A biology of incommensurability in which the relationship between men and women was not inherently one of equality or inequality but rather of difference that required interpretation. Sex, in other words, replaced what we might call gender as a primary foundational category. Indeed, the framework in which the natural and the social could be distinguished came into being.<sup>2</sup>

Sexual differences, in other words, came to determine the natural and social order. It follows that in the two-sex model gender became based on the anatomical differences between man and woman. Much of Laqueur's theory is based on the assumption that anatomists, in pursuit of William Harvey's ideas on generation, were increasingly busy investigating the reproductive organs and that, in so doing, they discovered that the

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1 I prefer to speak about the ‘organs of generation’ as this was the way the early moderns commonly referred to the organs of sex.

2 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Mass. 1990, 154.

female parts were not merely an inverted version of the male organs, but distinctly different.<sup>3</sup> From the eighteenth century onwards, it has long been assumed (by historical actors and historians alike) that anatomical preparations of female parts, such as the womb, ovaries and vulva, underscore “objective” and “naturalistic” sex differences and that they must be understood in the “ontological” (rather than cultural) category of woman. Following this line of argument, anatomical preparations of wombs, ovaries or vulvas seem to equal the “real thing”. Yet, the apparent objective preparations of female body parts reflect historically situated medical and cultural concerns. The female organs of generation were publicly exhibited (or not) in distinctly different ways and for diverse audiences; they often spoke of medical conditions, and their corporeality was regularly (ab)used in arguments over virtue and shame. For this reason it is not very fruitful to look at wombs, ovaries and vulvas in terms of a sex/gender dichotomy. Instead they are better understood in the interplay of the opposites of sickness and health, public and private, virtue and immorality. Moreover, they show that these opposites referred to both bodily and cultural realities and understandings.<sup>4</sup>

With its emphasis on wombs, ovaries and vulvas, the paper answers a more general complaint that in much historical work on sex and gender the female body is “an irritatingly non-physical abstraction” and that “we need an understanding of sexual difference which will incorporate, not fight against, the corporeal”.<sup>5</sup> Historians of science have recently argued that the materials which are fundamental to the sciences are not unambiguous and objective, but “plural in nature, at once the stuff of ingenious labour, mundane consumption, and sustained inquiry into nature and art”.<sup>6</sup> By the same token, female flesh cannot solely be seen as a natural and transhistorical entity. It is always also about the interpretation and manipulation of the body. Preparations of the female genitals were made objects, produced with a particular purpose: they were either meant to show the excellent skills of the anatomist, to satisfy the curiosity of lay people visiting anatomical collections, or even to embarrass and insult others. Thus, an emphasis

3 Michael Stolberg has convincingly shown that around 1600 leading physicians were already arguing for distinctly different female anatomies. Cf. Michael Stolberg, *A Woman Down to Her Bones. The Anatomy of Sexual Difference in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries*, in: *Isis*, 94 (2003), 274–299.

4 Cf. also Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions. Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Madison 1989, 59; Ornella Moscucci, *Hermaphroditism and Sex Difference: The Construction of Gender in Victorian England*, in: Marina Benjamin ed., *Science and Sensibility. Gender and Scientific Enquiry 1780–1945*, Oxford 1991, 174–199, 175.

5 Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe*, London 1994, 17. Cf. also Karen Harvey, *The Century of Sex? Gender, Bodies and Sexuality in the Long Eighteenth Century*, in: *The Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 899–916, 914.

6 Ursula Klein and Emma Spary eds., *Materials and Expertise in Early Modern Europe. Between Market and Laboratory*, Chicago 2010, 2. Cf. also Lorraine Daston, *Things that Talk. Object Lessons from Art and Science*, New York 2004; Ursula Klein and Wolfgang Lefèvre, *Materials in Eighteenth-Century Science. A Historical Ontology*, Cambridge, Mass. 2007.

on the material and public presence of the female organs of generation allows for an analysis of how they moved in and between the knowledge domains of the sciences and the public.<sup>7</sup> Not only did the organs of generation embody ideas about the body, the physical presence of wombs, ovaries and vulvas in public also affected the doings of doctors, midwives, gentlemen, market traders and lovers of poetry and theatre. Tracing the circulation of the female parts between dissection halls, hospitals, cabinets of curiosity, coffee houses and marketplaces enables an analysis of how – in the words of the editors – “the staging, discourse and representation of female anatomy intersected with the enactment, embodiment and performance of the female body in public”.

In three parts the paper investigates how the organs of generation were staged in (1) the anatomical cabinets of the well-known Amsterdam anatomist Frederik Ruysch, (2) in the anatomical atlas of Govert Bidloo, and (3) in the early eighteenth-century Amsterdam city hospital. At that time Amsterdam was thriving economically and had a vibrant ‘scientific’ and cultural climate.<sup>8</sup> It was also a leading centre for anatomical research. Not only was the Leiden anatomical theatre famous, the work of the Amsterdam anatomists was also closely watched and imitated all over Europe. Anatomical collections not only embodied revolutionary new Dutch preparation techniques, they also served as evidence of the Dutch excellence in anatomy.

