Destierro and Desengaño: The Disabled Body in Golden Age Spanish Portraiture

Colin C. Sanborn
Oberlin College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors

Part of the Art and Design Commons

Repository Citation
https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/135

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu.
Destierro and Desengaño: The Disabled Body in Golden Age Spanish Portraiture

Colin Sanborn
Advisor: Christina Neilson
Honors in Art History (B.A.)
Spring 2019
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the entire Oberlin Art History department for their unending support, and to Professors Christina Neilson, Matthew Rarey, and Erik Inglis for their invaluable mentorship and guidance during my time here. I would especially like to thank Professor Neilson for advising and supporting me over the course of two years, and for always encouraging me to take my scholarship one step further. Thank you as well to the other members of my Honors committee, Professor James Hansen and Professor Catherine Scallen (Case Western Reserve University), for your excellent insights and advice. Last but not least, I would like to thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship, and Dr. Afia Ofori-Mensa, as this thesis would not exist had I not had the pleasure of being a part of Oberlin’s MMUF program.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabling Court Structures</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirrored Bodies and the Construction of Perfection</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation and Meditation in the Torre de la Parada</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desenganar and the Seeing, Understanding Body</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure List</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

In her autobiographical *Arboleda de los enfermos* (*Grove of the Infirm*), the nun Teresa de Cartagena presents readers with the following reflection on her experience of being deaf, and thus visibly disabled,¹ in 15th-century Spain: “this mortification is like the source or stamp of our suffering, for just as the seal placed over wax leaves its own impression, so afflictions with the stamp of mortification impress on the body and face of the sufferer the seal of its own coat of arms.”² Throughout this text, Cartagena seems to inject the word “mortification” (literally *mortificación*) with a double meaning. It signifies both disability’s physical mark on her God-given body, which has historically humiliated her by isolating her from her hearing peers, and the mortification of fleshly desires required of her by God. In other words, for Cartagena and others like her who could not reliably “pass” as abled, disability was not just an individual experience of illness or impairment; it directly pertained to an individual’s relationship with God, themselves, and society at large. It was unavoidably interpersonal in its visuality and, as Cartagena suggests through the metaphor of armory, had broader social implications for disabled and abled Spaniards alike. Disability had its own heraldry and history, and throughout the canon of Golden Age Spanish portraiture, one can observe the myriad

---

¹ I define disability as the state of being limited in one’s abilities to function in an environment, social or physical, due to that environment’s incongruence with the shape and function of an impaired body. “Impairment” in turn refers to the physical reality of something like blindness, lack of mobility, psychiatric illness, a developmental disorder, etc.

ways in which that heraldry was “stamped” onto the disabled body in paintings depicting disabled subjects.

Unlike Cartagena’s autobiography, however, these pieces do not reflect their sitters’ personal experiences with disability: instead, they reflect an outsider’s reading of their “stamp of mortification,” and thus offer us a distinctly abled construction of disability as a broader phenomenon. There are at least 27 extant paintings and drawings by Spanish artists produced between 1560 and 1680 that depict disabled subjects, many of which were portraits, and collection inventories reveal more from this period that have since been lost or destroyed. The fact of these works’ existence in combination with their treatment of their subjects suggests a marked interest among artists and patrons in determining where and how disabled bodies fit into late 16th and 17th-century Iberian social structures—an interest that merits closer examination, particularly in the case of portraiture, which necessarily involved identifiable disabled sitters. The purpose of this project is therefore to formulate a better understanding of the role these representations played in early modern Spain’s distinctive conceptualization of bodily difference. Artists evoked disability in their work for a reason, and teasing out what purpose disabled subjects served for painters, their patrons, and their audiences will illuminate both how disability was understood by early modern Spaniards and how representing it visually helped develop that understanding. These artworks are not simply the end result of a broader discourse on disability; rather, it was in part through visual representations of

---

3 See for instance Svetlana Alpers, *The Decoration of the Torre de la Parada* (New York: Phaidon, 1971), Appendix II, for descriptions of portraits of dwarfs lost in the 1710 Austrian sack of the Torre de la Parada.
disabled subjects that this discourse developed. In the course of this development, the
disabled body uniquely enabled Spanish artists and patrons to communicate ideas about
the court, the monarchy, and the inner-workings of their own bodies and minds that they
could not otherwise express.

Yet the presence of disability in this body of work is frequently glossed over or
ignored entirely, despite the fact that an important piece in that group is also one of the
most extensively-discussed paintings of the Spanish Golden Age: Diego Velázquez’s *Las
Meninas* (1656), which prominently features the court dwarfs Maria Bárbola and Nicolas
Pertusato (and which I examine more closely in chapter 4). The scholarship on *Las
Meninas* has historically been interested in its representations of seeing and being seen, as
in the more conceptual analyses of Michel Foucault and Leo Steinberg that concern
themselves with the complex series of interactions between painter, subject, and viewer,
as well as that of Jonathan Brown, who focuses on Velázquez’s own attempt to be seen
specifically as a noble, intellectual artist. Svetlana Alpers takes a historiographic tack,
beginning with the question of why art historians have grappled with *Las Meninas* and its
mode of representation for so long, and ultimately posits that it is difficult to interpret
because the two representational frames that it utilizes—one that prioritizes the viewer
seeing the world, and one that prioritizes the world being seen—are necessarily in
conflict. But it remains persistently difficult for the figures of Maria Bárbola and Nicolas
Pertusato to themselves be seen, and thus be analyzed, despite the fact that Velázquez has
literally foregrounded them.
This foregrounding means that they are indisputably part of the main group of figures in the painting, by which I mean those congregated closest to the Infanta Margarita Teresa at center, who are further visually united by a horizontal beam of light shining from out of frame and directly to the right of the two dwarfs. Velázquez placed them in that position because it helped achieve a representational goal and, I argue, because no one except a disabled subject could achieve that particular goal. Still, mentions of Maria and Nicolas are fleeting, and seem to take their presence for granted. For Foucault, they are simply part of the specter of life at court that encircles the Infanta, “with its eddies of courtiers, maids of honour, animals, and fools,” and which is part of Velázquez’s reckoning with the representation of a multiplicity of gazes within and outside the painting. For Steinberg, similarly, they are a “boy dwarf” and a “female dwarf dressed in blue,” of note only in that their seeing bodies occupy space, and although Brown refers to them by name, his assessment of their role does not go far beyond a description of their poses. Alpers, on the other hand, briefly discusses the role of dwarfs at court in a general sense, and brings up Velázquez’s earlier portrait of Prince Baltasar Carlos with a now-anonymous dwarf (fig. 6), but only skims the surface of the conflict of representational modes that lies in the juxtaposition of infant king and court dwarf. Maria and Nicolas in Las Meninas appear only as a play on words—“even a dwarf


[dwarfs]” the child Infanta.\textsuperscript{7} The situation is no better in much of the scholarship on other portraits of disabled subjects, even those that delve deeply into the histories of the individual dwarfs and disabled jesters that were being depicted; the idea of using their deliberately visible disability as a frame of analysis remains under-examined. A recent increase in publications using this frame in the context of Golden Age and medieval Spanish literature has made it clear that there is something to be said for the way Spaniards have historically conceived of disability. It is therefore essential to that we analyze all of the forms that conception took, not just for the sake of cohesiveness, but for the sake of further developing an understanding in art history and disability theory alike of how constructions of disability have played essential roles in the visualization of the human body writ large.

This study’s geographic focus is not meant to suggest that the mere presence of disabled subjects in art was unique to Spain, as there was an interest throughout Europe at this time in the visual representation of “human oddities.”\textsuperscript{8} It is the case, though, that Spain’s single-minded pursuit of a “noble ideal” in the face of the social decline, political crises, and economic instability of the 17th century, as well as its long-standing preoccupation with somatic identity markers, helped develop a distinctive understanding

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{7} Svetlana Alpers, “Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of Las Meninas,” \textit{Representations} no. 1 (1983), 39-40.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{8} See for instance Touba Ghadessi, \textit{Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies} (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2018).
\end{flushleft}
of the significance of bodily difference. Any construction of such an ideal requires a construction of its opposite, and in many cases disabled bodies were expressly used for this purpose—particularly in the courts, where the perfection of the nobility was constructed through comparisons with the ostensible imperfection of the dwarfs, “natural fools,” and “madmen” who made up a surprisingly large part of the courts’ contingent of jesters, servants, and other workers. Extant inventories indicate that the majority of the portraits examined here were displayed in royal collections for most, if not all of their existence, which potentially suggests a patron within or closely connected to the royal family, and thus an interest on the royal family’s part in visualizing this bodily hierarchy. It is important to note, however, that the artistic representation of this dynamic is not a direct reflection of how it played out in daily life; in practice, the relationships between courtiers and disabled jesters/servants would not have been so dramatically performative. The significance of these artworks thus lies in the way that they extrapolate from these relationships, shifting from quotidian reality to a generalized, symbolically rich construction of bodily and mental difference. In a court that was concerned with questions of reputation, inclusion and exclusion, and intellectual development in areas both secular and spiritual, the disabled subject proved to be a powerful means of exploring all of these ideas.


10 Information on these inventories has been gleaned from the Museo Nacional del Prado’s online provenance records, as well as from Alpers, *The Decoration of the Torre de la Parada*, Appendix II.
It should be said, though, that this courtly focus does not deny that representations of disability also existed elsewhere. Religious paintings, especially of miracles performed by Christ and various saints, frequently featured lepers, epileptics, and paraplegics, and artists interested in visualizations of poverty like Jusepe de Ribera produced a number of works depicting blind people, amputees, et cetera. While these pieces do reflect the Spanish interest in bodily and mental difference, their audiences and the context for which they were produced is so distinct from the court portraiture tradition that to analyze them would be beyond the scope of this study. Whereas the court portraits examined here were at least nominally interested in the historical individuals they depicted, other representations of disability were interested in a generic “disabled body” that could be used as an index for broadly relatable concepts like social inequity or Christians’ charitable obligations. This disparity in and of itself indicates that there may have been different associative processes involved with different forms of disability; the body of a person with dwarfism, for instance, might be more likely to be associated with the court, whereas that of an amputee or a person with epilepsy might be associated with the impoverished classes and the site of the hospital. In each case, the image of the disabled body is mobilized in order to represent an idea that an abled body could not, but the specific ideas and motivations differ. Many of us perform similar mental processes in the present day, internally drawing distinctions between, say, wheelchair users and people

---

with service dogs. Social constructions of disability remain both insidious and multivalent.

