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Balancing Acts:

Domestic Careers and Enforced Reproduction of Female Court Dwarfs in Early Modern Europe

By

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Abstract

There is a growing call for the inclusion of intersectionality within disability studies and history. Included in this is the history of court dwarfs in Early Modern Europe, specifically the life experiences of female court dwarfs. Previous scholarship has too often generalized the lives of court dwarfs and highlighted experiences unique to male court dwarfs. These experiences reveal early gender expectations on disabled women not experienced by their male counterparts. This thesis exposes in detail how the lives of three women were impacted based on two key points: their accepted careers within domesticity and their experiences through enforced reproduction. Finally, this thesis divulges in the use of gendered language and imagery to reinforce such expectations and ideas. All three women balanced life as entertainers within the private and public spheres. They dealt with dehumanization while also gaining autonomy and privileges not granted to women of lower status, suggesting a complex period of servitude with some freedom. This thesis highlights the importance of intersectionality in research and the sources themselves. Included sources range from portraits and narrative scenes to letters and memoirs.

I. Disability and Court Dwarfs in Early Modern Europe

The field of disability studies has moved toward examining more time periods, regions, and categories of people thanks to growing calls for intersectional studies. Gendered experiences of female court dwarfs in Early Modern Europe offer an ideal topic for such a study. Court dwarfs are identified as individuals with a medical condition resulting in short stature, who were employed by aristocrats within their homes and royal court systems. These individuals appeared in records as early as Ancient Egypt, though recent scholarship examines court dwarfs housed by Early Modern European nobility, primarily kings and queens. The practice of acquiring and collecting court dwarfs increased in the sixteenth century, declining in the eighteenth.

The experiences of female court dwarfs, in contrast with their male counterparts, revealed much about gender expectations within Early Modern Europe. Three court dwarfs provided particularly rich examples: Mari Bárbola[1], Anastasia Boruwłaski, and a two-year-old child from the court of Isabella d'Este. This thesis exposes in detail how gender and disability resulted in unique life practices for female court dwarfs. The experiences of all three listed individuals revealed that female court dwarfs held important positions as companions and within the domestic and private sector, but they did not find further career opportunities like male court dwarfs. Their experiences were substantially dominated by enforced reproductive health practices. Finally, literature and art reinforced gender differences between these men and women using gendered language and visuals. All three aspects reinforce the argument that the life experiences of female court dwarfs were influenced by gendered restrictions from their

[1] Current scholarship includes alternate spelling and versions of Mari Bárbola's name, including Mari Barbóla and Mariabárbola. The spelling chosen for this thesis is in line with that found on the Museo del Prado database. The Museo del Prado currently houses and displays Diego Velázquez's most famous painting, *Las Meninas*.

aristocratic environment, in addition to contemporary perspectives on disability. While often born of lower status, these women were subjected to the ideals of their wealthy counterparts and patrons.

Previous scholarship has treated the position of court dwarfs as a single role, overlooking the significance of integrating intersectionality into the narrative. This narrow perspective ignored the complexity of life experiences revealed when mixing disability discourse with feminist and race discourse. Race discourse contributed to research since period perceptions of dwarfs as a distinct racial group especially affected women whose social roles were already so entangled with reproduction. Inclusion of intersectionality to examine this disabled community revealed substantial variety in roles, incomes, skill sets, levels of power and autonomy, and relationship with patrons not highlighted prior.

The title "court dwarf" refers to individuals who received a level of privilege and benefits in exchange for their skills and the use of their perceived abnormal physical appearances. Often born of low status, such individuals had easy access to elite patronage not usually open to children of poor families. Patrons provided varying degrees of support including clothing, meals, education, opportunities of travel, lodging, and salaries in exchange for services including performances, entertaining royal audiences, and serving as companions for nobles or their children. How court dwarfs found themselves employed by patrons varied. Sometimes poor families presented such children to aristocrats, offering guardianship of the child in return for financial compensation. In other cases, word of children born with dwarfism reached the elite, causing nobility to visit families and suggest such deals.[2] Nobles also gifted already acquired

[2] Józef Boruwłaski's memoir recounts one of these instances, that of his own. A countess would use the excuse of his father's death and his family's resulting poverty as reasoning for her taking over as Boruwłaski's guardian. His mother would ultimately agree to the transfer of guardianship. But this living situation would not last long. Another countess named Countess Humieska would visit during the first

court dwarfs to each other for diplomatic purposes. Several court dwarfs were born at court to older court dwarfs. These men and women were encouraged by their patrons to reproduce with one another. Such a practice exposed many tensions within period concepts of gender, medicine, and disability.

With *Wunderkammers*[3] gaining popularity amongst sixteenth-century elites, acquiring people with unusual physical characteristics became commonplace and a status symbol. European aristocrats added human curiosities like court dwarfs to their personal collections. Court dwarfs held many roles aside from primary consideration as entertainers, in part due to their disability. Their physical differences situated them outside of societal norms and the strict etiquette of court culture. Court dwarfs pushed boundaries of decorum as entertainers, making jokes in manners taboo for aristocrats, speaking out of turn with high-ranking royals, or laughing in place of their patrons during official functions. It was also believed that dwarfs warded off evil and witchcraft because they were natural wonders, serving as protection for their patrons and as oracles providing prophecies.[4] Finally, court dwarfs could hold several positions of trust: government officials, companions, servants, pages, etc. Courtly roles resulted in varied levels of personal wealth. Some maintained substantial and stable wealth, while others struggled with

patron's early pregnancy and suggest Boruwłaski move in with her to avoid any potential harm on the fetus. Both instances are examples of Early Modern aristocrats actively searching for and acquiring court dwarfs on their own volition.

[3] German for *cabinets of curiosities*; the term literally translates to rooms in the homes of aristocrats dedicated to extraordinary items. Items ranged from artifacts collected during global travels, varying species of animals hunted for sport, scientific curiosities, and more. The concept of *Wunderkrammer* itself is the continued collection by nobility of items evoking awe and curiosity from others. Court dwarfs were not physically placed in rooms like these cabinets, but they were acquired based on this practice/concept.

[4] Luisa Rubini Messerli, "The Death of the Royal Dwarf: Mari-Barbóla in Velázquez's Las Meninas," in *Erzählkultur: Beiträge zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Erzählforschung*, ed. Rolf Welhelm Brednich (Berlin: Walter e Gruyter GmbG & Co, 2009), 333.

intermittent poverty, especially after a fallout with patrons. Lasting employment required maintaining the patron's good favor.

Patronizing court dwarfs was also a show of wealth. Patrons provided housing, food, and other amenities. They also provided an allowance or yearly salary to several of their favored court dwarfs. In short, employing court dwarfs was something only the very affluent and elite could partake in. The spectacle of the court dwarf's body and the income required to care for them made them symbols of power and status, along with tools of political competition. For example, the Habsburg court acquired "one dwarf or fool per year"[5] at its climax. This reflected not only the growing popularity of the practice, but the royal family's increasing display of wealth. It also reflected the growing competition between royalty in outdoing each other's courts.

The dissemination of court dwarf imagery in art and literature was crucial in advancing this competitive display of wealth for noble families and increasing patrons' fame. Court dwarfs rarely commissioned their own images, but patrons did. As art historian Touba Ghadessi has argued, commissioning a portrait lets a patron "assert his or her social standing twice: first, by visualizing his or her possession and, second, by collecting, owning, and displaying a symbol of his or her social status."[6] Court dwarfs were thus entangled in the practice of both collecting and displaying.