The above-mentioned three cases are chosen as instances where the learned world of medics intersected with a public sphere which was dominated by sensational stories about medical miracles and tragedies. The hospital and anatomical collections were public places accessible to doctors and non-medical audiences alike. That is to say, they simultaneously functioned as specialised medical workshops as well as public sites of curiosity. It follows that it is impossible to draw clear-cut distinctions between public and private concerns and between medical knowledge and imaginative tales.<sup>9</sup>

At this rather blurred intersection of public and private, the status of female anatomy was ambiguous. It was forever oscillating between the idea that the female organs of generation captured within them the origin of life and the idea that the female organs of generation were the seat of much wickedness and shame. In particular, the second aspect of lust and immorality explicitly associated with the female organs of generation became a significant early eighteenth-century characteristic of the Dutch

7 Cf. also Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, *Institutional Ecology: “Translations” and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology*, in: *Social Studies of Science*, 19 (1989), 387–420.

8 I place quotation marks around ‘scientific’ to denote that science is a nineteenth-century category (mainly based on laboratory precision, production, efficiency, profit and control) and not strictly speaking applicable to early modern natural philosophy.

9 On the importance of stories in the visitor’s experience of the Leiden anatomical theatre cf. Rina Knoeff, *The Visitor’s View: Early Modern Tourism and the Polyvalence of Anatomical Exhibits*, in: Lissa Roberts ed., *Centres and Cycles of Accumulation in and Around the Netherlands during the Early Modern Period*, Berlin 2011, 155–176.

early modern anatomy of the ‘secrets of women’.<sup>10</sup> Eighteenth-century Amsterdam anatomists eagerly searched for the origins of life in the female organs of generation. Yet, they no longer associated female anatomy with the oral and experience-based knowledge of mothers and midwives – female anatomy was firmly established as an appropriate subject for medical research. Instead, female anatomy became increasingly associated with the immoral behaviour of doctors in their professional as well as sexual doings. The ‘secrets of women’, in other words, were no longer solely treated with medical respect, but they often also ended up on the streets of Amsterdam, where they became the joke of play writers, satirists, market traders, housewives and everyone else interested in a good gossip.

## 1. Organs of generation in the anatomical cabinets of Frederik Ruysch

In early eighteenth-century Amsterdam, the best place for viewing the organs of generation was the house of anatomist Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731) at the Bloemgracht. Ruysch was *praelector* at the *Athenaeum illustre* in Amsterdam and a leading member of a group of anatomists investigating the circulation of the blood and lymph as well as the organs of generation.<sup>11</sup> Ruysch was well-known for his anatomical collections, which were the first of their kind in Europe. In five rooms he kept over 3,000 anatomical preparations. They were a must-see and described in every touristic guidebook and diary. What made them special was Ruysch’s secret injection technique which enabled him to prepare corpses in such a way that they looked like living and sleeping human beings.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to the anatomical theatre in Leiden (the other great publicly accessible anatomical collection in the Republic), which owned only one preparation of female pudenda, Ruysch’s cabinets were full of genitalia. Ruysch carefully organised these “sensitive” preparations, which shows that he was very much aware of how his visitors viewed, experienced and thought about the female organs of generation. For the purpose

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10 On the evolving ideas of ‘secrets of women’ cf. Katherine Park, *Secrets of Women. Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection*, New York 2006, 91, 256.

11 The *Athenaeum* was a forerunner of the University of Amsterdam. At the time it was not considered a university, in medicine it served to train surgeons and midwives.

12 Frederik Ruysch, *Alle de Ontleed-, Genees-, en Heelkundige Werken van Frederik Ruysch*, Amsterdam 1744 (published posthumously), 1222. Unless otherwise stated, I use this edition of Ruysch’s works. The translations of the Dutch are my own. For Ruysch cf. also Luuc Kooijmans, *De Doodskunstenaar: De Anatomische Lessen van Frederik Ruysch*, Amsterdam 2004; Julie V. Hansen, *Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederik Ruysch*, in: *Art Bulletin*, 78 (1996), 663–679; Bert van den Roemer, *Het lichaam als borduursel: kunst en kennis in het anatomisch kabinet van Frederick Ruysch*, in: Ann-Sophie Lehmann and Herman Roodenburg eds., *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art/Lichaam en lichamelijkheid in de Nederlandse kunst*, Zwolle 2008, 217–240.

of this paper it is useful to divide Ruysch's preparations of genitalia into four categories: (1) male testes and penises, (2) wombs, (3) the sexual organs of impregnated women, and (4) vulvas.

### 1.1 *Male testes and penises*

As the female body is almost always defined in opposition to the male body, Ruysch's exhibition of the female organs of generation must be seen in relation to the many male testes and penises which he also dissected and prepared. Ruysch did so for two reasons. First, injecting the length of the epididymis would answer the medical question of whether the male seed was contained in the blood (Ruysch believed it was not). A second and perhaps more important reason was that at the time the single most difficult anatomical procedure was the injecting and preparation of the male parts.<sup>13</sup> The bodily material seemed to resist the injection method, which means that a good penis and testes preparation would enhance the anatomist's fame. Ruysch was exceedingly proud when he finally managed to preserve a penis as a whole. He placed it upon a pedestal and proudly presented it to his visitors – only to discover that not much later someone had snatched it off and stolen it.<sup>14</sup>