Because the authors analyzing the works I have selected have treated the question of disability either shallowly or offensively, I have chosen to explicitly examine this phenomenon from the perspective of recent work in the field of disability studies. In doing so, I want to emphasize that shifting from the idea that disability stems from individual bodies to what in disability theory is referred to as the social model—that is, the idea that disability is a socially, historically, and culturally constructed status and identity category—makes the relationship between early modern conceptions of disability and early modern visual culture much clearer. Art in any context is unavoidably influenced by social conditions and historical events, but we must acknowledge that this also is the case for understandings of disability. Doing so allows us to read this body of work as impacting not solely the development of the Spanish portraiture tradition, but the broader cultural construction of the significance(s) of bodily difference.

More specifically, though, my approach has been greatly influenced by Tobin Siebers’ *Disability Aesthetics*. In this analysis, Siebers identifies two major frameworks for evaluating the presence of disability in art: “disability aesthetics” and “the aesthetics of human disqualification.” The former draws upon modern art’s “love affair” with bodily difference, corporeal trauma, and psychological unease; it is an analytical structure that

---

12 For examples, see the scholarship on *Las Meninas*, exhibition catalog or museum entries on any of the works discussed here, or a focused study like the following that uncritically operates within frameworks that implicitly or explicitly characterize disabled people as pitiful or freakish: Barry Wind, ‘*A Foul and Pestilent Congregation*: Images of ‘*Freaks* in Baroque Art’ (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998).
“affirms that disability operates both as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions in the history of art and as a value in its own right important to future conceptions of what art is.”\textsuperscript{13} The latter, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which systems of oppression are upheld by “the accusation of mental or physical inferiority based on aesthetic principles,” where disability functions as a sign of otherness “that establishes differences between human beings not as acceptable or valuable variations but as dangerous deviations.”\textsuperscript{14} Relevant to each concept is the sway that constructions of beauty in and of themselves hold over us all. As Siebers puts it, “aesthetics is the domain in which the sensation of otherness is felt at its most powerful, strange, and frightening… [It] is the human science most concerned with invitations to think and feel otherwise about our own influence, interests, and imagination.”\textsuperscript{15} And although aesthetics as a systematized philosophy would not emerge concretely for another century, we can nevertheless observe in 17th century Spanish art this same invitation to reflect deeply on ideas about the body and about the value of bodies.

The fact that we can trace the devaluing of disabled bodies back much earlier than the 17th century means that the portraits I analyze here fit fairly neatly within the framework of the aesthetics of disqualification; the mere existence of teratology (i.e. the study of “monsters” and “human wonders”) and the moralization of “monstrous births” in this period speaks to a sense that certain forms of human variation were often seen as

\textsuperscript{13} Tobin Siebers, \textit{Disability Aesthetics} (Ann Arbor, MN: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 20.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 24.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 25.
undesirable or freakish, if not dangerous. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have argued in this vein that in the early modern period we can see the emotions toward and interpretations of these so-called monsters operating on a sliding scale between “pleasure (as in the courtly literature of romance and secrets) and…fear (as in the works of thirteenth-century natural philosophers).”

On one side of this scale the divergent body is marginalized in the sense that it is set apart as an object to be enjoyed, an “ornament of a benevolent creator,” and on the other, these “prodigies” and their divergence are understood to be a horrific form of divine punishment—both clear processes of disqualification. But because these court portraits are far from the post-World War II modern art with which Siebers is primarily concerned, one might assume that applying his second framework of disability aesthetics to this study would be anachronistic. This is true to an extent, since the ways in which these portraits construct an image of the disabled body is decidedly early modern, influenced neither by 18th-century aesthetic theory nor the burgeoning industrialization and capitalist insistence on productivity that would spark what Lennard Davis refers to as “the social process of disabling.”

However, as Victoriano Roncero López and Esther Cadahía point out in their analysis of the Spanish court jester, we can see in the 16th and 17th centuries a growing interest in and appreciation for so-called ugliness and the grotesque, which we can consider part of

---


17 Ibid. 176-177.

an emergent baroque sensibility that favors a degree of drama and/or intrigue as a means of inviting viewers to pore over a work’s details.\textsuperscript{19} We could look to several sources for examples—for instance, Ribera’s drawings of the “grotesque heads” of people with goiters (fig. 1). More relevant in its courtly context, however, is Alonso Sánchez Coello’s painstaking rendering of an elderly dwarf’s veins, wrinkles, and disproportionate limbs next to the porcelain, more acceptably feminine features of the Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia (fig. 2).

Coello’s portrait was painted between 1585 and 1588, which falls just before the period at hand, so we may potentially read it as the direct predecessor of some of the 17th-century portraits I will examine. It depicts Isabel Clara Eugenia and the dwarf, Magdalena Ruiz, in front of a red and gold floral tapestry, with a wall and column just barely visible in the shadowy space behind Ruiz. The Infanta stands at center, gazing impassively out at the viewer, holding a small cameo of Philip II in front of her sternum and resting her proper left hand on the head of Ruiz, who stands at her waist level holding two small monkeys and another cameo, looking up as if Isabel’s touch was sudden. Whereas the Infanta is dressed in an elaborate, ornately embroidered white and gold dress with a matching feathered cap perched atop her tightly-braided hair, Ruiz wears a simple black dress with a white, lacy-edged habit, monochromatic but for the red rosary beads draped around her neck.

Given the way that the extraordinarily precise rendering of the Infanta’s dress and accessories dominate Coello’s composition, we can characterize this portrait as one that seeks to elevate its royal sitter through a display of material wealth. Presumably the monkeys Ruiz cradles in her arms are part of this display—members of an exotic menagerie. What purpose, then, does Ruiz serve? If the claiming hand that the Infanta lays on her head is any indication, she, too, functions here as an ornament or accessory, perhaps conveying through her small stature a rarity or exoticism similar to that of the monkeys. The composition deliberately calls attention to Ruiz’s bodily divergence, through the Infanta’s gesture, Ruiz’s own acknowledgement of that gesture, and Ruiz’s position at the margins of the canvas, occupying the space in front of the shadowy background rather than the ornate tapestry. One could thus argue that the main “aesthetics” present here are those of disqualification. Yet at the same time, there was a documented sentiment among 16th and 17th-century poets and playwrights that “it is beauty, to have something ugly,” and that “in the horrible there is beauty”; such visual representations of those physical or mental features considered opposites existing simultaneously suggests that this was a belief held among Spanish artists as well. But the disabled body was not used solely to demarcate the boundaries between ideal human beings and their opposites. In fact, it served in many cases as a means of uniquely expressing complex ideas about not just beauty or intelligence, but imagination, inspiration, and artistic production. In Siebers’ words, it was to an extent “a value in its own right,” used to confront ideas about that most essential piece of the art-making

---

process: creativity and the mind’s generative power. I would therefore argue that the symbolic power that the image of the divergent body so clearly held in this period invites us to tweak and expand Siebers’ theory, so that we may refer not just to the “disability aesthetics” of the modern era, but a “baroque disability.”

Encapsulated in this baroque disability are the feelings of isolation and mortification that Teresa de Cartagena describes—what she calls her “dismal exile,” her *tenebroso destierro*—as well as the equally baroque notion of *desengaño*, or “un-deceiving,” which was an essential concept for artists concerned with the truthful representation of the human form. In the following chapters, I will analyze the ways in which this *destierro* and *desengaño* coalesce in the disabled body as it was constructed by portraitists like Velázquez and courts such as that of Philip IV. The exiled, mortified body boldly represented comes to facilitate the stripping-away of illusion and dangerous falsehood.
Chapter 1
Disabling Court Structures

How was disability understood during Spain’s so-called Golden Age? Because the way we understand disability in the present day relies largely on our living in a post-industrial, productivity-centric society, it may seem anachronistic to refer to “disability” at all in an early modern context. But while our own conception of disability is not identical to the one that was operating in 16th- and 17th-century Spanish society, the ways in which early modern Spaniards codified bodies and minds that fell outside the standard reveals underlying assumptions regarding human variation that are quite similar to those observable in the present day. These assumptions may be illustrated by a linguistic binary that emerged in the wake of early modern Spain’s various sociopolitical crises: that of defectiveness and the ideal, which can be seen at play in Coello’s portrait of Isabela Clara Eugenia and Magdalena Ruiz (fig. 2).

These are literal translations of two qualitative terms that, based on their presence in published writing and personal correspondences, were in relatively common use: defeto (defecto in modern Spanish) and lo ideal. People we might refer to as “disabled” today were in this context frequently subsumed under the label of defeto or defetuoso (the adjective form), which could be used to refer to almost anything considered antithetical to the ideal. Gloria Clark, for example, observes that the 17th century playwright Juan Ruiz

---

21 The connection between industrialization and our modern conception of disability has notably been discussed here: Lennard J. Davis, Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body (New York: Verso, 1995), 23-49.

de Alarcón, a “hunchback” born and raised in New Spain, was both mocked by poets like Francisco de Quevado for his spinal dysmorphism and denied a major post in Philip IV’s court, explicitly due to Ruiz de Alarcón’s “defeto Corporal.” Although Clark notes its use in these types of letters and poetry, it is ultimately unclear if defeto was the term in most common use; monstro (monstruo) and deforme appear regularly as well, with the former in particular referring to a person born with a body that goes against the natural order of things. It is the case, however, that to a greater extent than these other terms, defeto carried with it a set of connotations that place it in direct contrast with the values that an ideal person was meant to embody. In his Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española (1611), Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco defines defetuoso as “everything that is not complete, nor perfect”—“todo aquello que no está cumplido, ni cabal.” Notably, cumplido and cabal can both be used to mean something like “complete.” However, because cabal as a descriptor for a person specifically referred to their being “perfect in virtues” and having a strong sense of justice, I have translated it as “perfect.” The disabled body is thus figured as imperfect not just in a physical sense, but in a moral/personal sense; it is the body that lacks, positioned against the elevated body of the abled ideal. This is the relational dynamic that Isabel Clara Eugenia and Magdalena Ruiz and

---

23 Clark, “Juan Ruiz de Alarcón,” 104.

24 “Monstro es cualquier parto contra la regla y orden natural.” Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco, Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española (Madrid: Luis Sánchez, 1611).