Discourse on disability – specifically court dwarfs – in Early Modern Europe is complex because it requires individuals with a modern perspective on disability to understand several contradictory points. Primarily, this community dealt with voluntary servitude and perceived

[5] Ibid., 331.
[6] Touba Ghadessi, "Lords and Monsters: Visible Emblems of Rule," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16, no. 1/2 (September 2013): 504.

inferiority in exchange for financial support and wealthy lifestyles. Patrons provided amenities and luxuries few commoners could access, including tailored-made clothing, furnished apartments, tutors, travel, and secure high-paying positions. Court dwarfs responded through petty performances and subjected to treatment as lesser beings. As Ghadessi points out, court dwarfs "benefited from the court's educational, intellectual, and social advantages, but they were required to retain their marginal and wondrous qualities by participating in grotesque entertainments."[7] These men and women were dehumanized and perceived as human pets by their patrons and society in return for privileges.

II. Literature Review

Geographer Yi Fu Tuan contributed to earlier disability scholarships with his argument on the relationship between aristocracy and court dwarfs.[8] Tuan argued that despite being in physically close spaces, aristocrats distanced themselves emotionally from court dwarfs to maintain a novel sense of amusement. Tuan suggested that closer attachment would result in the recognition of cruelty in deformity. Attachment distanced too far away would lose any sympathy granted to court dwarfs. As a result, court dwarfs served more as entertainment and consumption than as individuals treated with familial-like affection and as moral beings. Adding to Tuan's argument, proximity is central to understanding how female court dwarfs held strictly domestic careers and how their sexual health was critically managed by patrons. These practices simultaneously reinforced and led to restricting financial dependence for these women. Both practices also show how aristocrats attached closer to female court dwarfs during key moments

[7] Ghadessi, "Lords and Monsters," 491.
[8] Yi Fu Tuan, "Slaves, Dwarfs, Fools," in *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1984), 132-161.

of these women's lives, while also distancing to avoid guilt over their participation in the oppression of a disabled group.

More recent scholarship regarding court dwarfs has resulted in a well-versed and interdisciplinary field. Scholars ranged from various specializations: art history, medicine, history, and more. Additionally, scholarships have used different primary sources in their arguments. Continuing scholarship has only begun to scratch the surface of what is disability studies and disability history.

Art historians have reviewed numerous works depicting court dwarfs from artists like Diego Velázquez, and Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo. These paintings included standalone portraits, portraits of dwarfs accompanying their patrons, and scenes inspired by mythology. Ghadessi provided critical research on the inventorying of people with disabilities, showing a history of court dwarfs serving as both objects and paint subjects.[9] Court dwarfs tackled a society that classified lower-class living beings into objects owned by royals. Ghadessi's research began to broach the complexity of disability within the Early Modern context. She discussed the role of court dwarfs as courtly tropes and visual culture markers, integral within the self-fashioning process for nobility like the Medicis.[10] Though Ghadessi focused substantial part of her research on the experiences of male court dwarfs, specifically Morgante.[11]

[9] Touba Ghadessi, "Inventoried Monsters: Dwarves and Hirsutes at Court," *Journal of the History of Collections* 23, no. 2 (November 2011): 267–281.
[10] Ghadessi, "Lords and Monsters: Visible Emblems of Rule," 491-523.
[11] Morgante was a favored male court dwarf to Cosimo I de' Medici in 16th century Florence and was a central figure in several paintings and sculptures.

Several scholars have been formative voices in the conversation between disability, history, and feminine studies, including Janet Ravenscroft[12] and Pamela Allen Brown.[13] Ravenscroft highlighted the presence of court dwarfs within the Habsburg queens' households. Brown discussed the impact both queens and court dwarfs had on each other's experiences within Early Modern courts. Both scholars' arguments relied heavily on the relationship between female patrons and their court dwarfs, with most attention leaning toward the patrons. Highlighted throughout the texts are the actions of wealthy patrons and their impact on court culture. By comparison, there was minimal discussion about the central role female court dwarfs held within this system. When compared to their contemporaries, female court dwarfs interestingly maintained stable and financially promising careers as domestics, were memorialized in literature and art, and prominently involved in fatal practices. Yet, previous scholars failed to highlight these points nor how involved patrons of court dwarfs were in such oppressive practices. In response, this thesis discusses each point in detail and reinforces the significance of intersectionality when discussing Early Modern disability history.

Scholars within the hard sciences have also broached the topic of European court dwarfs, specifically within the medical sciences. Medical texts have recently taken a unique approach of using court portraits to identify and study dwarfism as a medical condition within the Early Modern context. Gary E. and Linda K. Friedlaender argued that paintings like Velázquez's *Las Meninas* provided evidence for the health and care of dwarfs within the Habsburg court, visual interpretations of physical and mental disabilities, and perceived values placed on individuals

[12] Janet Ravenscroft, "Dwarfs - and a Loca - as Ladies' Maids at the Spanish Habsburg Courts," in *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-Waiting Across Early Modern Europe*, ed. Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben (Boston: Brill, 2014), 147-177.
[13] Pamela Allen Brown, "The Mirror and the Cage: Queens and Dwarfs at the Early Modern Court," in *Historical Affects and the Early Modern Theater*, ed. Ronha Arab, Michelle M. Dowd, and Adam Zucker (New York: Routledge, 2015), 137-147.

with disability.[14] *Court Dwarfs: An Overview of European Paintings from Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century* categorized the different types of dwarfisms for individuals employed within several European courts, with a majority identified as achondroplasia or pituitary.[15] Terms like proportionate were used to describe the displayed bodies of court dwarfs. These texts featured in medical journals hint at how primary sources included throughout this thesis can assist art history, historical research, modern-day medicine, and much more.

Previous scholarship faltered because of consistent oversight by historians due to the erroneous belief that disability was "too marginal to generate significant primary sources." [16] Evidently, recent scholarship discussed throughout this paper have proven otherwise. Scholars from various fields have provided an extensive catalogue showing the prevalence of disability through space and time. This thesis continues to add into the working catalogue. A plethora of primary sources contributed to my research, all spanning across various mediums, regions, courts, and authors. This variation proved beneficial to integrating intersectionality, as it provided a wide breadth of voices from various backgrounds to address one focal point: the presence of female court dwarfs. This variation of primary sources also allowed consideration of disability as a social model. The experience of dwarfs within courtly culture resulted from the responses of society around them. Aristocrats and outsiders led concepts of what was disability and what wasn't. Their opinions established norms and ideals; and so, this determined who

[14] Gary E. Friedlaender and Linda K. Friedlaender, "Art in Science: Velázquez and Dwarfism - The Art of Observation," *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research* 478, no. 1 (January 2020): 31-33.
[15] Federica Guaraldi, Nunzia Prencipe, Davide Gori, Stellina di Giacomo, Ezio Ghigo, and Silvia Grottoli, "Court Dwarfs: An Overview of European Paintings from Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century," *Endocrine* 42, no. 1 (December 2012): 736-738.
[16] Anne Borsay, "History and Disability Studies: Evolving Perspectives," in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* 1st edition, ed. Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2012): 324.

skewed outside of those norms. It was imperative to then use primary sources from both court dwarfs and outsiders, including patrons, artists, and writers.

Finally, this thesis emphasized intersectionality, autonomy, and understanding of how common the keeping of court dwarfs was in Early Modern Europe. It continued to add to the growing calls of approaching historically underrepresented communities and their experiences with the understanding that several identities impacted people in varying degrees. The experiences of a female court dwarf were unique to their male counterparts because of their placement in a rigid environment that considered both their gender and disability. Failure to acknowledge these differences within scholarship leads to a failure to understand the highs and lows these women dealt with in life, often with little acknowledgement from their contemporaries already. Autonomy acknowledges some of these women as having maintained often overlooked careers within the domestic realm. This thesis also recognizes places where autonomy is revoked, such as in sexual health. It acknowledges the long history of reproductive violence against disabled women that continues today. Finally, gender and disability suggest an understanding that the practice of keeping court dwarfs was not based on a timely and ethno-regional identity but on a socio-economic and courtly identity. As a result, the experiences of female court dwarfs surpassed space and time, allowing historians like myself to view evidence from varying countries and between a span of two-hundred years.