Since preparations of penises proved Ruysch's anatomical skills, he placed some of them in direct sight of his visitors. Apparently he did not associate his preparations with undesirable sexual thoughts. Feminist historians have argued that the conversely submissive and ontologically deficient female corporeal object stood in opposition to the fully realised male subject, whereby the intention was for the male onlooker “to respond to the [anatomical] model as to a female body that delighted the sight and invited sexual thoughts”.<sup>15</sup> In this gendered view of anatomy, the male organs of generation are mostly left out of the discourse – as if their presumed anatomical superiority turned them into sex-less organs. However, this was not the case in Ruysch's cabinets. Although many of his preparations were for every visitor to see, he also mentioned in his “Works” that he kept a part of a penis in a pot, whereby he had removed “the crown of the penis directly after the glans penis”. Ruysch explicitly stated that he had done so “*for reasons of honour*”.<sup>16</sup> He believed that feelings of sensuality were embodied in the nervous papillae of the tip of the glans penis, which “when activated in the play of Ve-

13 Cf. also Andrew Cunningham, *The Anatomist Anatomis'd. An Experimental Discipline in Enlightenment Europe*, Farnham 2010, 288.

14 Cf. Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 1015–1016. Cf. also Kooijmans, *Doodskunstenaar*, see note 12, 346.

15 Jordanova, *Visions*, see note 4, 55. Cf. also Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, New York 1990, 127–143; Karen Newman, *Fetal Positions: Individualism, Science, Visuality*, Stanford 1996. For a discussion of the feminist histories cf. Rebecca Messbarger, *The Lady Anatomist. The Life and Work of Anna Morandi Manzolini*, Chicago 2010, 138–142.

16 Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 842. My italics.

nus, and touched with a soft pressure, bring the greatest pleasure".<sup>17</sup> Ruysch argued that the papillae in the glans penis were comparable to those on the female cervix and nipples. Their corporeal similarity to the female organs of generation, in other words, turned them into highly gendered and sensitive material – male preparations which could as easily lead to undesirable sexual thoughts as the public exhibition of female pudenda. This argument is further corroborated by the fact that in the popular catalogues that accompanied the collections, Ruysch often only described the penis in Latin, contrary to most descriptions which were also translated into Dutch. This signifies that Ruysch considered the male penis – at least the glans penis, which is normally only visible in an erect state – too sensitive for the public eye.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2 *Wombs*

Ruysch's careful exhibition of preparations of wombs shows a similar tension between the eighteenth-century 'scientific' approach to sexual differences and the public exhibition of the female sexualised body.<sup>19</sup> While Ruysch was exceedingly careful when showing pudenda, he did not have any problems in exhibiting shelves and boxes full of wombs. Ruysch came into possession of the wombs in his daily practice as city obstetrician. He assisted with difficult births and he was regularly consulted about diseases of the female organs of generation. The condition Ruysch often saw was the pathology of the prolapsed and/or inverted womb.<sup>20</sup> Ruysch stated that he sometimes encountered it twice a week.<sup>21</sup> Although we no longer have many Ruysch preparations of wombs, illustrations of the preparations show that they were preserved without the other organs of generation attached. On their own, these wombs apparently did not bear much relation to sexuality and consequently did not present a moral threat to Ruysch's visitors.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Ruysch firmly placed the wombs in the de-sexualised domain of diseased organs, while for instance the male parts were more commonly found amongst healthy

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<sup>17</sup> Ruysch quoted in Kooijmans, *Doodskunstenaar*, see note 12, 347.

<sup>18</sup> More can be said about the historical materiality of the penis, but for the purpose of this paper it is important that the male parts are significant in relation to the exhibition of female anatomy.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Messbarger has also mentioned this specific eighteenth-century tension in relation to the work of Anna Morandi. Cf. her *Lady Anatomist*, see note 15, 143. For the rise of sexual difference cf. Stolberg, *Woman*, see note 3.

<sup>20</sup> The pathology of the prolapsed womb is interesting in the light of Thomas Laqueur's thesis on the predominance of the early modern one-sex model. In his view, stories about wombs turning inside out were always about sex transformations from women into men. This is not the case here. Cf. Laqueur, *Sex*, see note 2.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 57.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of the 'sex-less' womb goes against much historical work which has emphasised the anatomy of the womb as the summit of female anatomy. Most notably cf. Park, *Secrets*, see note 10.

anatomy.<sup>23</sup> Ruysch's most important reason for preserving wombs was his research on the medical question of how the placenta leaves the uterus, and it had a direct bearing on his medical practice. He had seen many women die as a result of midwives forcefully pulling out the placenta, thereby severely damaging the womb. Ruysch maintained that the placenta was alien to the female body (for it belonged to the domain of the child) and he urged midwives to stay calm and wait until the female body eventually rejected the placenta. The wombs in Ruysch's cabinets were almost always related to childbirth, which suggests that Ruysch considered them (like the placenta) part of the domain of the child rather than the woman. This might also be a reason why he stripped them of explicit references to the female sex.<sup>24</sup> This is most explicitly the case in the preparation of a foetus of four months old. It was preserved inside the womb and it carried the inscription: "created, died and buried in the same place, so that the womb is my tomb."<sup>25</sup> Rather than being seen as female flesh, the womb was considered the child's mausoleum.