25 Covarrubias, Tesoro.

26 “El hombre cabal: cuando es perfecto en virtudes, y en guardar especialmente justicia.” Ibid.
portraits like it seek to convey—and that, by extension, was gaining traction in the Spanish courts.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those considered closest to the ideal tended to come from the highest echelons of Spanish society, while those considered furthest from it tended to live on the margins. As with today’s ideologies surrounding the abled body, then, this early modern ideology of perfection served primarily to justify and maintain social hierarchies and inequalities. Thus, to draw from contemporary definitions of disability, someone classified as *defetuoso* would more likely than not be limited to some degree in their ability to function in society. As Encarnación Juárez-Almendros discusses in the context of Spanish anxieties surrounding contagion, for example, “the poor, the sick, the disabled and prostitutes were among the populations most subjected to a separate set of [health] regulations that marginalized them from the rest of society,” thus singling them out as especially dangerous to the social order.27 It must be said, though, that *defetuoso* was an imprecise label, and cannot serve as a direct analogue to the category of “disabled.” Someone’s defectiveness could stem just as easily from their imperfect writing style, moral failings, or non-Spanish/Christian parentage as from something like disfigurement or blindness.28 Terms referring to specific impairments (e.g. “lunatic” or “idiot” in place of a clinical term like “mentally ill” or “intellectually disabled”) were used throughout early modern Europe in medical and legal settings “to determine… fitness to administer property, enjoy legal immunity or enter an asylum,” but at least in

---


28 Clark, “Juan Ruiz de Alarcón,” 104.
Spain, it is difficult to locate a word that neatly ties together the range of experiences we now call disability.\textsuperscript{29}

Although it would ultimately be inappropriate to use defeto/defetuoso and the modern “disabled” as interchangeable terms, it is the case that the dominant understandings of these two categories have a rhetorical framework in common. Today, systemic ableism—what Siebers refers to as the “ideology of ability”—leads us to consider disability to be undesirable at best and a signifier of non-humanness at worst, as well as emphasizing the faulty concept that disability is a strictly biological condition.\textsuperscript{30} Disability theorists and activists argue, conversely, that disability is an identity category that emerges at the intersection of bodily and/or mental impairment and social, cultural, and historical conditions. A person becomes disabled—that is, limited in their ability to live successfully in society—not due to the simple fact of their body’s existence, but as the result of where cultural baselines for how a body is “supposed” to function have been set.\textsuperscript{31} Rosmarie Garland-Thomson has referred to this as a process of “misfitting,” wherein “the discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is” renders disabled people (or indeed anyone who does not “fit” the shape of the world they live in) “misfits.”\textsuperscript{32} This is a particularly useful framework for this study,


since, as Garland-Thomson notes, it is temporally flexible. Rather than trying to construct a teleology of “disability” as a category, we can understand it as a “material arrangement” in which outcast status is inflicted on people with impairments because “the shape and function of their [disabled] bodies comes in conflict with the shape and stuff of the built world.” And just as not everyone who was considered *defetuoso* would be considered disabled today, neither would everyone who “mis-fits”—yet the conflict between body and world can still help reify the belief that certain types of human variation are always faulty and undesirable. Though it had yet to be named in a cohesive way, disability was recognized as a mark of serious and fundamental difference, and consequently functioned as a disqualifying factor.

Visual representations of disabled subjects can thus be understood as examinations and, frequently, exaggerations of the disabled body’s mis-fit. In the eighth section of his influential *Diálogos de la pintura*, artist and theorist Vincente Carducho describes at length what the features of a person’s face can tell you about their morals and temperament, beginning with a written portrait of the “just man.” This hypothetical *justo* is many things, but above all “well-proportioned”—unlike the “man of bad habits,” who in contrast is characterized by things like a “deformed face” or a “short, crooked neck.”

Similarly, Carducho states that both the *insensato* (fool) and *rudo* (mean, “rough” person) can be identified by their “badly sculpted” extremities. As Covarrubias does in his

---

33 Ibid. 594.


dictionary, then, Carducho actively moralizes the body; *defetuoso* is attributed to weakness of character or mind. Importantly, though, he also constructs a specific visual language with which to moralize. For Carducho, as for other art theorists of his time (such as Francisco Pacheco), a portrait’s power lies in its ability to imitate life—or, more specifically, *inner* life. If it is in fact possible for a given portrait to truly convey the sitter’s inner life to the viewer, then there should necessarily exist a set of bodily traits that can be employed by the artist to that end.

It is important to note that while there was certainly a degree of idealization involved in the process of creating a portrait, especially in a courtly context, theorists like Pacheco maintained that a true portrait was one which did not “conceal…things that go against beauty.” If a proper likeness was to be achieved, the artist could not in good conscience omit their sitter’s perceived flaws. According to Pacheco, the most one should do to hide visible “defects” is to “represent [the] subject from a flattering angle, provided that [one] still captures the sitter’s likeness.” In the context of Carducho’s physiognomic vocabulary, this makes perfect sense; if visible *defetuoso* indicates something about a person’s character, and if the artist’s goal in painting a person’s portrait is to successfully imitate that character, the only way for them to achieve that goal is to render the sitter’s *defetuoso* in a clear and calculated way. The ability to render visibly

---


37 Tiffany, *Diego Velázquez's Early Paintings*, 61.

38 Ibid. 62.
disabled bodies thus becomes an important tool in the portraitist’s arsenal—and, as we will see, would become a vital part of Velázquez’s court portraiture in particular.

While royal courts throughout 17th-century Europe kept dwarfs and intellectually disabled or mentally ill jesters, Spain is notable in terms of both how many of these figures its court employed—Philip IV kept over 100 dwarfs during his lifetime—and the frequency with which they were represented visually. This raises a number of questions, but first and most basically: what exactly was it about disabled people that appealed to Spanish royals? On the one hand, we may understand the jester, or truhán, as one of the only figures in the court with the ability to openly mock the king. In his definition of truhanes, Covarrubias notes that they “had license to say whatever they wanted”—in part, he implies, due to the fact that these figures were “without shame, without honor, and without respect.” Especially in the case of “artificial” fools, who were not disabled but feigned “insanity” or some other form of mental difference, the jester’s performative remove from proper behavior and thought processes allowed them to serve as an outlet for jibes and expressions of discontent that anyone else would face serious consequences for voicing. These kinds of outlets would have been particularly necessary during the social and economic instability with which Spain was faced in the 17th century; for Philip IV, faced with political and personal crises alike and struggling to


41 “El chocarrero burlón, hombre sin vergüenza, sin honra y sin respeto…[que] tiene licencia de decir lo que se le antojare.” Covarrubias, *Tesoro*. 
exercise his authority under the thumb of the Count-Duke of Olivares, a comical
expression of his own anxieties may have proven cathartic. Fernando Bouza has proposed
that:

In theory, the court was organized as though it were a small universe and its
hierarchy mimicked, on a palatial scale, the great chain of creation; in order to
understand the presence of these disproportionate, wretched beings in it, one
needs only to repeat what has already been said regarding the need for monsters
to complete the harmony of the world.\textsuperscript{42}

This echoes an attitude toward the “monsters” of the world that we can trace back
centuries before the period at hand. Although the belief that monstrous births and other
instances of bodily or mental difference were a form of divine punishment was persistent,
it seems that the notion that the ideal could be tempered by the unideal was also in
circulation, given, for example, the long coexistence in collections of monsters and
traditionally beautiful, “less ambiguous wonders of nature and art.”\textsuperscript{43} We may consider
this idea of balance in and of itself as being part of the baroque appreciation of the
grotesque which has influenced the works examined here.

In that vein, however, we must also consider the fact that many of these jesters
were not performing—at least not in the sense of feigning madness. Their so-called
defetuouso, whether it was dwarfism, mental illness, and/or an intellectual disability, was
not something that they could adopt and shed at will; as is the case for disabled people
today, it played a key role in their experience of the world and the way they navigated it
day-to-day, not just during festivals or comedias. Carrie Sandahl has argued along these

\textsuperscript{42} Fernando Bouza, \textit{Locos, enanos y hombres de placer en la corte de los Austrias: oficio

\textsuperscript{43} Daston and Park, \textit{Wonders and the Order of Nature}, 193.
lines that, due to the way visibly disabled people “cause a commotion” in majority-abled spaces, “disability inaugurates the act of interpretation in representation in daily life,” such that “disabled people can be considered performers, and passersby, the audience.”

Even before a disabled subject is captured on a canvas, their body and its mis-fit with their environment is open to the interpretation and analysis of anyone who happens to see them.

We may read the disabled jester as being boxed into this “invisible theater” as well, particularly given the ways in which the mental worlds of mentally ill and intellectually disabled people were conceived in the 17th century. Drawing from the contemporary classifications of the popular Sevillian novelist Mateo Alemán, for example, López and Cadahía note that “according to classic tradition continued in the Middle Ages,” the natural fool “had an empty head and could, therefore, listen to and pass on the words given by the Holy Ghost.”

There are ideas in common here with Carducho’s physiognomic theory, in the sense that the fool’s ability to act as a divine intermediary is linked directly to their physical body; more generally, though, I would argue that it is possible to see this positioning of the disabled figure as part of the twin phenomena of destierro and desengaño, in that it simultaneously sets disabled figures apart and grants them special access to truth, and thus the ability to tear down earthly deceptions with their words. It is the case, however, that as Coello’s portrait indicates,

---


45 López and Cadahía, “The Court Jester,” 100.
there exist a significant number of portraits featuring disabled subjects that do not delve so deeply into the symbolic power of the disabled body, and that instead transform those bodies into ornamental props. There is a seeming contradiction here: why, if these figures were thought to have the ability to convey otherwise inaccessible truths, would they be objectified and dehumanized in this way? To understand this move, we must examine the phenomenon of the double portrait in more detail.
Chapter 2
Mirrored Bodies and the Construction of Perfection

As in other parts of Europe, portraiture as a genre in Spain was largely concerned with emphasizing the dignity and elevated status of its subjects. Consequently, those subjects tended to be royal, noble, or otherwise connected to the upper echelons of society. Particularly in the case of the Habsburg line, these subjects’ prestige was conventionally signaled by portraying them in an austere, rather minimalist style, identifying them as “physically and spiritually remote and superior beings.” Within this tradition, however, we also find a number of portraits where disabled, non-aristocratic subjects, who were certainly not considered superior or dignified, are inserted next to the high-class sitter. These subjects were usually “court dwarfs”: people with dwarfism who were generally either jesters or pet-like companions for individual members of the royal family. In these unconventional double portraits, these figures are included for the express purpose of constructing a vision of the royal or noble ideal by (directly or indirectly) positioning the disabled body as its antithesis.