III. Terminology

Disability as a term is modern in conception and use, particularly within medical texts. In part, large-scale disability movements were only recently credited during the mid- to late-twentieth century. While the defining terminology for disability is new, considerations of bodily

differences and mental impairments to categorize individuals has existed throughout time. This thesis used such modern terminology when discussing a pre- "disability" Early Modern society, with consideration that both modern and early modern maintained somewhat consistent ideas of physical impairments and dwarfism.

Disability relies on the social model, or how society and its perceptions construct ideas of what is and isn't disability and the disabled body. As with other social constructs like race, it changes over time, expanding and excluding varying perspectives. Defining disability depends on an individual's regional and cultural environment, with various societal responses occurring throughout time.[17] Hence the need to emphasize intersectionality within the discussion of history and disability studies. Female court dwarfs were impacted in varying degrees because they were labeled as both disabled and women within a wealthy social network. Their gender, class, racial identity, and sexual identity impacted their life experiences. Such experiences were unique compared to able-bodied communities and others within the disabled community, like their male counterparts. Furthermore, outside forces like aristocrats played a sizable part in the development and experiences of female court dwarfs.

Interest in racializing groups based on various characteristics like physical markers and customs grew during the Early Modern period. Renaissance artists led this interest through frontal pieces, costume and emblem books, cartography, paintings, and sculptures. Similar to disability, the modern concept of race had yet to breakthrough. Current ideas on defining race group individuals based on characteristics like skin tone and shared phenotypic traits. By

[17] Colin Barnes, "Understanding the Social Model of Disability: Past, Present, and Future," in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* 1st edition, ed. Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2012): 12.

comparison, Early Modern concepts of race were based on alternative physical differences, including the concept of monstruous races.

Popular texts, like John Bulwer's *Anthropometamorphosis: man transform'd*, defined monstrous races as individuals both mythological and mortal, with traits unlike Christian European men and women.[18] An individual was part of this monstrous race based on different skin colors, ethnic attire, scarring and tattoos, voluntary body modifications, placement of limbs, and much more. One group featured within Bulwer's ethnology and the general discussion of monstruous races were dwarfs.[19] Bulwer described several distinct characteristics for dwarf races, including several explanations on the causes of dwarfism. These explanations included the practice of placing young children in small cages during critical points of development to stunt growth, in addition to our modern understanding of dwarfism at birth or a theological explanation dependent on God's will. [20] The racializing of individuals like dwarfs during this period resulted in a morbid curiosity over reproduction. This curiosity and the added novelty of acquiring a court dwarf inspired several aristocrats to partake in enforced reproduction.

This thesis addresses the sexual exploitation of female court dwarfs by their aristocratic patrons to produce more of said monstruous races. Scholars have previously referred to this practice as the act of breeding dwarfs.[21] The term breeding outside of this discourse was often used in discussion of animals and failed to reinforce that such actions on court dwarfs were not completely voluntary. The power structure within this patronage system leaned into uneven power dynamics between the financially dependent court dwarf and their wealthy patrons.

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[18] John Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis: man transform'd* (London: Printed by W. Hunt, 1653).
[19] Bulwer's publication used contemporary spelling for dwarfism, specifically *dwarfes*. I have chosen to use the modern spelling of dwarfs throughout my thesis.
[20] Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis,* 500.
[21] Brown, "The Mirror and the Cage," 140.

Additionally, some court dwarfs were credited as having decreased mental capabilities that added to their exploitation. Death was a potentially fatal outcome for many these women. Despite this, a mother's survival did not guarantee the opportunity of keeping their child, with patrons gifting children born with dwarfism to their wealthy peers. My thesis took these factors into consideration and used the term enforced reproduction practices in place of breeding. Enforced reproduction acknowledged the lack of consideration these women faced by society and emphasized the chief goal for the practice: reproducing more court dwarfs. The term also recognized that this practice was widespread and common within aristocrat circles, nowhere unique to specific courts or people.

The term dwarf was used in several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts, such as Bulwer and Józef Boruwłaski. Comparisons were often drawn between dwarfs and giants, establishing an opposing relationship between both groups and their physical differences. Alternatively, the use of the term pygmies was presented in Bulwer's ethnology.[22] Pygmies was commonly used when describing animals, such as various types of birds. This emphasized the concept of dwarfism aligning with the natural world as much with the mortal world. In short, several terms were popularized for describing this community: monstrosities, dwarfs, and pygmies. To assure consistency, dwarfism and dwarfs were used throughout this thesis.

Finally, primary sources identified individuals without dwarfism but otherwise disabled as fools, jesters, and clowns. Like court dwarfs, these individuals were sources of entertainment for royalty based on their physical and mental capabilities. But the practice of employing court fools would eventually stop by the eighteenth-century. Despite this, eighteenth-century British legal documents provided examples of individuals dissolving their marriages based on their

[22] Ibid., 502-503.

mental capacity, using the terms "natural fool" and "void of common sense" as reasons.[23] This continued use of fool in legal documents suggested that it was now a term closely aligned with disability and not employment, distinct from dwarfism. This thesis continued this understanding, identifying court fools and court dwarfs as separate entities with separate experiences.

IV. Careers and Companionship

Contrary to modern thought, many Early Modern women held professions inside and outside of the household.[24] Western society encouraged the understanding that careers for women were required to be outside of the domestic setting, specifically from their own homes. Additionally, marriage status and autonomy away from their male guardians were meant to define independence. The lack of representation of employed women within sources has furthered this modern ideology. I encourage the separation from this modern concept to one more fitting with Early Modern women. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women were career women despite their lack of presence within government and military roles. Instead, they were active in domesticity or roles beginning in the household that flowed into the public sphere. Their domestic setting did not take away from the fact that many of these women earned their own incomes, housing, and some form of independence. Involvement with the economic market ranged for women, especially of higher statuses. Female employment included midwifery, maidservants, the sale and production of textiles, and more.[25]

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[23] Borsay, "History and Disability Studies," 325.
[24] Ruth Goodman, "Women's Work," in *How To Be A Tudor: A Dawn to Dusk Guide to Tudor Life*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 182.
[25] Several scholarships focus on vocation and work for women in Early Modern Europe. For more information on work in Early Modern England: Jacqueline Eales, "Work," in *Women in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Bristol: UCL Press, 1998), 70-81. For more information on the work of wealthy women in Early Modern Florence: Anne Machette, "Women, Objects, and Exchange in Early Modern Florence," in *Early Modern Women* 3 (Fall 2008): 245-251.

Some of these career women were female court dwarfs. They were women who exchanged their services for benefits like housing, education, and a steady flow of income. Many indulged in the lifestyle of the aristocrats they accompanied, including tailored wardrobes, worldly travels, and use of servants. These women were used heavily as private and public entertainment compared to their same-sex noble counterparts. In addition, they were commonly employed in domestic roles when compared to their male dwarf counterparts. Both factors created a unique and complex understanding of how female court dwarfs were involved in both a public and private concept of careers. Despite their superficial identity as public entertainers, female court dwarfs were not exclusively public entities like their male counterparts. These women were almost always placed in the private role expected of upper-class Early Modern women, evident from several court paintings and literature.