Ruysch's presentation of the sex-less womb follows the shift in attention from the womb to the ovaries (or eggnests, as they were called at the time) as central to procreation. As a result of William Harvey's theories on generation, it was no longer believed that conception is the result of semen acting on the menstrual blood in the womb, but it was generally assumed that conception happened close to the ovary where a female egg was impregnated by the spirits of the male seed.<sup>26</sup> This conclusion was reaffirmed by Ruysch's "bosom friend for over 50 years", the Delft anatomist Reinier de Graaf (1641–1673), who in his "De mulierum organis generationi inservientibus" (1672) confirmed the existence of follicles in mammalian ovaries, and the connection between these structures and the subsequent appearance of embryos.<sup>27</sup> How and where exactly conception happened remained a mystery and was keenly investigated by Ruysch and his contemporaries.

23 This argument has been brought forward by Sam Alberti for nineteenth-century anatomical collections. However, it also holds for their eighteenth-century forerunners. Cf. Samuel J. M. Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities. Medical Museums in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford 2011, 134.

24 Sam Alberti has argued that "in industrial society reproduction became the manufacture of the infant; the faulty female machine taken apart and analysed on the shelves of the anatomical museum." In contrast to Ruysch's eighteenth century anatomical cabinet, the child was taken away from the place where it was manufactured and female anatomy became separated from the domain of the infant. Cf. Alberti, *Curiosities*, see note 23, 136.

25 Alberti, *Curiosities*, see note 23, 165.

26 Cf. Elizabeth B. Gasking, *Investigations into Generation 1651–1828*, London 1967.

27 William Harvey (1578–1657) was arguably the most important anatomist of his time. He discovered the circulation of the blood and thereby set the research agenda of early modern anatomical research. Harvey's theories on generation also proved influential. Reinier de Graaf (1641–1673) was an important proponent of a group of Dutch anatomists investigating the organs of generation.

### 1.3 Impregnated women

Compared to the diseased wombs, the preparations of impregnated (healthy) wombs and Fallopian tubes were handled with much more care. Ruysch's preparation of the organs of generation of a woman killed by her husband after being found in bed with her lover was a case in point. As forensic advisor to the Amsterdam courts, Ruysch was called to the scene of the *crime passionel*. Seeing a chance as it came along and eager to take a stance in discussions on generation, Ruysch dissected the lower abdomen on the spot.<sup>28</sup> Ruysch saw that the womb was slightly elevated which made him think that the woman must have fallen pregnant. He also discovered that the male seed was 'cooked' and present in the womb as well as in the Fallopian tubes. Against the Harveyean opinion, he concluded that for impregnation not only the spirits of the male seed, but also the substance itself was necessary.<sup>29</sup> Ruysch carefully took the parts home in order to further investigate and preserve them.

The preparation belonged to a small group of preparations of impregnated wombs. In all cases the women had died only moments after having had intercourse. The preparations were kept on the top shelf of the fifth cabinet, presumably out of direct sight. They were always made of the womb with the Fallopian tubes and the ovaries attached. In contrast to the diseased wombs, these preparations seemed to be much more associated with femininity. Their positioning on the top shelf suggests that Ruysch feared that stories of women dying in the sexual act would lead to immoral thoughts. Moreover, it was in accordance with the public (bourgeois) view that many "fallen women" were poor creatures, too sensitive to see the lustful intentions of so-called gentlemen. They were generally seen as the victims of a double moral standard in which women were and men were not punished for sexuality outside marriage. In early-eighteenth century spectatorial journals people were called upon not to cast out these fallen women, but to offer them loving protection.<sup>30</sup> Ruysch seems to have followed this advice: he protected the organs of the unfortunate women against the nosy eyes of a judgemental public. As in the case of the public presentation of penises, Ruysch's making and exhibition of wombs and ovaries related to impregnation was highly gendered, while at the same time he presented wombs as seemingly sex-less organs in the case of disease and childbirth.

### 1.4 Vulva

In this context it is significant that Ruysch seldom preserved female pudenda. And if he did, for instance in the case of female infants which he preserved in their entirety, he

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28 Cf. Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 1106.

29 Cf. Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 680.

30 Cf. Dorothee Sturkenboom, *Spectators van Hartstocht. Sekse en Emotionele Cultuur in de Achttiende Eeuw*, Hilversum 1998, 146.



used to place the bottles on the top shelves of his cabinets or in small cupboards above the cabinets. Occasionally he also placed them on lower shelves, but in most of these cases he turned the bottles so that the pudenda were not directly visible. Presumably, for visitors to see the vulva they had to actively ask, and they would only be able to see it with the permission and help of Ruysch. Although Ruysch's name is generally associated with a preparation of a baby arm holding a baby girl's vulva, thanks to a beautiful photograph by Rosamund Purcell, this "shameless" presentation of female pudenda does not reflect the organisation of Ruysch's anatomical cabinets.<sup>31</sup>

In the popular catalogues advertising and describing his collections, Ruysch never described the pudenda in Dutch – just like he never described the glans penis in Dutch.<sup>32</sup> For instance, on the third shelf of the second cabinet Ruysch kept the vulva of a girl alongside the penis of a boy. Between these two preparations he displayed the preparation of a calf's liver. In the catalogue he provided Latin and Dutch descriptions of the liver, but he kept to Latin when describing the penis, pudenda, hymen and clitoris of the children.<sup>33</sup> Clearly these objects were not meant for "ordinary" eyes. They exemplarily illustrate that Ruysch's preparations of the organs of generation oscillated between the 'scientifically' relevant domain of medicine and the social and moral domain of the public at large. It shows that anatomical preparations, in the words of Ludmilla Jordanova, "bear an especially ambivalent relationship to the public/private dichotomy, in being rooted in the latter, yet making claims in the former".<sup>34</sup> While Ruysch was exceedingly careful in representing the female organs of sex, thereby clearly drawing a line between the private domain of female anatomy and the general public, his former pupil and Leiden colleague Govert Bidloo (1649–1713) went a step further. He breached taboos and exposed the hypocrisy inevitably involved in the eighteenth-century representation of female anatomy.