The use of the disabled body for this purpose was not arbitrary or coincidental; defetuoso played an important role in Spanish court life in general, as demonstrated by the number of fools, servants, and other workers who would be medically/legally

---


classified as dwarfs, “idiots,” “lunatics,” et cetera.48 This demographic phenomenon may be attributed in part to Spain’s general fascination with the way difference manifests in the body, but Janet Ravenscroft also points out that “the presence of dwarfs and ‘imbeciles’ at court…allowed the royal family to fulfil its charitable [religious] duty towards these less able members of society and provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate their moral, intellectual and physical superiority.”49 The mere fact of these disabled figures’ presence therefore allowed the royal family to integrate the continuous construction of a physical and mental ideal into day-to-day life in the courts. At the same time, they were able to demonstrate their Catholic charity, introduce a source of entertainment, and reestablish court hierarchies through the dual vehicles of disabled jesters’ performative breaking of boundaries and their visible mis-fit among royalty and nobility. Court painters, when including disabled bodies in their work, further contributed to this process. In each case, disabled figures are experimentally inserted into an environment in order to visualize the shape and extent of their difference. This might be literal, as with compositions that place dwarfs next to people, animals, or objects much larger than them, or figurative, in the case of works that use more abstract or symbolic formal elements to raise broader questions about the interactions of bodies and environments. The resultant works tended to fall into two categories: the double and single portrait. In this chapter, we will examine the former.


Rodrigo de Villandrando’s 1620 *Prince Philip and the Dwarf, Miguel Soplillo* (fig. 3) serves as an excellent example of this type. It depicts a young Philip IV with Miguel Soplillo, a popular court dwarf from the Low Countries gifted to the Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia and reportedly a “close companion” of Philip’s, posed in a rather shadowy interior space with a tiled floor that roughly implies the room’s depth. Philip, in ornate gold and white dress, is positioned in the center of the frame, with his proper left hand resting on the hilt of a sword at his hip and his proper right resting on Soplillo’s head. Soplillo, relegated to the far edge of the frame, mirrors Philip’s pose, minus the feathered hat he holds in his right hand. On Philip’s other side is a small table covered in rich red fabric with decorative gold trim, on which has been placed a fluffy, elaborately decorated white hat with a black brim. The table’s surface at about the level of Soplillo’s neck, and the top of the hat, minus the feathery fan sprouting from its peak, is about parallel to the top of his head. Hanging behind the table is a swath of crushed red velvet, and looming in the shadows behind Soplillo is a classical column.

In many ways this is a standard royal portrait: the poses, costumes, and environment adhere closely to the conventions of the genre, emphasizing decorum and material wealth. What is unusual, then, is the interaction between the two figures—that is, the placement of Philip’s hand on Soplillo’s head. This compositional decision says much about how emergent dynamics between the ideal and unideal were being explored

---


visually. Additionally, the occasion of the portrait’s commission and the site of its display makes Soplillo’s inclusion even more noteworthy. Given the date and Philip’s white and gold outfit—ceremonial colors in Portugal—Leticia Ruiz Gómez theorizes that this and Villandrando’s portrait from the same year of Isabel of Bourbon, Philip IV’s first wife, commemorate the ostentatious *jornada portuguesa* of 1619, which saw the royal family travel to Lisbon to accept the Portuguese throne on the future king’s behalf and inspired the production of many other commemorative works. According to provenance records provided by the Prado, by 1636 the portrait was in turn being displayed in a gallery in the Alcázar overlooking the “Jardín de los Emperadores” (Garden of the Emperors), also constructed around 1619 and notable for hosting Leone Leoni’s marble portrait of Charles V. In this context, we can understand Villandrando’s portrait as being concerned with the dignified representation not only of the future king, who would assume the throne just a year after it was painted, but of the Habsburg legacy as a whole and its continuation. The inclusion of Soplillo in this piece thus begs the question of how the figure and physicality of the court dwarf contributed to that representation.

Given the prevalence of this “dwarf and royal” juxtaposition in the canon of court portraiture, we can see the important role disability plays in developing pictorial types, as well as in shaping what it means to be, in this case, a member of the royal family. But we

---


should not mistake inclusion for respect. Ravenscroft notes that during this period height was explicitly linked with health and status, and John Moffitt points out that the widely-circulated Spanish translation of Baltasare Castiglione’s *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (1527, translated in 1534) emphasizes that a courtier’s “outward beauty is a true sign of inner goodness, directly representing...an index of the soul, by which it is outwardly known.” Accordingly, Castiglione advised the court portraitist memorializing these souls to “show that sobriety which the Spanish nation so much observes, since external things often bear witness to inner things.” The royal’s prestige and well-being, along with the prestige and well-being of the state, is thus exaggerated through a comparison with a person with dwarfism, whose appearance—their mortificación—is consequently conflated with low status, illness, or any number of other imperfections.

Despite this power imbalance and general exploitation of their visible difference, many authors have drawn attention to the ways in which these disabled figures were favored to an extent within the Spanish courts. Beatrice Otto, for instance, suggests that jesters could become particularly close to kings “due to a shared sense of isolation,” as both were markedly separate from “normal” society.

---


56 Ibid. 220.

generosity of various kings toward their jesters, pointing to court records of both high salaries and lavish gifts; she points in particular to Magdalena Ruiz, the court dwarf and “natural fool” (i.e. a jester who was intellectually disabled or mentally ill) who appears with Isabel Clara Eugenia in the Coello portrait, the composition of which is remarkably similar to the Villandrando portrait (fig. 2). Ruiz is referred to with great affection in several letters penned by members of the royal family, cited by both Otto and Laura Bass. Yet as Yi-Fu Tuan points out, the status of court dwarfs and natural fools was not so cut and dry; as he says, “they were the privileged servitors of a household and yet also, in subtle ways, counted among the nonhuman members of a menagerie,” in the sense that they were implicitly valued more for their intriguing physicality and entertainment value than for their personhood. The fact that the presence of these figures in the courts in the first place was contingent on the fact of their visible bodily and/or mental difference speaks to this interpretation. Tuan additionally notes the common practice of gifting and loaning both fools and dwarfs between households as evidence that despite being treated with kindness and assigned value, they were ultimately possessions of the court: collectible items that served as indicators of status. Court dwarfs in particular, who were often “given” to young princes and princesses as companions, were in many ways relegated to the level of human pets. López and Cadahía come to the same conclusion, noting along with Fernando Bouza that jesters in the Spanish courts were frequently


60 Ibid. 159.
referred to as “the palace bugs/vermin,” or sabandijas palaciegas.\textsuperscript{61} This ambiguous status seems visible in both paintings. Both Philip and Isabela are depicted with one hand on Soplillo and Ruiz’s heads, ostensibly as a sign of affection; yet with this context in mind, the gesture also carries with it some not-so-subtle shades of the condescension and ownership implicit in rulership.

Ruiz Gómez has interpreted this pose as a gesture of benevolence and protection, where figures like Soplillo are meant to represent the Spanish citizenry that figures like Philip ruled, or would soon be ruling.\textsuperscript{62} While that connotation is surely present, given the portrait’s association with the scope of Habsburg rule and a whistle-stop tour of that very citizenry (the jornada portuguesa), I would argue that Villandrando’s compositional choices also reflect strongly the objectification and dehumanization inherent in the “keeping” of court dwarfs. For one, Soplillo has been placed in the same marginal position as the small table on the right on which Philip has placed his feathered hat, thus compositionally and functionally equating the two. The table serves as a resting place for royal clothing, and Soplillo’s head serves as a resting place for the royal body. Therefore, just as this beautifully decorated table is meant to display Philip’s beautifully decorated hat, Soplillo is meant to serve as a display of both Philip’s benevolence and what will be his kingliness. Additionally, since tallness would have been explicitly linked with high status in the eyes of this work’s audience, to paint Philip as being of the ideal height to


\textsuperscript{62} Ruiz Gómez, El retrato español en el Prado, 68-69.
nonchalantly rest his hand in this way is to indicate his status, just as to labor over the rich material of his costume is to indicate his wealth. In other words, Soplillo is not only representative of the Spanish citizenry at large: he is representative of the Spanish crown’s material wealth and charitable duties.

Additionally, when one examines similar portraits, such as Juan Pantoja de la Cruz’s 1579 The Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia (fig. 4) or Velázquez’s 1632 Don Diego del Corral y Arellano (fig. 5), it becomes clear that Soplillo’s position in the painting is conventionally occupied by a piece of furniture, frequently a table, where various objects are placed that echo some aspect of the sitter’s identity. Selfhood is in this way extended beyond the limits of the individual sitter’s body. Soplillo, in this interpretation, thus acts as an object, included less because of his personhood and more because of his potential to bolster Philip’s personhood. Like the papers that Velázquez paints in the right hand of Don Diego del Corral y Arellano, which may serve as signifiers of his legal and authorial career, Soplillo signifies Philip’s royal status; to borrow from Saidiya Hartman’s analyses of subjection, the soon-to-be king is “[augmented] through his embodiment in external objects and persons.”63 In its slight twisting of the recognizable conventions of identification in portraiture, this painting thus implicitly informs the viewer of the power dynamics that royalties sought to establish.

Diego Velázquez uses a similar formula in Prince Baltasar Carlos with a Dwarf (fig. 6), one of his early court portraits, which some have suggested was meant to

---

commemorate “the celebration of the Oath of Allegiance (juramento) to the future king.”\textsuperscript{64} If this is the case, here we see, again, a disabled figure serving as a “contrastive foil”\textsuperscript{65} for a young prince entering a new stage of his life as a member of the Habsburg line. The infant Baltasar Carlos looks out at the viewer from the center midground of the composition, richly-dressed and unusually poised for a one-year-old. To his proper left, also in the midground, is a feathered hat placed on a tasseled pillow; to his proper right, closer to the foreground, is the unnamed, ambiguously-gendered dwarf, who holds a rattle and an apple and glances over their proper left shoulder, face turned away from the viewer. The dwarf’s body language is significantly less rigid than the prince’s. As in the Villandrando portrait, then, the sitters are mirrored and arranged hierarchically by height. In this case, however, since it is likely that both sitters were in reality around the same height, Velázquez has created an artificial disparity between them through the use of perspective. We can conceivably read Velázquez’s inclusion of the rattle and apple as an additional effort to contrast the sitters, given that they may function as a somewhat joking reference to the scepter and orb associated with the Holy Roman Emperor, and thus with Baltasar Carlos’ great-great-grandfather.\textsuperscript{66} Following the traditional formula of a jester’s live performance, which may well have occurred on the occasion of the prince’s juramento, the sobriety of the royal family and the seriousness with which their legacy is

\textsuperscript{64} Alpers, “Interpretation without Representation,” 40.