Ideas surrounding autonomy in discussion with court dwarfs could result in confusion. This confusion arises when attempting to understand how people who can be gifted between families and patrons can also have their own independence. To address this, one must view from the perspective of court dwarfs as reflections of their courtly environment. Previous scholarship has already reflected on the strict lifestyle of nobles, particularly of noblewomen. Placement within a patriarchal society requires strict rules and limitations for queens, princesses, and their high-ranking ladies-in-waiting. Additionally, such a gendered society permits specific roles and tasks for women. For example, wives of aristocrats took charge in maintaining the household and education of children. Female patrons headed the employment of servants, artists, and entertainment. While these examples point to women holding leadership roles, they were also subjected to enforced behavior. Arranged marriages of princesses to domestic and foreign leaders granted political alliances for their families. Women – specifically married women – lead

household affairs because they were often not allowed to participate in other forms of labor in place of their husbands. With all of this in consideration, the idea of court dwarfs being steadily employed while also involuntarily traded by their patrons is contradictory but familiar for the historical period and Early Modern women.

Figure 1, Velázquez, Diego, *Las Meninas*, oil on canvas, 1656, Museo del Prado, https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f.

Spanish court painter Diego Velázquez completed his monumental *Las Meninas* in 1656 within the Cuarto del Príncipe. One of his largest paintings, it featured several key figures within Habsburg court.[26] The painting's central figure was identified as Infanta Margaret Theresa of Spain, who maintains direct attention with the painting's audience. Attending to the young infanta were her two *meninas*[27]: María Agustina Sarmiento and Isabel de Velasco. Her *guardamujer de las damas de la reina*[28] Doña Marcela de Ulloa appears to be speaking with an unidentified *guardadamas*[29], both standing behind one of the maids of honor. The *aposentador*[30] José Nieto stands at attention by

[26] Portus, Javier, Diego Velázquez 'Las Meninas'. En: Velázquez y la familia de Felipe IV, [1650-1680], Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2013, p.126-129 n.16. Citation and names of everyone listed was provided by the Museo del Prado. Spelling differs across scholarship, but figures remained consistent.
[27] *Meninas* translates from Spanish to maids of honor.
[28] *Guardamujer de las damas de la reina* roughly translates from Spanish to a lady-in-waiting.
[29] *Guardadamas* translates from Spanish to attendant, or guard to the infanta in this instance.
[30] *Aposentador* translates from Spanish to chamberlain.

the room's open door. A small mirror in the background provided the reflection of the infanta's parents, King Philip IV and Queen Mariana of Austria. Velázquez included himself in the middle of the painting, standing in front of a large white canvas. Most importantly, two court dwarfs stand to the right of the painting's foreground. A young Nicolasito Pertusato mischievously pokes at a sleeping mastiff on the floor. The primary focus for this thesis was Mari Bárbola, who gazes back at the audience while standing amongst the Spanish royal entourage.

Figure 2, Martínez del Mazo, Juan Bautista, *Margaret Theresa of Spain*, oil on canvas, 1665-1666, Museo del Prado, https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/margaret-theresa-of-spain/5ea1a2a6-8f98-4b09-a3d8-7a2cd04529bf.

Despite often credited as part of Philip IV's court, Mari Bárbola belonged to Queen Mariana's household and was the companion to both infanta and queen. Mari Bárbola was born in Germany and found herself employed by the royal family later in life. Additionally, Mari Bárbola image in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* established her as someone with achondroplastic dwarfism. Life in court for the female figure included food provisions, yearly wages, two recorded servants, dresses, and snow for each summer day.[31] Aside from the snow, most of these services and provisions remained consistent with another of Queen Mariana's female dwarfs. This established a standard form of care for female court dwarfs employed by the Hapsburgs. The gifting of daily snow hinted at Mari Bárbola's good relations with her patrons, possibly a result of her good services.

[31] Messerli, "The Death of the Royal Dwarf," 331-333.

The supply and usage of snow required new technology and allowed for food and drinks to maintain their coolness during the Iberian Peninsula's extreme summer heat.

Figure 3, Martínez del Mazo, Juan Bautista, *Queen Mariana of Spain in Mourning*, 1666, The National Gallery, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/juan-bautista-martinez-del-mazo-queen-mariana-of-spain-in-mourning

After Velázquez's death in 1660, his son-in-law Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo would replace him as official court painter. Martínez del Mazo followed his father-in-law's practice of including court dwarfs within court scenes. *Margaret Theresa of Spain* (1665-1666) portrays a now older infanta wearing mourning clothes after the death of her father, Philip IV. In addition, the painting was dated prior to her departure to Vienna, where she would marry Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I. This suggested it served as a royal keepsake for the Madrid palace. While infanta is the central figure, several figures were included in the background. To the audience's right stood four figures identified as the young Charles II, a lady-in-waiting, an attendant dressed in widow's weeds, and a female court dwarf. The Museo del Prado and some scholarship identified this female court dwarf as Mari Bárbola.

Martínez del Mazo also painted *Queen Mariana of Spain in Mourning* that same year. Like the previously discussed painting, it depicted the Queen Mariana mourning the death of her husband while wearing widow's weeds. The queen is seated within the Madrid palace while

several figures appeared in the background. These figures included two attendants and a lady-in-waiting caring for the young Charles II. Two unidentified court dwarfs stood behind the infant Habsburg heir, one a woman and the other a man. The female court dwarf was suggested to be Mari Bárbola, adding to the growing number of depictions presented. The groups in both portraits were reminiscent of *Las Meninas*, displaying the daily interactions between servants and royal children. All three paintings remained consistent with showing Mari Bárbola within the domestic setting, suggesting that the female court dwarf worked exclusively from the household and as a courtly companion.

Las Meninas displayed each figure within strict roles required of their positions and employment. They also appeared within the hierarchy commanded at court. If *Las Meninas* was originally intended to serve as a visual interpretation of the *Mirrors for Princes*[32] genre, the king and queen became literal mirror representations of rulers. The current rulers were designated as role models for the growing infanta, who would eventually partake in political affairs as the Holy Roman Empress. Infanta Margaret was the painting's central figure. She was meticulously doted on, as a royal child would often be. Her *meninas* dressed the young girl while attendants waited for further instructions, speaking in the background. A chamberlain guarded the door leading into the occupied and bustling room. Velázquez appeared with his canvas, brush, and palette. These items served as markers identifying his profession as court painter. Furthermore, Velázquez embodied the successful painter under the patronage system. Everyone was portrayed within their current professions, emphasizing their central identities within court.

[32] *Mirrors for Princes* was a genre of loosely political literature directed specifically in the education of royal male heirs during the Middle Ages and Early Modern, though it was used in educating other children of nobles. Several variations were written based on the region. Topics include instructions of behavior, governance, specific schools of thought, and more. In some, instructions suggested looking to religion or previous historical figures (including predecessors) for inspiration and guidance in ruling a country or empire.

This representation left the two court dwarfs shown in the foreground. Following this line of thinking, their roles must be presented within the group painting. Mari Bárbola was dressed in extravagant clothing following contemporary trends. She was not dressed like the older lady-in-waiting located behind her, despite being closest in age to her. Henceforth, Mari Bárbola could not share the same role as Marcela de Ullhoa. Her attire was more in tune with the *meninas*, who attended to the Infanta. All of the attending women were of aristocratic birth or widows to politically high-ranking men. Sharing similar clothing styles argued to some extent for similar social standing. Mari Bárbola's proximity to the infanta also provided insight to the closeness between the two figures, establishing her as the infanta's companion. As Tuan argues, Mari Bárbola was close enough to accompany the infanta, while still at a distance as to not allow a friendship like that between the infanta's *meninas*. She was presented in the painting for companionship to Margaret, even in the most mundane of activities.