## 2. Govert Bidloo and the shameless exhibition of female anatomy

The public exhibition of female pudenda was the subject of a fierce controversy between Frederik Ruysch and Govert Bidloo. The argument hinged on the question of

31 The preparation is in the possession of the Anatomical Museum housed in the Leiden University Medical Centre.

32 I thank Marieke Hendriksen for pointing this out to me.

33 Cf. Frederik Ruysch, *Thesaurus anatomicus secundus*. Het tweede anatomisch cabinet van Frederic Ruysch, Amsterdam 1702, 44. Cf. also Frederik Ruysch, *Thesaurus anatomicus tertius*. Het derde anatomisch cabinet van Frederic Ruysch, Amsterdam 1703, 20; Frederik Ruysch, *Thesaurus anatomicus quartus*. Het vierde anatomisch cabinet van Frederic Ruysch, Amsterdam 1704, 27. The public catalogues are accessible via the internet, cf. <http://ruysch.dpc.uba.uva.nl>. Since Ruysch was in the habit of working on his preparations and reordering them in different cabinets, he described them more than once in the catalogues of his collections. It is, therefore, not unthinkable that the three descriptions are of the same preparation.

34 Jordanova, *Visions*, see note 4, 52.

how an anatomist could respectably represent the female outer parts of generation. Bidloo was famous for the realism of his anatomical atlas, the “*Anatomia Humani Corporis*” (1685). Instead of making his dead bodies as alive as possible (as Ruysch tried to do in his anatomical cabinets), Bidloo chose to represent the dissected body as distinctly dead. Books, pins, robes and even a fly creeping over a dissected abdomen reflected the putrefaction of the dead corpse and the revolting reality of the dissection room.<sup>35</sup>

Bidloo and Ruysch often quarrelled about anatomical structures and it was almost always Ruysch who started questioning whether some of the structures Bidloo claimed to have discovered and portrayed in his atlas actually existed.<sup>36</sup> In all arguments Ruysch’s frustration about his social position was audible. Although he considered himself anatomically superior to Bidloo, who was a professor at a university, Ruysch was no more than a *praelector* at an *Athenaeum*. Ruysch doubted that Bidloo had in fact seen anatomical structures. It is all, as Ruysch exclaimed, “a fantasy of Bidloo” and not based on sense perception. The latter’s atlas, he further stated, was best used for “wiping the arse”.<sup>37</sup>

Bidloo and Ruysch were extremely rude when battling out their differences. Their bickering about anatomical “facts” was always accompanied by slanderous attacks about life style and morals linked to the way in which the other anatomist represented female anatomy. For instance, Bidloo said that “Ruysch is shameless and dishonourable ... a disgrace for the study of anatomy, the worst anatomist, an excellent butcher, a scandalous and disgraceful orator”.<sup>38</sup> And Ruysch, in turn, labelled Bidloo “a man, shameless, who is disgraceful, scandalous and without honour, shameless and mischievous, frivolous, dirty, lascivious, a moral cancer, an utter enemy of peace and learning”.<sup>39</sup> Ruysch was most vocal in associating Bidloo’s anatomy with immoral behaviour. While he himself was very reluctant to publicly exhibit the female pudenda, Ruysch noticed that his rival explicitly displayed them. “Why,” he asked, “does Bidloo feel the need to represent the pudenda, while not discussing them at the same time?” “Is it not the case,” he argued, “that Bidloo is stimulated by the passions of Venus and also wants to encourage his flirtatious comra-

35 Cf. Rina Knoeff, *Moral Lessons of Perfection: A Comparison of Mennonite and Calvinist Motives in the Anatomical Atlases of Bidloo and Albinus*, in: Ole P. Grell and Andrew Cunningham eds., *Medicine and Religion in Enlightenment Europe*, Aldershot 2007, 121–143.

36 Cf. also Dániel Margócsy, *A Museum of Wonders or a Cemetery of Corpses? The Commercial Exchange of Anatomical Collections in Early Modern Netherlands*, in: Sven Dupré and Christoph Lüthy eds., *Silent Messengers. The Circulation of Material Objects of Knowledge in the Early Modern Low Countries*, Berlin 2011, 185–215.

37 Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 447–448

38 Bidloo in Frederik Ruysch, *Antwoord van Frederik Ruysch op het Boekje van Govart Bidloo het welk hy den naam van VERDEDIGING gegeven heeft*, in: Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 440. Cf. also Govert Bidloo, *Godefridi Bidloo vindiciae quarundam delineationum anatomicarum, contra ineptas animadversiones Fred: Ruyschii, praelect: anat. Chirurg: & botan, Leiden 1697*.

39 Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 441.

des and bosom friends?" In Ruysch's eyes Bidloo was a "whoremonger" whose biggest crime was that he "had robbed Corinne from her skirts in order to reveal her maxim."<sup>40</sup> Bidloo's immoral behavior, Ruysch believed, made him the most immoral of anatomists.