\textsuperscript{65} Bass, The Drama of the Portrait, 111.

treated is gently mocked, bending the rules of social engagement within the safety of this performative space.

However, although the positioning of the unnamed dwarf and the hat/pillow on either side of the prince is near-identical to the Villandrando portrait, Velázquez uses this composition quite differently, particularly in the lack of direct interaction between Baltasar Carlos and the dwarf. The prince lays no direct, visible claim to the figure of the dwarf, unlike Philip IV and Isabel Clara Eugenia in Villandrando and Coello’s portraits, and it is the dwarf who turns toward him, helping to initiate the comparison between their accessories and physicality. In other words, the gesture that leads the viewer toward an understanding of the relationship between the disabled body and the ideal body is performed by the former, rather than the latter. This is not to say that the dwarf themself has agency here, as their actions and intentions remain a construction of Velázquez’s imagination. But it is nevertheless notable that Velázquez has placed his construction of the dwarf in this active role. This may be due in part to the age difference between Philip and his son; after all, an infant prince doesn’t hold the same type of authority as a prince who is about to ascend to the throne. When one examines Velázquez’s other portraits of disabled subjects, however, it becomes clear that this may be due instead to his greater creative (rather than political) interest in exploring the relationships between disabled and abled bodies.
Chapter 3
Mediation and Meditation in the Torre de la Parada

As Sharon Snyder phrases it, cultural producers throughout history have used images of disabled bodies as “topical objects, if not narrative agents” in the process of “[manifesting]...the unacknowledged conflicts of a period.” She and David Mitchell have posited that, in a discursive phenomenon they refer to as “narrative prosthesis,” a text “borrows the potency of the lure of difference” that disability provides, posing it within a text “as an ‘alien’ terrain that promises the revelation of a previously uncomprehended experience.” Of course, when Snyder and Mitchell refer to “narrative,” they primarily have literature in mind; nevertheless, these concepts become quite pertinent in a context where the act of commissioning a portrait is very much an attempt to construct a narrative. More precisely, I propose that when we turn to Velázquez’s single portraits of dwarfs and jesters, we can see him using these sitters’ disabled bodies as a prosthesis of sorts—one meant to flesh out understandings of court structure, Philip IV’s nebulous royal identity, and art-making as a generative process. Whereas the double portraits discussed in the previous chapter were used primarily to reinforce courtly hierarchies and characterize their disabled sitters as ornaments, these works seek to express ideas about understanding, imagination, and any number of “uncomprehended experiences” that for Velázquez and his audience alike were uniquely


encapsulated in the disabled body. In images as in texts, there is a potency afforded to divergent forms, which is why a baroque construction of disability relies upon the striking visualization of that potency.

The most relevant portrait here is Velázquez’s *The Buffoon Don Diego de Acedo* (fig. 7), which was displayed in the Torre de la Parada, one of Phillip IV’s personal hunting lodges located just outside Madrid. It depicts Acedo, a mustachioed, middle-aged man with a receding hairline, seated outdoors on the ground; a distant, mountainous landscape is roughly rendered in dull greens, grays, and browns in the background, identifiable as a part of the Guardarrama range that would have actually been visible from the windows of the hunting lodge. Neatly groomed, dressed all in black with his hat jauntily tilted to the side, and balancing a folio the size of his torso on his lap, Acedo takes up most of the frame, and gazes neutrally out at the viewer as he uses one hand to turn to a different section in his book. He is surrounded by other, smaller volumes; two are piled in the bottom left corner of the frame, and one lies open in the center of the foreground, its soft front cover bent into a ‘D’-shape. Wedged into this frontmost book are a few blank sheets of paper, weighed down by an ink-pot, that serve to hold Acedo’s place.

The catalyst for the way this painting makes its meaning is explicitly its subject’s disabled body—in particular, the fact of its subject’s dwarfism. In other words, given the fact that Acedo is centered in a composition whose key element is scale, the most

---

immediately striking detail of the piece is its rendering of Acedo’s mis-fit in this environment. The book on Acedo’s lap, of course, is the size of his entire torso, but his position relative to the landscape in the background, unmediated by walls or windows, creates an additional comparison between his body and the vast mountain range behind him, which would have been visible from where the portrait was displayed. The small size of Acedo’s body—the visible sign, the mortificación of his disability—is what allows Velázquez to deal with scale in this way, as well as what allows him to use this piece to further explore ideas about intelligence and the acquisition of knowledge, delving more deeply into what he has read into his subject’s body.

The formal features that Velázquez relies on most heavily to achieve this are pose and the use of accessories, the latter of which refers to not just the books Acedo is surrounded with, but the costume in which he has been dressed, since both function near-identically as symbols for more complicated ideas about knowledge and status. To touch first on the former, however, we should note that while Acedo’s seated pose may seem inconsequential in isolation, it is actually rather peculiar; aside from the three companion portraits that hung alongside this one in the Torre de la Parada, there are next to no Spanish portraits from this period that show their subject seated on the floor or ground. 17th century Spanish portraits with seated subjects certainly exist, but all of those subjects are shown sitting in chairs, and are usually being commemorated for their contributions to the Church. In Bartolomé Murillo’s Portrait of Don Justino de Neve (fig. 8), for example, Neve is seated, dressed all in black, looking directly at the viewer, and is holding his place in a book with his fingers, with another book on the table next to him
and a mountainous landscape behind him. Unlike Acedo, however, Neve is surrounded by clear markers of his social status; his coat of arms is displayed on a column behind him, and a small silver hand bell referencing his work in the Church sits on the table beside him, along with an ornate golden clock. At his feet sits a well-groomed lap dog with a red bow around its neck—a status symbol as well as one of fidelity. Neve was a wealthy, influential ecclesiastic and patron of the arts, and Murillo has evidently included these details as a means of conveying this to his audience. Interestingly, while Acedo is also surrounded by objects, they do not seem to pertain to his actual job at court; he worked in the office known as the secretaría de la cámara stamping documents and correspondence with a facsimile of the king’s signature. His entire job, it seems, was to use one stamp, which itself had to be locked in what was called the cofre de la estampa—a coffer of some kind that one could not handle or transport without oversight and that could only be unlocked by the Secretary of the secretaría.

Yet it seems that Velázquez has presented him quite differently. This is not a representation of repetitive office work, but a representation of intellectual motion. Acedo is not only turning a page, but turning to a specific page; he is actively cross-referencing and demonstrating his knowledge of the book’s contents, and the presence of the inkpot and blank pages beside him indicates that he is in the process of noting down and

---


synthesizing that knowledge with the information gleaned from the other three books in the frame. Additionally, though the mere fact of his being shown seated with a book echoes contemporary portraits of learned men, Manuela Mena Marqués has suggested that the volume’s enormous size, as well as Velázquez’s rough indications of illumination or illustration, indicates that it is both a high-quality folio and “a great book of consultation, of sciences, of philosophy, of botany, which gathers dense and complex knowledge or a compendium of knowledge.”\footnote{Es evidentemente un gran libro de consulta, de ciencias, de filosofía, de botánica, en que se reúne un saber complejo y denso o un compendio de saberes.” Manuela B. Mena Marqués, “Velázquez en la Torre de la Parada,” in \textit{Velázquez y Calderón: Dos genios de Europa}, ed. José Alcalá-Zamora and Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2000), 108.} Considering that it is those same concepts of combined knowledge and active learning that are essential to understanding this portrait, this is a compelling suggestion. The figure being presented to us here is Acedo as intellectual—Acedo as humanist, even, studying the liberal arts. He is additionally dressed in line with the somber fashions of the nobility in Philip IV’s court, which largely involved “uncomfortable, all-black vestments, enlivened only by a simple white ruffed collar…[and] made from starched and heavily padded fabrics which created the effect of an armor-like uniform.”\footnote{Julie Vinsonhaler Hansen, \textit{The Philosophers of Laughter: Velázquez’s Portraits of Jesters at the Court of Philip IV} (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1999), 89-90.} Philip IV’s reign is associated in general with a “turn towards conservatism” in politics as in portraiture, moving away from his father’s perceived frivility and hearkening back to the solemnity of his grandfather’s reign.\footnote{Moffitt, “The Theoretical Basis,” 222.} As Julie V. Hansen suggests, in this context a stiff, monochromatic costume like Acedo’s comes
across as “a physical manifestation of the wearer’s inner moral convictions and control.”75 For Acedo to be dressed in this way may thus signal to viewers, who would themselves be familiar with the connotations of these fashions, that his outfit is meant to convey a similar degree of sobriety and poise.

It would be inappropriate, however, to conclude that these details therefore signify a desire on Velázquez’s part to sincerely characterize Acedo as a noble, learned figure. As the past two chapters have demonstrated, figures like Acedo were not known for being treated with respect and understanding, and it is consequently quite easy to imagine the multi-layered emphasis on Acedo’s size as a joke at his expense, given especially the previously mentioned understanding of height as a status indicator. Additionally, since Acedo’s interaction with the book, along with the smaller volumes arranged in the lower left of the frame, could plausibly also be read as a reference to his post in the secretaría de la cámara, Velázquez’s choice to depict Acedo actively engaging with the folio on his lap may serve as a less flattering commentary on the latter’s role in the court. As Keith Broadfoot has recently suggested, Acedo’s real-world job might be read as almost comical in its repetitiousness, skirting the line between bureaucratic work and jester-like performance; as he says, “all that was required of [Acedo] was a single gesture, a single movement of the hand.”76 What’s more, as mentioned above, Acedo had neither free access to the stamp nor the authority to use it without the personal supervision of the secretary. Although these are more or less the limits of our knowledge on his occupation,

75 Hansen, The Philosophers of Laughter, 90.

76 Keith Broadfoot, “Velázquez’s Dwarfs and the Modern Uncanny.” Angelaki 21, no. 2 (2016), 42.
which limits the degree to which we can speak to the everyday experience of working in the secretaría, I would nevertheless agree with Broadfoot’s assessment that “the theatrical manner in which this gesture was staged,” involving the ritualistic unlocking and locking of the cofre de la estampa, thus “seems to accentuate the very limitation of what was required.” In this context, Velázquez’s evocation of more extensive intellectual activity, as embodied by the interaction with reading material that Acedo surely would not have had cause to reference in the course of his duties, comes across as ironic, even mocking. It is for this reason that I find Broadfoot’s overall interpretation of Acedo’s work in the secretaría as a comedic performance compelling, at least in the context of these four portraits, given that he is otherwise a striking exception in a group of paintings whose disabled subjects worked exclusively as jesters.