Where Velázquez is the court painter, Mari Bárbola is strictly the domestic court dwarf. Her green dress identified her foundational employment as an entertainer for the royal family. Green was a common color worn by entertainers of the royal court, both male and female.[33] The color green was connected to the concept of nature and madness. Court dwarfs were themselves perceived as natural wonders, hence their acquisition by nobles. Despite her green dress, Velázquez does not depict Mari Bárbola actively entertaining those around her nor the audience. No individual within the room paid any attention towards her. Instead, her own attention landed on the audience, reminiscent of a dignified observer. *Las Meninas* intended to represent the daily activities of these court members. Mari Bárbola's common activities were unlikely public

[33] Ravenscroft, "Dwarfs - and a Loca - as Ladies' Maids at the Spanish Habsburg Courts," 154.

displays of entertainment and instead accompanying the growing infanta and her entourage within the confines of the royal palace.

The latter two paintings also asserted Mari Bárbola as a strictly domestic female court dwarf employed within the royal household. In *Margaret Theresa of Spain* and *Queen Mariana of Spain in Mourning*, she appeared behind the infanta and queen during a period of extreme and personal grief. The female court dwarf was presented near both women grieving the death of their father and husband. Additionally, she was present for the infanta's life-changing transition to her future husband's household in another country. This transition notably occurred after Philip IV's death. The king's death did not change Mari Bárbola's employment in the palace, encouraging the fact that she was under the queen's care and under the domestic sector. His death did not result in a similar loss of status within the government or military sector because she was never included in them to begin with. The enforcement of Mari Bárbola into the domestic role of entertainment because of her disability and gender provided stable employment compared to male court dwarfs. Additionally, Mari Bárbola continued to act as companion of the royal children, not only for the now older infanta but also for the young Charles II. Compared to *Las Meninas*, Mari Bárbola's attention was on the infanta or young prince. This established a physical connection that was rooted in their relationships. But she was almost never depicted actively serving her patrons. She did not appear dressing the infanta nor hold a cup for the young Charles II, like the other figures in the paintings. She took on a more passive role as companion or an individual present for support and conversation. She was not depicted as subservient to her patrons, never appearing to kneel like the infanta's *menina*. Of course, status continued to remain that she did not outrank the royal family; only that she possibly ranked equally to others employed by the court.

Velázquez also painted portraits of several male court dwarfs for Philip IV: *The Buffon El Primo* (1644), *El Niño de Vallecas* (1635-1645), and *Buffoon with Books* (ca. 1640). Unlike previous works, these male court dwarfs were presented as the central figures and alone in the portraits. Their identities within these portraits were separate from their patrons despite the recorded relationship. Additionally, none of these men were placed within domestic settings like Mari Bárbola was. They were not watching over royal children or in the presence of the queen. On the contrary, they were placed within outdoor and public settings, particularly in the countryside. In *Buffoon with Book*s, the male court dwarf sat with a quill and books. The inclusion of these items implied that the man was educated and literate, in addition to being employed within records. He also appeared in black attire instead of green, implying his central identity was not leaning heavily as entertainer. The seated man was identified as Don Diego de Acedo. Don Diego served not only as official court dwarf but also as the king's undersecretary and keeper of the seal.[34] Seals were used by kings and queens in place of written signatures. They were used when authenticating legislation,

Figure 4, Velázquez, Diego, *Buffoon with Books*, oil on canvas, ca. 1640, Museo del Prado, https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/buffoon-with-books/0e15421d-e184-4059-aad4-d0073fd316a3.

[34] Guaraldi et al, "Court Dwarfs," 736.

charters, and other written documents.[35] The trust placed on Don Diego had to be prevalent when appointing him as keeper of an item used in authenticating on the behalf of a ruler and established him well as a government official. Finally, his title as *don* translated to a courtesy title implying respect and potentially hinted at noble-blood or akin to aristocracy.

I argue that while Mari Bárbola was employed by the royal court, her employment differed from those of her male counterparts because societal norms were maintained despite her perceived differences rendering her physically different. The position of court dwarfs was not consistent for those involved. While her male counterparts were granted roles such as hand of the king, Mari Bárbola – and most likely other female court dwarfs – maintained positions as companions and within the domestic sphere. There were varying forms of payments and differing tasks taken on by individuals. Some court dwarfs held official positions or attended functions consistently, while others attended only on certain days. Mari Bárbola appeared at the infanta's side during both her early childhood in *Las Meninas* and during her period of mourning at the death of Philip IV in *Margaret Theresa of Spain.* Mari Bárbola's continued presence within the paintings is evidence that the female court dwarf remained solidly within her position for a long period of time compared to her peers.

Further evidence that female court dwarfs held successful careers as companions was presented in Józef Boruwłaski's 1788 memoir.[36] Boruwłaski was an eighteenth-century Polish court dwarf. He served under two countesses prior to becoming a traveling musician. While

[35] Cynthia J. Neville, "Making a Manly Impression: The Image of Kingship on Scottish Royal Seals of the High Middle Ages," in *Nine Centuries of Man: Manhood and Masculinity in Scottish History*, ed. Lynn Abrams and Elizabeth L. Ewan, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017): 102.
[36] Józef Boruwłaski wrote a memoir that looked back on key life events, from his birth, travels, career as a musician, marriage, and more. My thesis used his 1788 version, though several other editions exist. The latest dated in 1820, several years prior to his death. I chose his 1788 version for several reasons. Primarily, he went into greater details regarding his siblings (including female court dwarf Anastasia Boruwłaski) and featured snippets of his sister's life as she grew older.

recounting his life experiences, he introduced his younger sister named Anastasia, also born with dwarfism. The only indication of Anastasia's employment was the mention of being under the protection of Castelane Kaminska.[37] In her adulthood, Anastasia fell in love with a young and unnamed soldier. Her brother wrote that the officer was from "a good family, [but] was not rich."[38] This statement suggested that Anastasia was of higher standing wealth-wise in comparison to her lover. Additionally, this was suggested to have posed an issue for the relationship. Unfortunately, nothing came out of the relationship due to her early death of smallpox at age twenty-two.[39] The Boruwłaski family was extremely poor due to their patriarch's death while the children were young. Hence, Anastasia's wealth could not have come from an inheritance. Instead, her financial circumstances came from her employment under her patron. Anastasia made herself an independent and financially successful woman through her role as companion. Though, we do not know whether Anastasia's income as a court dwarf would have allowed her to support the poor officer.

By comparison, Boruwłaski served two countesses, a prince, and was a traveling musician at the time his historical memoir was published. While his relationship with a prince was one of support, it did not grant full financial dependence. Boruwłaski was still expected to earn an income through his travels on the recommendation of the prince. By this time, Boruwłaski was supporting a wife and young child. He was able to gain audiences with nobility around Europe and performed in front of large audiences through his connection with the prince. Unlike Anastasia and Mari Bárbola, Boruwłaski was presented outside of the domestic sphere to earn an income. Acting as a royal companion was not his main source of income, it only assisted

[37] Józef Boruwłaski, *Memoirs of the celebrated dwarf* (London: 1788): 79.
[38] Ibid., 81.
[39] Ibid., 83.

in providing a network for future job opportunities. Additionally, his eldest brother was entrusted in the management of affairs for his own patron and maintained the position of steward. Anastasia's profession was never mentioned outright. She was never labeled as a professional companion within her older brother's memoir. I believe the lack of labeling was due to the inherent understanding that female court dwarfs served only as domestic companions unlike their male counterparts who could work additionally outside of this position. While these women were granted employment that allotted them housing and luxuries, they were not given the same freedom men were given.