Not only was Bidloo criticised for his wicked anatomy, he was at the same time condemned for his "immoral" activities in the social world of theatre. In addition to his medical job, Bidloo also was a talented poet and playwright. In 1684 he was even elected governor of the *Schouwburg*, Amsterdam's theatre.<sup>41</sup> Bidloo took the lead in bringing spectacles to the stage. Most notably he accompanied the tragedies "Faëton" and "Salmoneus", written by Joost van den Vondel, one of the Republic's most appreciated writers, with light effects, decorations, pantomimes, music, choirs and dance. Moreover, he asked women to play female parts, which was unusual and considered highly immoral. The people of Amsterdam loved it, but the members of the artistic company *Nil Volentibus Arduum*, keen to promote French classicism in theatre, were taken aback by Bidloo's sacrilege.<sup>42</sup> They favoured sober productions, which contrasted with Bidloo's staging of what they considered "orgies and female nudity". They argued that Bidloo's "effects" were only meant to satisfy the eyes and ears, rather than morally enlightening the people.<sup>43</sup> The situation was further exacerbated after Bidloo ridiculed the members of *Nil Volentibus Arduum* in two further plays, which were so popular that Bidloo performed them twelve times.<sup>44</sup> Many pamphlets appeared in which Bidloo was portrayed as utterly immoral. At one point Bidloo almost ended up in prison, which was only prevented by the intervention of his protector, the Stadtholder William III.

Bidloo's problems with Ruysch as well as with the members of *Nil Volentibus Arduum* reflect the problematic position of female bodies in public. Although it has been argued that compared to late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and England, the Dutch adopted a particular liberal attitude towards sexuality, the moral bickering about Bidloo's work implies the opposite.<sup>45</sup> The moral indignation of *Nil Volentibus*

<sup>40</sup> Ruysch, *Werken*, see note 12, 467–469.

<sup>41</sup> In this context it must be mentioned that Bidloo belonged to a group of erudite, wealthy and culture-loving Mennonites. At the time, this group was of utmost importance for the prospering of cultural life in the Dutch Republic.

<sup>42</sup> *Nil Volentibus Arduum* was the motto of a group of Amsterdam intellectuals, established in 1669, following the example of the *Académie Française*. Their purpose was twofold: (1) to promote French Classicism and to reform the performances in the Amsterdam Theatre which were far too vulgar for their tastes and (2) to secretly discuss the forbidden philosophy of Spinoza.

<sup>43</sup> Mieke B. Smits-Veldt, *Vertoningen in opvoering van Vondels tragedies 1638–1720: van emblema tot "sieraad"*, in: *De Zeventiende Eeuw*, 11 (1995), 210–218.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Bidloo's "De muiterij en nederlaag van Midas, Koning Onverstand" (1685) and his "Zonder wijn kan geen liefde zijn" (1686).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Wijnand Mijnhardt, *Politics and Pornography in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Republic*, in: Lynn Hunt ed., *The Invention of Pornography*, New York 1993, 283–300. Cf. also Inger Leemans, *Het Woord is aan de Onderkant: Radicale Ideeën in Nederlandse Pornografische Romans 1670–1700*, Nijmegen 2002.

*Arduum*, just like Ruysch's reluctance in openly showing preparations related to the sexual act, belies the assumption that sexuality in the Dutch Republic was an integrated and accepted part of the public domain. Although the Dutch public domain was full of erotic images (depictions of brothels hung in the homes of respectable Dutch families and paintings of physical love and eroticism adorned the walls of the rooms where wealthy merchants entertained their guests), these images were only acceptable in the context of married life.<sup>46</sup> Rather than reflecting a liberal sexual attitude, these images of sexual desire and the pleasures of love were openly acknowledged as the physical expression of marital love: the images were meant to stimulate sexual intercourse *within marriage*.<sup>47</sup>

Bidloo challenged this contextualised attitude towards erotic images. The way in which he portrayed women in his anatomical atlas as well as in the *Stadschouwburg* signified a breach of trust with his medical colleagues. Rather than keeping the 'secrets of women' out of public view, he openly presented them to large public audiences. Although the people of Amsterdam loved Bidloo's performances, he was hated for them by many of his highbrow (medical) contemporaries. Moreover, Bidloo's confrontational attitude exposed the hypocrisy involved in the artificial divide between the erotic images of naked women in the houses of the cultural elite and the explicit public representation of the female body (including the pudenda and other morally offensive body parts) – the former encouraging a healthy sexual appetite, the latter leading to sexual degeneration. Paradoxically, offensive references to the vulva were often used as a linguistic weapon in medical debates over the morally correct representation of the female. Ruysch's criticism of Bidloo exemplarily shows how a 'scientific' disagreement ended in a rude questioning of the moral justification of representing female pudenda.

The abusive potential of the pudenda was not limited to the medical world. It was often a salacious emphasis on the vulva which brought medical issues into the public domain. The infamous case of Lysbeth Jansz van Ravesway, which held the whole of Amsterdam spellbound in 1677 and 1678 proves a case in point. It shows how a medical quarrel about the secrecy and jealousy surrounding the invention and use of an obstetric instrument quickly degenerated into a public pornographic slanging match centred on the state of Lysbeth Jansz's genitals.

### 3. The case of Lysbeth Jansz van Ravesway

Lysbeth Jansz van Ravesway was a patient of Frederik Ruysch and surgeon Andries Boekelman. Lysbeth was pregnant and having problems delivering her baby. Ruysch

46 Cf. Klaske Muizelaar and Derek Phillips, *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age. Paintings and People in Historical Perspective*, New Haven/London 2003, 138–159.