There is, however, an additional aspect of this piece that proves quite meaningful in an analysis of the broader ideas Velázquez is trying to explore: the site of its display. As Svetlana Alpers is careful to point out, the Torre de la Parada was not Philip IV’s only hunting lodge, nor was it necessarily one that saw frequent use; notably, between La Zarzuela and Valsain, it is the only hunting lodge that was not also used as a performance space. Rather, as suggested by its name derived from the verb parar, “to stop,” it served as more of a rest stop. Located in a secluded area between the Pardo palace and La Zarazuela, it was a junction of sorts for Philip and his entourage, as well as any visiting

77 Ibid.

diplomats or nobles who may have been accompanying them on the hunt. Additionally, although it was one of Philip IV’s original architectural projects, it seems that the lodge was built “at little expense” around an earlier watchtower erected by Philip II, and was “of very modest size,” particularly in comparison to the much more lavish project that was the Buen Retiro pleasure palace. Due to its small size, transitional function, and relative seclusion, as well as the fact that very few visiting diplomats ever mentioned seeing it, the Torre is often characterized as a private space for Philip, again in contrast to the highly public nature of the Buen Retiro.

Yet as Alpers has noted, the Torre de la Parada also stands out in this trio due to the fact that it is the only space Philip IV had decorated with site-specific commissions, primarily executed by Rubens and Velázquez. Among these commissions was The Buffoon Don Diego de Acedo, as was one of Velázquez’s other “jester portraits” depicting the dwarf Francisco Lezcano (fig. 9). The Buffoon Calabacillas (fig. 10), discussed in the following chapter, was displayed alongside them as well, although it is unclear if the latter was painted for the specific purpose of being displayed in the Torre de la Parada or

79 Sancho, La arquitectura de los Sitos Reales, 206-207; Svetlana Alpers, The Decoration of the Torre de la Parada (New York: Phaidon, 1971), 105.

80 That is, in comparison to the major royal sites that were already well-established by the time Philip came into power, such as the Pardo, the Alcazár, Valsain, et cetera.

81 Alpers, Decoration of the Torre, 105.


83 Alpers, Decoration of the Torre, 105.
if it was an earlier work brought in to supplement the newly commissioned portraits. In any case, the decision to place portraits of these figures in this space is a curious one, and one that implies a great deal about the representational utility of the disabled body for Velázquez and Philip as artist and king, respectively. I will discuss the former in the following chapter; here, I will elaborate on the ways in which Acedo’s portrait speaks to the Torre de la Parada’s potential function as a site of introspection.

In the bureaucratic hierarchy of the court, the secretaría where Acedo worked was very close to the king himself, ranking only below the intimate position of Sumiller de Corps, which was at this point occupied by the Count-Duke of Olivares. This closeness was due in part to the fact that they handled the royal signature, but under the Sumiller’s authority the secretaría also oversaw all audiences with the king, reviewed petitions and briefings sent to him by individual citizens, and acted as an intermediary during the royal pardoning process. In other words, it is possible to visualize Acedo as being positioned at multiple junctions: in reality, between the king and the court, and within his portrait, which Velázquez explicitly ties to the physical space of the Torre de la Parada, between the king’s more permanent residences and his other, more public lodges. Additionally, in this cultural milieu where the disabled figure in and of themselves is positioned between

---

84 Another one of Velázquez’s portraits of court dwarfs, The Buffoon Sebastián de Morra or, more recently, The Buffoon El Primo (see D’Ors, Johnson, and Johnson, “Velázquez in Fraga,” 620-625) is frequently grouped with these three, but the Prado’s provenance records and the extant inventories of the Torre indicate that this portrait was likely never displayed there (see also Alpers, The Decoration of the Torre, 129). All four portraits mentioned here were hung in the same room in the Palacio Nuevo Real in Madrid by 1772, but this is the earliest date we can confirm that they were all displayed together.

85 Gómez Gómez, “La secretaría de la Cámara,” 176-177.
the abled world and the divine Word—or simply the nebulous unknown—we can read
them as embodying a less earthly intermediary space. This, too, may be part of
Velázquez’s compositional scheme; Acedo’s hat is arranged such that his forehead, made
even more visible by his receding hairline, is brightly illuminated by an unseen source
that can easily be interpreted as divine light, the light of inspiration, or any number of
related metaphors. In other words, his mind lies directly between this beam and the blank
pages waiting to receive its exclusive knowledge. Furthermore, since we have established
that Acedo is shown in the process of not just copying, but *synthesizing* knowledge, he is
in no way a passive intermediary. Thus, shades of mockery notwithstanding, Velázquez is
not offering up a flimsy construction of the disabled body. He has instead crafted a
multivalent iteration of that construction that speaks to what I believe is a genuine desire
on his part to explore its unique symbolic weight.

It must be said, however, that Mena Marqués has argued that because their links
with actual entertainers and employees in the court are relatively tenuous, the four “jester
portraits” in the Torre de la Parada were not meant to be portraits at all.86 Rather, she
claims, they are allegorical pieces, born of Velázquez’s capacity for *invención*, that were
part of a decorative program intended to educate the young Prince Baltasar Carlos by
combining classical philosophical imagery with the familiar iconography of the court
dwarf and/or natural fool. Although it has frequently been suggested that the Torre de la
Parada had no coherent decorative scheme,87 Mena Marqués posits instead that we may at


87 See Alpers, *Decoration of the Torre*, and Bouza, “Modern Rogues and Ancient
Philosophers.”
least read Velázquez’s contributions as revolving around his paintings of Aesop and Menippus—in other words, around the idea of wisdom couched in fable and satire.

Ultimately, given the lack or loss of documents, the inconsistent inventories of the Torre, and an ongoing confusion over the identities of multiple gente de placer named in court records, it seems difficult to claim concretely that the Torre de la Parada portraits have absolutely no connection to real figures in Philip IV’s court—or vice versa.

Regardless of our suppositions regarding the identity of these subjects, however, the crux of Mena Marqués’ argument remains relevant to the Acedo portrait’s concern with the acquisition of knowledge, and would seem to align with our present understanding of Philip IV’s relationship to the Torre de la Parada as a space. For one, the older structure that the Torre was constructed around was built in the context of a king mentoring his son; supposedly, while accompanying Charles V on the hunt, a young Philip II was dissatisfied with the overnight accommodations in the Pardo, and proposed that a tower be constructed that would both be more comfortable and visible throughout the forest. Bouza has additionally noted that “during the years of Olivares’ government, [Philip and Baltasar Carlos] were surrounded by literate culture, with the idea that it would be a means of helping perfect them for the exercise of power,” and while he is hesitant to suggest that the decorative program of the Torre was explicitly constructed by Olivares to promote “Neostoic education,” he nevertheless emphasizes that figures like Aesop,

88 For a more recent discussion of disagreements over the identity of the dwarf “El Primo,” frequently identified as Don Diego de Acedo, see D’Ors, Johnson, and Johnson, “Velázquez in Fraga,” 620-625.

Menippus, and Democritus (who was also painted by Velázquez for the Torre) “had become highly familiar in the court of Philip IV around the same time that the paintings were produced.” A thought-provoking, if not explicitly educational, program based around the familiarity of these figures and their work would necessarily include artworks that deal with the question of understanding; a distinction must be made through this imagery between true and false, deep and shallow comprehension. Velázquez, certainly aware of associations between disability and unique forms of understanding given their presence in the Spanish intellectual milieu, thus took the opportunity to expand this program into an exploration of not just knowledge writ large, but as it pertained to the structure of the court, the intellectual life of Philip and his son, and the “uncomprehended experiences” that perhaps felt out of their reach. Velázquez’s interests here were by no means selfless, though, and as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, his use of this imagery was equally entrenched in a desire to understand his own practice and status as an artist.

---

90 Bouza, “Modern Rogues and Ancient Philosophers,” 224.
Chapter 4
Desenganar and the Seeing, Understanding Body

Well-documented in the analysis of early modern Spanish literature is Spanish creatives’ preoccupation with the concept of deception and illusion, which may be encapsulated in the opposing engaño and desenganar. But while the former was understood in largely the same way as its English translation, “deception,” the latter is not so easily transferable. Although desenganar is frequently translated as the rather negative “disillusionment,” and although there are certainly cases where the term was used to describe a sense of “disabuse or disenchantment with the world,” it was also commonly used to express a more complex sentiment and mental process that results from the stripping away of illusion. Covarrubias, for instance, defines it as “el trato llano y claro, con qué desenganamos, o la misma verdad que nos desenganó”—the clear, straightforward treatment (of others) with which we “disillusion,” or the same truth which “disillusioned” us. Moreover, the people who are capable of desenganando “[hablan] claro, porque no conciban una cosa por otra”; they speak clearly, because they do not confuse one thing for another. Desenganar at its simplest is thus explicitly framed as a service to others, emphasizing the benefit of truth rather than any kind of nostalgia for the lost falsehood. More fitting than “disillusionment,” then, may be a translation along the lines of “un-deception.”

---

91 Bouza, “Modern Rogues and Ancient Philosophers,” 205.
92 Covarrubias Horozco, Tesoro de la lengua.
93 Ibid.
When we examine its usage more closely, we also find, perhaps unsurprisingly, that *desengaño* was a concept of interest in the art world. Pacheco, for instance, mentions it in *Arte de la pintura*, claiming that when we approach a highly naturalistic painting and “notice not the softness of the flesh but rather the hardness of the panel on which it is painted…‘instead of deceiving us, we are undeceived’”—“en vez de engañar, desengaña.”