A comparison of the number of paintings featuring male and female court dwarfs also hinted at the gendered differences within the court system.

> Furthermore, anatomically abnormal individuals rarely commissioned their own portraits. Therefore, the social status at issue was usually that of the patron of the portrait or 'owner' of the monstrous individual being portrayed. By commissioning a portrait, the patron would assert his or her social standing twice: first, by visualizing his or her possession and, second, by collecting, owning, and displaying a symbol of his or her high social status.[40]

Accounting for the number of commissions, images of male court dwarfs appeared more common than female court dwarfs. One explanation follows the idea that female court dwarfs were held to a stricter domestic and private sphere than their male counterparts. Men held roles in government positions and Velázquez painted them in their own solo portraits, yet the women appear as backgrounds to their patrons in scenes within the household. The appearance of male court dwarfs was more acceptable to the public audience compared to the images of female court

[40] Ghadessi, "Lords and Monsters," 504.

dwarfs. Similarly, Anastasia was not presented within Boruwłaski's memoir with a job title because she maintained a private position within the domestic sphere compared to her male siblings. Not only were these women serving as companions within their careers, but they also took part in further activities today deemed private: childbirth.

V. Enforced Reproduction

Another experience unique to female court dwarfs involved their reproductive health. Early Modern midwives and obstetricians were employed to assist in childbirth for many women of various socio-economic backgrounds. Obstetrical instruments were used to aid in labor, including birthing chairs and toothed duck beak forceps.[41] Widespread attitudes towards the pregnant body included avoiding excitement to not disrupt blood flow.[42] Additional attitudes on bodily sensitivity included surrounding oneself with beauty under the belief that looking at such granted one a healthy and beautiful child. In a period where Martin Luther himself preached on "self-sacrificial motherhood"[43] with women preferably perishing over their children, female court dwarfs made the ultimate sacrifice with their own reproduction. Unfortunately, for some this sacrifice was not entirely their choice.

Modern medical texts outlined the high risks women with dwarfism experienced from their pregnancies. Texts explained how various forms of dwarfism impacted the body and pregnancy experience, resulting in pregnancy and childbirth not being universal for even these

[41] Elizabeth Fee, Theodore M. Brown, and Roxanne L. Beatty, "Early Modern Childbirth," *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 3 (March 2003), 432.
[42] Ulinka Rublack, "Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany," *Past & Present*, no. 150 (February 1996), 84.
[43] Ibid., 90.

women.[44] Today, many women with dwarfism find caesarian sections to be their common delivery mode, though vaginal delivery can occur with extreme caution. Respiratory distress, limited abdominal size, hypertension, superimposed preeclampsia are some recorded risks women with dwarfism have faced during pregnancy and childbirth.[45] Already difficult childbirth and the added lack of understanding over dwarfism and disabled bodies increased the risk of death for Early Modern female court dwarfs. The morbid sexual curiosity of Early Modern European nobility, as presented throughout this section, would sadly result in fatal results for female court dwarfs.

Bodily sensitivity and precautions for women was likely not to apply to female court dwarfs. The practice of enforcing pregnancies to produce more court dwarfs and a section of Boruwłaski's memoir hint at such. Treatments of lying in (akin to being bedridden) and avoiding shocks were done based on the belief that extreme stress resulted in impure blood harming fetuses. Miscarriages, false pregnancies, and "monstrous" births were held to be consequences from said shocks. But the expected outcome of pregnancies for female court dwarfs was meant to produce dwarfism. Care for such shocks was less likely because of the original intention from these births. The main priority within this practice was the successful production of children with dwarfism to gift them to other aristocrats at a later time.

Many aristocrats commonly gifted dwarfs from their own households to other nobility, especially as a sign of good favor. Isabella Clara Eugenia presented her grandmother, Catherine de Medici, with a female court dwarf disguised as a multilingual parrot in a covered cage.[46]

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[44] C E Vance, M Desmond, A Robinson, J Johns, M Zacharin, R Savarirayan, K König, S Warrillow, and S P Walker, "Pregnancy in a woman with proportionate (primordial) dwarfism: a case report and literature review," *Obstetric Medicine* 5, no. 3 (2012): 125-129.
[45] C E Vance et al, "Pregnancy in a woman with proportionate (primordial) dwarfism," 125.
[46] Brown, "The Mirror and the Cage," 137.

Jeffrey Hudson was hidden in a large pie to the surprise of his new patron, Queen Henrietta Marie.[47] For some Early Modern aristocrats, their curiosity in the reproduction and nature of court dwarfs in addition to the practice of gifting other nobility resulted in enforced reproduction practices.

Isabella d'Este wrote to family member Diana d'Este regarding a two-year-old dwarf girl. The unnamed child was not given to d'Este nor taken in from a peasant family. Instead, she was a result of the enforced reproduction practice at d'Este's court. The aristocrat actively enforced such a practice to produce more court dwarfs from those already employed under her. The dehumanizing practice proved successful as the child was born and "without a doubt remain a dwarf."[48] D'Este offered the child to Renée de France once the child was of an age to be by herself. Sent to Diana in hopes of Renée's acceptance, the young infant was torn from her mother, a court dwarf believed to be named Delia.

Years later, Boruwłaski's memoir would recount a horrifying moment in which he overheard a conversation between his patron and her company concerning the possible reproduction of dwarfs.

> One of the company having put the question, whether Dwarfs possess the faculty of procreating? Another advanced, that if they have it, their children would grow to the common size; and the Countess Humieska acquainted her company with the state of my family, and in particular my sister, whose size, she said, is still more extraordinary than that of Joujou. She added, she had often revolved in her own mind, how pleasant it would be to join these two little creatures, that the result might decide the question[49]

[47] Ghadessi, "Lords and Monsters," 518.
[48] Isabella d'Este, *Selected Letters,* ed.Deanna Shemek (Toronto: Iter Press, 2017): 562.
[49] Józef Boruwłaski, *Memoirs of the celebrated dwarf,* 31.

Concerns of the experimentation with reproduction and individuals with dwarfism continued amongst aristocratic circles despite the two-hundred-year time difference between Isabella d'Este and Countess Humieska. Neither patron took into consideration the health of their wards nor acknowledged the women or children as equals. Countess Humieska went so far as considering Anastasia and Boruwłaski as simply creatures or non-human. D'Este referred to the child as a fruit and a product of a separate race based on their dwarfism. This word choice connected back to contemporary beliefs of dwarf communities being part of a monstrous race and the need to continue procreation.

Boruwłaski languidly despaired at the overheard conversation and cried out at the company's lack of empathy. He was saddened that his humanity was overlooked by his patrons, who saw him as an object without values and morality. Such thoughts extended to the female court dwarfs in these enforced reproduction practices. Anastasia was not considered as a morally acceptable human being in the eyes of the noblewomen. Instead, she was viewed as a part of an experiment, akin to animals bred for the pleasures of their owners. Her humanity was questioned and thrown out the window at the expense of others' curiosities. For d'Este, Delia was not granted the right of caring for her child until adulthood despite living within the world of the wealthy. Her child was born with a value that could be determined and exchanged between those who did not birth her.

Rublack mentioned that Early Modern women used the culture of childbirth "to resist their husbands' patriarchal power by withdrawing sexual services and physical labour."[50] The pregnant body, accompanied by attitudes over the treatment of expecting mothers, allowed women acts of rebellion and instances of autonomy within strictly gendered societal roles. But

[50] Rublack, "Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany," 85.

female court dwarfs within the patronage system were not allotted these rebellions. Instead, these women faced further oppression. They were expected to reproduce despite the high risks involved, including death. Female court dwarfs faced further issues after birth with separation from their children by patrons they were dependent on. Children both with dwarfism and not much older than two-years-old were expected to travel across vast lands and under the supervision of non-guardians, only to find themselves in homes of other strangers. Additionally, husbands often maintained participatory roles during non-court dwarf pregnancies and childhood.[51] But patrons were instead the key participants within the pregnancy of their female court dwarfs. Women under the protection of their patrons established a relationship distinct from the relationship of marriage or partnership outside of patronage. Ultimately, enforced reproduction of female court dwarfs harmed both mother and child.