47 Cf. Muizelaar/Philips, *Picturing*, see note 46, 153.

and Boekelman came to her rescue when she had been in heavy labour for three days. Ruysch described that they found the woman “very weak and exhausted, with a terrible inflammation, and starting mortification of the parts through which the child should pass, which were, because of this, so thickened, hardened and narrowed, that she was exceedingly incapable to give birth”.<sup>48</sup> A green fluid was emanating from her vulva and a very foul stench made it almost unbearable to stay in the same room as Lysbeth. With the help of a secret instrument, Boekelman delivered her within half an hour. The still-born child was so big that it didn't fit in a normal baby coffin and had to be buried with its head and knees bent upwards.

After a few days Boekelman and Ruysch visited Lysbeth Jansz again to inquire after her health, but they were told that Lysbeth had been brought to the city hospital. Doctor Bonaventura van Dortmont (who was chief physician of the hospital) and the other hospital physicians showed them that Lysbeth Jansz not only suffered from a large rupture in the perineum, a common complication after a difficult birth, but also from a ruptured rectum. As a result, excrements were flowing through the organs of generation (*teel-leden*), the vulva's extremity was infected with bad gangrene and the skin of the lower part of her body had peeled off. All of this, van Dortmont claimed, was caused by Boekelman's use of the dreaded *speculum matrices*, an “iron screw” used to open up the cervix.<sup>49</sup>

Boekelman reacted in a pamphlet, starting a pamphlet war in which eventually the doctors of Amsterdam were ridiculed in satirical dialogues, plays and songs. 48 pamphlets are known, of which eight were written by Boekelman and van Dortmont.<sup>50</sup> The others were composed by medical friends as well as by members of the Amsterdam theatre company *Nil Volentibus Arduum*. In particular under the influence of the latter, the matter was brought to the attention of a large non-medical public. Notaries were involved, attesting to the truth of what each of the involved parties claimed; bets were placed on van Dortmont's ability to expose Boekelman's “iron screw” (in which case Boekelman would have had to pay 300 guilders to the poor); and women discussed Lysbeth Jansz on the marketplace and in shops.

48 Ruysch, quoted in Marianne Peereboom, ‘Lijsje Jans haar kous ley aan duygen’. Een medische pamflettenstrijd in Amsterdam, cf. <http://www.kb.nl/stcn/lijsjejans.html>.

49 The story is also mentioned in Kooijmans, *Doodskunstenaar*, see note 12, 105–123.

50 Cf. Andries Boekelman, *Nader Vertoog van Mr. Andries Boekelman, Breuk en Vroetmeester der Stadt Amsterdam waer in aengewesen worden de quade proceduren van Doct. Bonaventura van Dortmont, en deszelfs onkunde aengaande het afhalen van een doode vrucht, en derzelver toevallen, Amsterdam 1677*, and the answer: *Bonaventura van Dortmont, Verklaring over de Aenneming van Mr. Andries Boekelman. Over het Verschil van het Afhalen van een Doode Vrucht, Amsterdam 1677*. The ensuing pamphlets of Boekelman and van Dortmont repeat to a large extent the same arguments. For a list of all the pamphlets see the website of the Royal Dutch Library in The Hague: <http://www.kb.nl/stcn/lijsjejans.html> (last consulted in November 2011).

Boekelman claimed that van Dortmont himself had caused the ruptures in Lysbeth Jansz's perineum and rectum. He argued that several times a day van Dortmont publicly showed Lysbeth's injuries to colleagues and *liefhebbers*, interested laymen visiting the hospital. Boekelman rhetorically claimed that people could as easily gape at patients as they could visit Ruysch's anatomical cabinets – whereby it must be noted that hospital patients (as well as most anatomical preparations) originated from the lower social classes. This implies that the bodies of the poor were seen as 'public property', far less affected by the moral sensitivities which inflicted the social elites. Boekelman stated that van Dortmont, in order to satisfy the curiosity of his audience, time and again inserted a speculum into the wounds of Lysbeth's vulva, thereby actively preventing the lesions from healing. Boekelman's accusations caused great uproar on the side of van Dortmont. His supporters – the morally controversial Govert Bidloo among them – defensively wrote that the wounds were caused by Boekelman's secret instrument.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, they ironically remarked that Boekelman, being in trouble, no longer called Lysbeth Jansz a dirty whore, but that he had changed his tune and now claimed that Lysbeth was a poor widow dishonoured by the hospital doctors.<sup>52</sup>

The matter was quickly taken up by *Nil Volentibus Arduum*, who used it in order to expose the rivalry between medical groups and the desolate state of the patient, who was ultimately seen as the victim of arguing doctors, surgeons and apothecaries. They ironically remarked that not even Homer and Virgil had written so much on the hymen of Helena as the people of Amsterdam now wrote about the "gilded vulva" of Lysbeth Jansz. The publication of "Desolate Boedel der Medicijne deses Tijdts" (The Abandoned Estate of Medicine at this Time), published by *Nil Volentibus Arduum* in 1677, gave a new and much viler impulse to the debate. While the status of Lysbeth Jansz initially oscillated between whore and widow, the references became more pornographic as the debate intensified. Lysbeth Jansz's "dishonored" vulva, which was now commonly referred to as 'Lysjes kous' (Little Lys' stocking) was always at the very centre. A pamphlet written by Johannes Baptist van Lamsweerde, a follower of van Dortmont, shows how linguistically the debate had changed from medical jargon to pornographic images of doctors sexually abusing Lysbeth Jansz. Van Lamsweerde wrote:

In the dissection room, there was a vivid anatomy for the midwives, where these proud obstetricians laid Lysbeth Jansz on the slab, in her full length and naked; see, see, neighbours, spectacles for sale for all kinds of views, here came Elsjje Pelsje Moer jumping forward, here was Rouwje Bouwje Moer busy pulling up her

51 At the time it was a normal procedure to keep inventions, recipes and methods secret. Cf. Dániel Margócsy and Koen Vermeir, *States of Secrecy. An Introduction*, in: *The British Journal for the History of Science*, forthcoming, at: [http://hunter-cuny.academia.edu/DanielMargocsy/Papers/723878/States\\_of\\_Secrecy\\_-\\_an\\_Introduction](http://hunter-cuny.academia.edu/DanielMargocsy/Papers/723878/States_of_Secrecy_-_an_Introduction)

52 Cf. Anonymous, *De tweede onschult zijne een nadere coutenant, tusschen de geesten van Imant en Niemant*, Amsterdam 1678.

sleeves, here was Schreytje Meythe Moer busy putting on a clean apron; it was about the measuring of Lysjen's piss-pot, in order to exactly know the depth, width and height of the interior and exterior works; ... they laughed, they tickled, they fingered, it was joy, cuss the *Gasthuys* doctors, they treated Lysbeth Jans so harsh, that she did nothing but moan and scream.<sup>53</sup>

Elsje Pelsje, Rouwje Bouwje and Schreytje Meythe were references to the lawyer Andries Pels and the doctors Lodewijk Meijer and Johannes Bouwmeester, all three leading members of *Nil Volentibus Arduum*. Ironically, all three belonged to the most elite group in the world of theatre, who, as was the case with Bidloo's plays, argued against vulgarity in favour of more elevated plays in order to educate the public. The fact that they were now associated with pornographic anatomy was a well-aimed insult.

We do not know what became of Lysbeth Jansz. After three months and far from being well, she was released from the hospital and she moved back to her old rooms in the *Markensteeg*. In the ensuing year she was still repeatedly visited by midwives, surgeons and physicians inquiring after her health and asking to see the injuries (of course only for the purpose of the next pamphlet), but sometime in 1678 attention shifted away from her and the case of Lysbeth Jansz van Ravesway was quickly forgotten.

#### 4. Conclusion

How should we understand the preparations and representations of genitals discussed in this paper? Did they answer specific medical questions about the reproductive system or were they preserved and represented only because they were simply there as part of the organs of generation? Should we think about the preparations of pudenda as embodiments of attitudes towards sexuality or as public enactments of femininity? Are the vulgar insults uttered in pamphlets about female submission in a male-dominated world, or just about medical arguments gone wrong? In fact, the material in this paper provides support for all of these positions. The anatomy of the early eighteenth-century female body was a conglomerate of different ways of acting and thinking. It follows that the organs of generation materialised and embodied medical practices and techniques as well as public morals and opinions.

The cases of Ruysch, Bidloo and Lysbeth Jansz exemplarily show the ambivalent state of female flesh in the public domain. It was both in need of public protection and extremely useful insulting material. In all cases, female anatomy was not so much understood in a dichotomy of sex and gender, but continuously redefined in relation to the opposites of sickness and health, public and private, morality and vice. More than anything, the sensitivities and controversies over the public representation of wombs,

<sup>53</sup> Johannes Baptist van Lamsweerde, *De koeckoeckx-zangh van de nachtuylen*, Amsterdam 1677.

ovaries and pudenda show that these opposites were *embodied* and *lived*, rather than culturally articulated and externalised.<sup>54</sup> The import of the materiality of female anatomy goes against the cultural determinism of Laqueur, who has argued that the invention of the two-sex model (by which he really meant the biological discovery of the female organs of sex) was the result of endless micro confrontations over power in the public and private sphere and that the new biology of the female body was developed in order to redefine the position of women in the private and domestic domain of motherhood.<sup>55</sup> However, this cultural invention of an ontological and incommensurable category of the female sex did not exist. The male and female sexes were not biologically defined categories but were materially defined in relation to each other. Most notably, some parts of the male reproductive organs (such as the glans penis and the *tunica vaginalis* (the inside membrane of the testis) were considered highly feminine. Sex differences, in other words, were not of kind, but of degree, and were continuously changing.<sup>56</sup> First and foremost this paper has shown that the gender of the sexes was decided not only among anatomists working on the parts of generation, but also in the public domains of the hospital, the theatre and the marketplace. And it was particularly in the public presentation of the female organs of generation and their circulation in anatomical collections, the theatre and in pamphlets, that the materiality of the sexes was continuously redefined.

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54 Cf. also Pamela H. Smith, Vermilion, Mercury, Blood and Lizards: Matter and Meaning in Metalworking, in: Klein/Spary, *Materials*, see note 6, 29–49, 30f.

55 Cf. Laqueur, *Sex*, see note 2, 148 and 193.

56 Cf. also Moscucci, *Hermaphroditism*, see note 4, 194.