Juan José Lahuerta suggests that “this ‘undeceiving’ corresponds to the most intense perception of reality, precisely at the moment when reality cannot give us anything more than itself,” and that for Velázquez in particular, “‘undeceiving’ arises in exchange for something else, another reality,” and indeed “becomes the theme of this painting.” With his later work in particular, a close-up view of Velázquez’s loose brushwork is what leads to this moment of undeceiving, and the viewer’s desire to get so close to begin with speaks to the “strength of [the artist’s] ingenuity and artistry” that Pacheco says, still in reference to a truly exceptional painting’s ability to undo its own initial deception, “[does] something where it didn’t seem possible to do anything.” This is a two-step process, again aligned with our notion of “baroque disability” in its activity and inherent drama, that draws the viewer close in order to essentially force them to reevaluate their environment and their ability to see and understand it. To borrow a phrase from Snyder and Mitchell, we see here a distinct interest in mapping “alien terrain,”


95 Ibid.

96 “…donde la fuerza del ingenio y del arte haciendo algo donde no parecía posible hacer nada.” Francisco Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura* (Madrid: Imprenta de Manuel Galiano, 1866), 62.
pushing representation to its furthest limits so as to grasp something beyond it. In the case of our group of portraits, an audience’s visual encounter with the disabled body can thus potentially act as a catalyst for this process.

Velázquez therefore makes it clear that he is concerned with the mental state and intellectual life of these sitters—that is, with representing the vehicle of desengaño—in part by emphasizing each of their foreheads through a combination of exaggerated lighting and careful costuming. We have seen how this operates in his portrait of Diego de Acedo, but it is worth noting as well that there is support for the claim that this was a key part of Velázquez’s compositional scheme; radiography has indicated that he initially painted Acedo with a more level, pyramidally-shaped hat, but replaced it in the final composition with the ovoid, jauntily-tilted one that displays as much of the skull as possible. And at least in the case of the portraits of Acedo, Francisco Lezcano, and the so-called “Juan Calabazas,” Velázquez occupies the only other exposed part of their bodies—their hands—with activities related to their intellectual activity/inner mental world. We have seen in the previous chapter how this choice operates in the Acedo portrait, and we can see a similar effect in the case of Francisco Lezcano (fig. 9) if we are to read the object in Lezcano’s hands as a deck of cards, which may have represented frivolity, superstition, and/or deception. In the case of The Buffoon Calabacillas (fig. 10), however, Velázquez has again crafted a more complex iconography, part of which involves the curious positioning of the sitter’s hands.

98 Ibid. 130.
The piece depicts Calabazas sitting on the ground in the corner of a dark interior space rendered in shades of brown, cross-eyed and smiling, lifting his face as though to address someone standing above him out of frame. He folds his proper right hand into a fist in the palm of his proper left, which he rests on his proper right knee, drawn up toward his chest. His other leg is folded parallel to the floor in a traditional “criss-cross” position. Calabazas is, again, lit quite dramatically; a source from the upper right starkly illuminates the top half of his face while casting his eyes into shadow. He is dressed all in black, save for the gauzy white frills around his collar and at the ends of his sleeves, and a rumpled cloth of the same color is pinned under his folded left leg. Forming a loose triangle at his feet are the only other things in the room: to the left of the canvas, near his feet, is a spherical container made of reflective metal, and to the right is a tall, hollowed-out gourd—a calabaza, the source of his nickname and a symbol of his “empty-headedness.” Barely visible in front of the dark cloth that spills into the foreground is a small, cylindrical glass of red wine.

The marked value contrast, along with the dramatically unconventional pose, suggests an interest on Velázquez’s part in drawing the viewer’s gaze to Calabazas’ face and hands, which in turn suggests that this pose is imbued with deeper meaning. Additionally, these are the only uncovered parts of Calabazas’ body; the rest of it is swimming in dark, loose cloth, confusing the viewer’s understanding of his form. In other words, we may treat Calabazas’ face and hands as the only points of access to his “real” body, illuminated for the viewer’s benefit. Given the widespread interest at this time in the drawn or painted body’s ability to divulge inner character, as well as the awareness
Velázquez no doubt had of this physiognomic tradition, it follows that Velázquez intended for his sitter’s face and odd gesture to communicate some kind of insight into (Velázquez’s construction of) Calabazas’ inner life, as well as Calabazas’ own capacity for insight, given the “empty head” that supposedly left him open to divine messages. The caveat that there is a disconnect between Calabazas the man and Calabazas as imagined by Velázquez, however, is an important one. The disabled body and the meaning it contains, which we are here invited to access, have been shaped by an outside party, and speak less to Calabazas’ actual inner life than to Velázquez’s construction of the disabled body’s significance.

Mena Marqués has put forward the theory that Calabazas’ odd gesture can be linked to an Aesopian fable, in line with her argument that Velázquez’s jester portraits in the Torre de la Parada revolved around the ideas of fable and satire embodied by his accompanying paintings of Aesop and Menippus. For Calabazas to place his tightly-clenched fist in his open palm like this, she argues, references the rogue who confronted Apollo with a small bird caged in his hands and asked the god to guess whether it was dead or alive; if Apollo said it was dead, he would open his hands and let it fly away, and if Apollo said it was alive, he would crush it to death in his fist. The point of the fable is that, as Mena Marqués puts it, “only the wisdom of divinity was able to unravel and answer the enigma, discovering the rogue’s falsehood.”

If we are to understand Calabazas’ gesture, perhaps directed at the recipient of his smile, as evoking this Schrödinger’s bird for the viewer that approaches the portrait, we can see an additional

---

99 Mena Marqués, “Velázquez en la Torre,” 147.
desire on Velázquez’s part to explore the dual ideas of insight and desengaño. Calabazas, in gesticulating this question, calls to mind both a search for understanding and the potential for divine un-deception.

Following from the connection with Aesop and Apollo, Mena Marqués suggests that the round object in the bottom left of the canvas is not another gourd, as most authors suggest, but a “well-worn golden vessel or flask,” or redoma de oro, which she identifies in turn with the sacred vessel of Apollo—the supposed theft of which was, according to legend, the reason Aesop was sentenced to death.\(^\text{100}\) She argues that, given the recurring themes of knowledge and understanding in Velázquez’s paintings for the Torre de la Parada, it would make sense for Calabazas’ props to more clearly refer to those issues; as she says, “in front of the sacred vessel of pure philosophy [sits] the gourd,” hollowed out to hold wine and representative “of vulgar understanding, of experience.”\(^\text{101}\) This is useful for our purposes as well, given that it represents another connection being drawn between complex understanding and the disabled body. It has been noted repeatedly that the hollow calabaza in The Buffoon Calabacillas is meant to reflect the sitter’s own hollow head. If this object is indeed joined by the “sacred vessel of pure philosophy,” along with a more conventional glass of wine, we might then understand these accessories as a miniature still life reflecting a more complex process of comprehension, triggered by the beam of symbolic light illuminating Calabazas’ face and perpetually synthesizing within his clenched fist. Along these lines, Alicia R. Zuese suggests that still

\(^\text{100}\) Ibid. 144, 146.

\(^\text{101}\) Mena Marqués, “Velázquez en la Torre,” 146.
life as a genre, in its “posing of objects separated in nondescript space” and the way it “infuses [mundane objects] with deeper meaning,” can be linked to “spiritual contemplation…[or] a ‘mirada mística’ (‘mystical gaze’),” where meditating on said objects and their spatial relationships can yield a more profound understanding of the ideas they are meant to symbolically evoke.  

Additionally, as Bouza notes, drawing from López de Vega, the wise philosopher “[has] eyes impervious to lightning. They are never blinded, impeded, or detained by the brilliant light that shines forth…They perceive entirely that which is and ignore that which seems.”  

In other words, spiraling outward from the catalyst of Calabazas’ disabled body is a wide web of meaning revolving around a desire to represent the unrepresentable—the un-understandable.  

As this discussion of light suggests, the language of ostensibly secular understanding frequently intermingles with that of divine revelation, which may simply speak to the permeability of boundaries between the religious and the secular during this period. We may use this permeability to our advantage, however, in that we may draw upon analyses of visionary experience in order to understand the ways in which the imagination and “intellectual vision” of Velázquez’s disabled subjects were being represented. As Víctor I. Stoichita phrases it in his invaluable study, a vision is “unreal, imaginary and therefore personal, private and, consequently, uncontrollable…Only the representation of this representation guarantees, on the one hand, communication and, on

———

102 Alicia R. Zuese, Baroque Spain and the Writing of Visual and Material Culture (University of Wales Press, 2015), 120.

the other, control.” He notes that Carducho also places “imaginary visions” and
“intellectual manifestations” in the same realm of creative material seen and understood
by one’s “inner eye,” rather than their physical ones. This in itself aligns with the
Augustinian theology and the spiritual practices laid out by Ignacio de Loyola that, given
their broader influence, as well as Ignacio’s 1622 canonization, would certainly have
been circulating in the court of Philip IV, who himself was deeply religious. Augustine,
for example, argues that “knowledge is…accessible to the learner, not through words, but
through seeing the thing itself,” both with one’s physical eyes and with one’s inner eye,
the latter of which gains understanding “in the direct, immediate presence of the light…
[which is] God Himself.” Similarly, in his Spiritual Exercises (1522-1524) Ignacio
focuses heavily on the concept of imagination, encouraging readers who follow his
program of meditations and prayers to make use of their oculo imaginationis, the eye of
their imagination, which “directs them toward interior vision, knowledge, and
investigation…[in an] imaginative process…that is structured as a progressive opening”
of that imaginative eye. The idea of an internal imaginative journey that leads one

105 Ibid. 93.
106 See, for instance, this analysis of his extensive correspondence with the mystic María de Ágreda, famous for her bilocation between Spain and its American colonies: Marilyn H. Fedewa, María of Ágreda: Mystical Lady in Blue (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 125-166.
toward greater spirituality was no doubt part of the intellectual milieu of the court. I would therefore argue that Velázquez’s portraits of disabled subjects are unconventional semi-secular representations of a visionary experience, where rather than being witness to an awestruck “spectator-believer,” we are shown what Stoichita calls “the active participation of a ‘seeing body’” without gaining access to the visions of their inner, imaginative eye. To elaborate further, let us return now to Velázquez’s best-known representation of the seeing body: Las Meninas.