VI. Gendered Language and Ideals

Boruwłaski briefly discussed his family structure early in his memoir, introducing his parents and siblings. He wrote of his father's passing when he was only nine years old and his mother's struggles in raising children alone while facing financial difficulties. Boruwłaski was the third of six siblings, all born of alternating statures from oldest to youngest.[52] The second, third, and youngest brothers were all recorded as average in stature, with Boruwłaski mentioned one brother standing at five feet ten inches.[53] Alternatively, his eldest brother and only sister

[51] Ibid., 85.
[52] The siblings appear as follows, in decreasing order of age: eldest brother (dwarfism), second brother (average height), Boruwłaski (dwarfism), third brother (average height), Anastasia (dwarfism), and youngest brother (average height).
[53] Józef Boruwłaski, *Memoirs of the celebrated dwarf*, 7.

were born with dwarfism. His eldest brother stood at three feet six inches.[54] His sister, Anastasia, was the shortest of the siblings at two feet two inches.[55]

Both siblings would follow similar routes as Boruwłaski and other dwarfs, living under the care of their own patrons. His unnamed eldest brother would live under the patronage of Castelane Inowloska, eventually entrusted as a steward presiding over the management of her affairs.[56] Anastasia was seven years younger than Boruwłaski and lived under the patronage of Castelane Kaminska.[57] Her patron was noted as being a wealthy woman and their relationship was credited as being loving. Anastasia would eventually pass away at twenty-two years old, succumbing to smallpox. Her death greatly impacted both her benefactress and Boruwłaski, evident in his brief section recounting the events.

Of note in these introductions is the language Boruwłaski used, specifically his use of gendered language. Boruwłaski wrote the following regarding his eldest brother:

> …he has constantly enjoyed a robust constitution, and has still strength and vigour much above his size and age; he has lived a long time with the Castelane Inowloska, who honours him with her esteem and bounty; and finding in him ability and sense enough, has instructed him with the stewardship and management of her affairs.[58]

He used similar language when describing himself shortly afterwards:

> …yet, not with-standing this diminutive proportion, I was neither weak nor puny: on the contrary, my mother, who suckled me, has often declared that none of her children gave

[54] Boruwłaski writes that his eldest brother was three inches taller than him at the time the memoir was published. Additionally, the author offered that his own height was three feet three inches at the age of thirty. Using this information, I suggest that his eldest brother was the tallest amongst the dwarf siblings with a height of three feet six inches at the age of sixty.
[55] Józef Boruwłaski, *Memoirs of the celebrated dwarf*, 7.
[56] Ibid., 7.
[57] Ibid., 79.
[58] Ibid., 7.

her less trouble. I walked, and was able to speak at about the age common to other infants, and my growth was progressively as follows.[59]

By comparison, Boruwłaski offered the following for Anastasia: "among them was a female, who died of the small-pox at the age of twenty two. She was at that time only two feet two inches high, and to a lovely figure united an admirably well proportioned shape."[60] When remembering Anastasia's death, Boruwłaski re-emphasized later in the text how proportionate she was despite her short stature, specifically using "extreme regular proportions of her shape."[61] He went into detail, describing her being "of a brown complexion, with fine black eyes, well circled eyebrows, very thick hair, and so much gracefulness in all she did that added new charms to her figure."[62] Moving beyond physical appearances, Boruwłaski offered that she was a person of good nature and gentleness. Anastasia was cheerful and an individual who "could not see a suffering fellow-creature, without seeking to give relief."[63]

Boruwłaski reinforced two concepts within his language involving Anastasia, that the young woman was beautiful in physical appearance and of an ideal personality. He stated twice that Anastasia had a proportionate body and acknowledged the normalcy her shape displayed. Previous statements by Boruwłaski suggested that Anastasia had pituitary dwarfism. Pituitary dwarfism resulted from insufficient growth hormones within the body, specifically in the pituitary gland underneath the brain. Individuals with this form of dwarfism were credited as having short and proportionate statures, with likenesses akin to average height individuals compared to achondroplastic dwarfism. Anastasia having a proportionate body was significant

[59] Ibid., 7-9.
[60] Ibid., 7.
[61] Ibid., 79.
[62] Ibid., 79.
[63] Ibid., 79.

because it aligned her with Early Modern European beauty ideals. Characteristics like family, rank, virtue, and physical appearances were significant in establishing value and identity for women within their strict and gendered society.[64] Furthermore, these established ideals grew stricter the higher in ranking a woman was, with the highest being aristocratic women.

Boruwłaski's memoir constructed Anastasia's identity within these preferred values. While Anastasia was not of noble birth, she was connected to aristocracy through her patron. She was recognized within society based on the network created from her relationship with Castelane Kaminska. Anastasia's and Mari Bárbola's ranks, though artificial and impermanent, aligned them with ladies-in-waiting and other courtiers. In addition, Boruwłaski focused almost entirely on Anastasia's virtues and physical appearances.

Anastasia presented a unique case due to her identity as a disabled woman. Her dwarfism established her automatically as an oddity within society. Her career and presence within the aristocratic world relied on her being a woman with dwarfism. Those who encountered her were likely to base one of their first impressions on her distinct appearance. Because of her disability, she was outside of established societal norms. But Anastasia toed the line of beauty. While her dwarfism placed her outside of aristocratic ideals, her proportioned body resulted in her aligning with the ideal version of dwarfism into which Mari Bárbola did not fit. Characteristics associated with Early Modern beauty standards included youthfulness and symmetry.[65] Anastasia had both and Boruwłaski took initiative to memorialize his sister under such.

The requirements for symmetry involved notions of balance. Early Modern ideals emphasized harmony within environments, including the human body. Just as a face was deemed

[64] Michelle Webb, "A Great Blemish to her Beauty: Female Facial Disfigurement in Early Modern England," in *Approaching Facial Difference: Past and Present*, ed. Patricia Skinner and Emily Cock (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020): 28.
[65] Webb, "A Great Blemish to her Beauty," 28.

more beautiful the more symmetrical it was, so too was the body. The closer an individual's body was to being well proportionate, the more attractive they were deemed. A court dwarf's stature did not take away from this. Those with pituitary dwarfism aligned closer to able-bodied individuals, with some arguing they were miniature versions of their patrons. On the other hand, those less proportionate were recognized as ugly. The rigidness of such a gendered society did not escape court dwarfs. Virtues like kindness, a gentle disposition, and demureness added to these ideals from a non-physical perspective.

According to Boruwłaski, Anastasia's most valued attributes were her youthfulness and symmetry. In addition, she maintained ideal values for a woman, being kindhearted and selfless. The reader could picture Anastasia's beauty based on his detailed description of her facial features. The use of adjectives like well, fine, thick, and graceful enhanced these features, accentuating the ideals of beauty. She was selfless, with zero capabilities to ignore others who were wounded or in despair. Her generosity and gentle demeanor added to her beauty. Anastasia's identity was that she was beautiful both inside and out. All of these added to her value as an individual.

By comparison, Boruwłaski acknowledged the intelligence of his eldest brother that rewarded him the position of steward of affairs. His eldest brother's identity was valued at his intellectual capability. Boruwłaski also took care to assure the audience his brother was strong, robust, and with vigor. His brother was not valued as a man in society for his physical attractiveness but for his intellect and strength, both more prominent within Early Modern masculine ideals. Boruwłaski also recounted several interactions of his own where individuals complimented his intelligence, conversation skills, and requested his opinion on contemporary issues. In addition, he complimented himself as not lacking either. He was not weak because of

his dwarfism. In fact, he claimed that he excelled from his other siblings, including those of average height. Both men were established in society as men of standing and intellect, but his sister was commemorated for her attractive appearance and generous personality.

Webb suggested that female beauty standards relied on the male gaze.[66] Men were the overarching judges in the desirability of women. There was also an understanding that women used physical attractiveness to direct power differences between themselves and men. Boruwłaski's memoir provided a written account from the male observer, judging his sister and her value in society based on her beauty and palatable personality. Anastasia's proportionate body and striking features established a cultural capital, possibly making her rise higher in ranking to other female court dwarfs. Hence why her brother would reinforce her physical attributes first when introducing her to the readers.

"Female appearance mattered to Early Modern men and remarking upon it was an entirely unremarkable act."[67] Boruwłaski, being a man aligned with aristocratic ideals on behalf of his environment, would likely share the characteristics of other Early Modern men in remarking upon the appearances and beauty of their female counterparts. Judgements like his were of the norm and he certainly does this throughout his memoir. Several male court dwarfs, like Jeffrey Hudson, were recognized for their own proportionate bodies deeming them attractive. This draws back to the standards of beauty within disability and dwarfism. Their able-bodied male counterparts would also be judged on male beauty standards, but the perspectives were much more lenient compared to women's and men established these standards themselves.

Isabella d'Este's letters provided more examples of gendered language and beauty standards. In her September 1532 letter to Diana d'Este, d'Este discussed the young dwarf girl

[66] Ibid., 28-29.
[67] Ibid., 28.

born within her reproduction program. The beginning of her letter hinted that Isabella had promised years prior for a child with dwarfism to be sent to another noblewoman named Renata upon their successful birth. Significant here is the language d'Este used to discuss the child to Diana, who would eventually care for the child prior to their transfer to Renata. First, d'Este specified the child's sex, a female. The child's name was not included within this letter nor in a later letter dated November 1533. D'Este continued, stating "we cannot hope she will stay so small as my Delia"[68] and "given her beauty, she deserves to be treasured."[69]

Records identifed Delia as Isabella's beloved court dwarf and some scholars suspected her as being the mother of this young girl.[70] D'Este mentioned the child's height in comparison to Delia to provide an argument that the child would surely have dwarfism, as previously was the purpose for the enforced reproduction practice. She was also aligning the child with Delia, an already established female court dwarf that would be recognizable to the parties at hand. Readers also recognized the significance the child's height, with those of smaller stature and proportion becoming further oddities to taller court dwarfs. The value of their bodies arose from their distinctive height.

Most importantly, d'Este recounted the beauty of the young girl. Like Anastasia, her beauty encouraged her value in the eyes of future patrons. Her identity revolved on her being a physically pleasant being to look upon by the elite, even more so because she was female. D'Este argued that her beauty linked to her being treasured, adding that her beauty granted her the privilege of being treasured. It was not her intellectual capabilities or other skills that were the prime reasons, but her physical appearance. This begged the question of whether the child was

[68] Isabella d'Este, *Selected Letters,* 562.
[69] Ibid., 562.
[70] Brown, "The Mirror and the Cage," 141.

inherently less treasured or deserving of good care had she been any less pleasing to the aristocrat's eyes.

Finally, paintings discussed earlier provided gendered imagery. Each of the images maintained a central focus on the female sitter, either Queen Mariana or Infanta Margaret. The inclusion of Mari Bárbola acted as a reminder to the audience of their connection. She only ever appeared in the presence of the female sitters and not with Philip IV. She occasionally appeared standing beside the young Charles II. It was a common occurrence for court dwarfs of either sex to act as companions to the royal children. Despite this, only one painting showed Mari Bárbola attending to the child. The remaining two appeared with her attention towards either the female sitter in the foreground or directly at the audience.

Furthermore, Mari Bárbola only ever appeared in paintings within a domestic setting. Her placement appeared centrally within the walls of the royal court. No solo portraits were thought to exist of the female court dwarf. Her existence within art and history were when she was physically within the same space as her female patrons. By comparison, Velázquez alone painted several portraits of male court dwarfs seated alone. They appeared in varying backgrounds, including within nature. They presented themselves within varying job roles, including Don Diego de Acedo as keeper of the seal.[71] Other artists followed similar concepts. The Medici court dwarf Morgante appeared in several images: as the central figure for the unique double-sided portrait, as a mythical being in sculptures, and peeking over his shoulder while overlooking Florentine political affairs.

In *Las Meninas*, Mari Bárbola wore a fashionable and distinguishing green dress. The dress's design was reminiscent of the dresses worn by the infanta's two *meninas* to her right,

[71] Guaraldi et al, "Court Dwarfs: An Overview of European Paintings from Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century," 737.

with their colors being the most noticeable differences. Velázquez was establishing Mari Bárbola's identity heavily on her role as both entertainer and companion for the infanta. Her attire was likely chosen and paid for by her patrons. Her appearance was intentional down to the dye and sleeve fashion. Mari Bárbola was meant to follow the trends and exude beauty as a member of the Habsburg court and extension of the royal family's image, just as Anastasia and d'Este's young court dwarf had to do. By comparison, Nicolasito's appearance relied on a red attire and his interaction with the large mastiff. Nicolasito donned a red attire, unlike his older female counterpart. His identity did not include entertainment, at least for Velázquez. The artist had previously painted male court dwarfs wearing green attire, such as Sebastián de Morra and Don Francisco Lezcano. But Mari Bárbola fulfilled enough as the entertainment within the painting. Nicolasito instead fulfilled the identity of masculinity and huntsmanship. Men posing with dogs used in hunting were a common trope within Early Modern portraiture. Here the audience observes a young man towering over an animal, much like a hunter would with their hunting dog. The innuendo appeared palatable and mischievous considering the figure was still quite young.

VII. Conclusion

Women like Mari Bárbola and Anastasia lived complex lives because of their disability and gender. Female court dwarfs held positions in history that went beyond the title of court dwarf, contrary to the excessive singular and generalized usage in scholarship. They were women with careers within the domestic sphere and near Early Modern European royalty. The future of children like a two-year-old under the care of Isabella d'Este were determined prior to their own birth and with little of their own input, while her mother had little say to the child's

safety. Scholarship failed to acknowledge these women's unique experiences impacted by their gender despite how they were presented within primary sources, often heavily gendered. Scholarship too often overlooks the issues disabled women faced during this history, instead highlighting aspects usually applicable only to male court dwarfs. This paper only began to scrape the surface of the history of female court dwarfs, specifically reviewing two women and a child.

Disability history is integral in evolving modern attitudes and preconceptions of what is disability and disability issues. Understanding the history of medical malpractice against women, especially over their reproductive health, encourages more individuals to look at current issues disability activists are calling attention to within their own medical experiences. By researching the history of underrepresented and oppressed communities do we grow to understand how those events continue to impact modern issues. The history of female court dwarfs presents women exploited by a patronage system through their reproductive health while also maintaining autonomy as career women. Their history is complex and previous scholarship has only begun to brush the surface.

If we are to truly create a scholarship that incorporates intersectionality into the experiences of all individuals, it is inherently necessary that disability be included. For an intersectionality that excludes disabled identities fails altogether. Scholars must explore how lives of historical communities were impacted based on their race, gender, sexual identity, class, *and* disability.

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