Personally commissioned by Philip IV in 1656 and designed to be hung in one of his private rooms in the Alcázar (the pieza del despacho), Las Meninas depicts a group of people congregated in a room, dim but for an open door in the background and a band of sunlight filtering in through an unseen window in the foreground. At the center of this group is the young Infanta Margarita María, looking out at the viewer and flanked on either side by two meninas: to the left, in profile, María Agustina kneels at the Infanta’s eye level as she offers a small jug of water, and to the right, Isabel de Velasco leans in the Infanta’s direction but fixes her gaze outward. Standing at the far right of the

109 Stoichita, Visionary Experience, 197.
110 Giles Knox, The Late Paintings of Velázquez: Theorizing Painterly Performance (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 119.
canvas are two court dwarfs, Maria Bárbola and Nicolas Pertusato, with a large dog laying at their feet. Maria also looks directly at the viewer, while Nicolas is occupied with nudging the dog’s hindquarters with his foot. Standing in shadow just behind Maria and Isabel de Velasco are the lady-in-waiting Marcela de Ulloa and an anonymous guardadamas (a bodyguard-esque male attendant), and hovering on the stairs just beyond the door at the back of the room, hat in hand, is José Nieto, the queen’s chamberlain. Hanging on the wall to the left of Nieto and informing the viewer what exactly this group is staring at so intently is a rectangular mirror that reflects in miniature Philip IV and Mariana of Austria—the royal sitters for Velázquez’s portrait-within-a-portrait. The living players in this scene occupy the bottom half of the canvas, delineated by the strong horizontal of the mirror hanging at the back of the room and the doorframe to which it is parallel. On the walls above them are a number of paintings, the contents of which are invisible due to perspective or covered save for the two large canvases hung just above the door and mirror, identified as copies after Rubens’ oil sketches for Minerva and Arachne and Contest of Pan and Apollo, both part of his mythological program in the Torre de la Parada. Emerging from out of frame and dominating the far left of the composition is an enormous canvas, facing away from the viewer, which Velázquez has painted himself contemplating as he hovers just behind the action in the foreground, palette in one hand and brush at the ready in the other.

At the heart of *Las Meninas* (fig. 11) is a call for the viewer to try to understand something that exists beyond the painting—something invisible and unrepresented save for the mirror above the Infanta's head. Observing this piece is an imaginative exercise, where the viewer must themselves become a “seeing body” that can relate to this space, these gazes, and their implications while the painting, itself full of seeing bodies, simultaneously relates itself to the viewer. As Foucault (among others) has suggested, there is a sense of reciprocity inherent to the work; it is “a mere confrontation…direct looks superimposing themselves upon one another as they cross.” Another important factor here, however, is the fact of who is being represented within the frame, and thus who is being represented as simultaneously taking part in and stimulating this imaginative process. We have, of course, Velázquez himself, along with the Infanta, various courtiers, and the king and queen reflected in the background. Most importantly, though, at the far right of the frame we also have the two court dwarfs, Maria and Nicolas. It is in their inclusion in a work like this one that we can truly understand the unique opportunity that the disabled body afforded to artists interested in plumbing the depths of concepts like imagination and understanding.

In line with the way Velázquez uses light in his other portraits of disabled subjects, the two dwarfs are positioned nearest to the window that provides the light with which we can see and understand the scene—as well as, crucially, with which Velázquez is painting. They are simultaneously marginal, as in double portraits like *Philip and Soplillo*, and receiving most directly the bright beam of sunlight, the “luce eterna,” that

---

114 Foucault, “Las Meninas,” 5.
offers everyone involved in this scene, real and represented alike, access to further insight, whether it be divine, creative, or both. As Leo Steinberg has put it, Velázquez shows here “an uncanny sensitivity to nuance of illumination.” In that vein we may note, of course, the remarkable way Velázquez has painted light glancing off the edges of the mirror that reflects Philip IV and his wife, and his ability to convey the subjects of the two paintings that hang above solely through shadowy smears of color, but here we should pay special attention to his careful rendering of how the sunlight from the window diffuses across each figure in the foreground.

One of the most significant features of the “baroque disability” examined here is its positioning of the disabled figure as an intermediary capable of receiving and relaying knowledge that abled people cannot access. Velázquez has in turn made it clear that for him, these disabled intermediaries are not the equivalent of radio receivers; rather, they are represented as distilling, synthesizing, and controlling the distribution of this knowledge. In his single portraits, this was largely conveyed through the use of accessories and pose, but in Las Meninas, Velázquez has done so as part of the work’s strange perspectival scheme. He has, in essence, drawn a line from the unseen window to his own head as a means of conveying the fact of his distance from that source of unrepresentable understanding. Though he ensures through his self-portrait, as many have argued, that his artistry is understood as a complex intellectual pursuit, the light of inspiration nevertheless hits his face indirectly, having already been filtered by the stoic


116 Steinberg, “Velázquez’ Las Meninas,” 52.
figure of María Bárbara. But as the subjects of the paintings behind him indicate, to misuse one’s artistry following such inspiration is a risky endeavor. Both Minerva and Arachne and The Contest of Pan and Apollo deal with the potentially lethal consequences of challenging divine artistry. As with Mena Marqués’ proposition that there is a connection between The Buffoon Calabacillas and another story of Apollo’s superior skill/knowledge, then, we can potentially understand these mythological references as indicating not only Velázquez’s opinions on the nobility of his work, but his sense that there are certain forms of understanding and imagination that he cannot necessarily grasp. He has constructed throughout his oeuvre a vision of the disabled subject as being privy to a unique light and having a unique control of their imaginative eye as a result of their mis-fit in the Spanish social, physical, and intellectual environment.

Steinberg has argued that Las Meninas broadly “conducts itself the way a vital presence behaves,” creating “an encounter” where the viewer “[partakes] of an infinity that is not spatial, but psychological—an infinity not cast in the outer world, but in the mind that knows and knows itself known.”117 In its call for imagination and insistence upon fixing so many layers of gazes on the viewer, he says, the painting acts as a “mirror of consciousness,” conveying a sense of “I see you seeing me—I in you see myself seen—[I] see you seeing yourself being seen.”118 These lines of sight bounce off of each other, creating endlessly recursive seeing bodies; at the same time, Velázquez seeks to convey the tenuous thread of understanding that stretches towards his represented body,

117 Steinberg, “Velázquez’ Las Meninas,” 54.
118 Ibid.
such that he (the artist) understands himself (the self-portrait) understanding, as well as
the king and queen’s understanding of their own presence permeating the canvas as a
whole. We thus see once again the chain reaction set off by the disabled body—returned
to the physical margins of the composition, but still facilitating the viewer’s attempts to
grasp what lies just beyond them and become un-deceived.
Conclusion

Let us return again to Teresa de Cartagena and her *Arboleda de los enfermos*. She describes in detail how the social (and subsequent emotional) repercussions of her deafness left her completely isolated from her fellow nuns; as Encarnación Juárez-Almendros puts it, “though the convent separates [Cartagena] spatially from society, her impairment places her in a more difficult situation of abjection and human rejection,” in that exile, that *tenebroso destierro* “where she feels ‘more in a sepulcher than a dwelling’ and severed from human pleasures.”119 At the same time, however, Cartagena felt that her corporeal and social suffering was “an instrument of experience that [made] her wiser and [lead] her to a realm unexplored by healthy and able people.”120 Her disability, which cuts her off from earthly auditory experiences, thus grants her “a new capacity to hear spiritual voices.”121 In short, she argues that it is their externally-imposed isolation from normative society and interpersonal relationships that offers the disabled subject greater access to an imaginative space that promises a deeper understanding of the world around them (as well as a deeper spiritual understanding). Unique insight is predicated here on being at a remove from normal thought and perspective, and one’s access to this insight is indicated by their being visibly disabled—that is, the “mortification” which itself has led to their isolation.


120 Ibid. 137.

121 Ibid.
This ought to remind us of an important fact: despite the complex layers of meaning the disabled body is used to produce, that body is not analogous to the one that exists in reality. We frequently speak of “social constructs” in the context of the present day; disability in the 17th century was not a social construct in that modern sense, but it was nevertheless *socially constructed*. To borrow Garland-Thomson’s phrasing, these so-called defective bodies “[emerged] and [gained] definition only through their unstable disjunctive encounter with an environment”\(^{122}\)—an environment that consisted not only of monarchical hierarchy and courtly structure, but of a fascination with processes of thought and understanding that disabled figures frequently interrupted. The disabled body that is represented in the works analyzed here is an amalgamation of the beliefs, fascinations, and fears that surrounded the baroque understanding of markedly divergent bodies and minds.

I emphasize this not to detract from its representational power, but to advocate for a study of art that takes that representational power seriously. We do not need to limit ourselves to modern art to analyze the ways in which disability functions as an essential value and a means of understanding artistic practice itself, nor should we stop examining the ways in which it continues to determine new artistic directions in the present day. In turn, an analysis of the visually constructed disabled body in Golden Age Spain stands to strengthen emerging research on how real disabled populations in this period were being treated and understood. Much can be gleaned about a society’s attitudes toward a given group of people and its conception of their state of being from the ways they represent

\(^{122}\) Garland-Thomson, “Misfits,” 595.
that group artistically, which must necessarily be considered in disability studies’ turn
toward pre-industrial understandings of disability—and how they might better our
understanding of how disability culturally operates in the present day. In short, if we are
to grasp these constructive processes across time periods and cultural contexts, we cannot
let the baroque disability that emerged during Spain’s Golden Age of artistic production
remain in its shadowy exile.
Figure List

Figure 1. Jusepe de Ribera, *Large Grotesque Head*, c. 1622.
Figure 2. Alonso Sánchez Coello, *The Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia and Magdalena Ruiz*, c. 1585-1588.
Figure 3. Rodrigo de Villandrando, *Prince Philip and the Dwarf*, Miguel Soplillo, c. 1620.
Figure 4. Juan Pantoja de la Cruz, *The Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia*, 1579.
Figure 5. Diego Velázquez, Don Diego del Corral y Arellano, c. 1632.
Figure 6. Diego Velázquez, *Prince Baltasar Carlos with a Dwarf*, 1631.
Figure 7. Diego Velázquez, *The Buffoon Don Diego de Acedo*, c. 1645.
Figure 8. Bartolomé Murillo, *Portrait of Don Justino de Neve*, 1665.
Figure 9. Diego Velázquez, *Francisco Lezcano, el Niño de Vallecas*, c. 1645.
Figure 10. Diego Velázquez, *The Buffoon Calabacillas*, c. 1636-1637.
Figure 11. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656.
Works Cited


———. “Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of *Las Meninas*.” *Representations* no. 1 (1983): 30-42.


Moreno Villa, José. *Locos, enanos, negros y niños palaciegos: gente de placer que tuvieron los Austrias en la corte Española desde 1563 a 1700.* La Casa de España en México, 1939.


