DWARFS—AND A LOCA—AS LADIES’ MAIDS AT THE SPANISH HABSBURG COURTS

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The dwarfs who lived in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish Habsburg courts have received barely any serious scholarly attention, an absence that is eloquent testimony to preconceived ideas about their insignificance to court culture. The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on one particular category within this group: that is the women with dwarfism who served queens and princesses as ladies’ maids. Despite their privileged positions as close personal servants and companions, these dwarfs now find themselves in the shadows. From being centre stage, they have receded from view because of their triple status as physically anomalous, female and servants. This critical blindness is anachronistic, ignoring as it does the dwarfs’ function as royal companions and their extraordinary appeal as “monsters” and “marvels”. Enigmatic figures because of their monstrous status and marvellous attraction, they nonetheless lived and worked at the epicentre of power.

The starting place for anyone interested in the Habsburgs’ dwarfs is José Moreno Villa’s 1939 catalogue, _Locos, enanos, negros y niños palaciegos siglos XVI y XVII_. Moreno Villa spent a year and a half compiling his catalogue of “fools, dwarfs, blacks and palace children” from accounts held at the Palace Archives in Madrid, of which he was Director. The work was completed during the Spanish Civil War “as bullets flew through the windows of the Archives”, a situation that may explain why the dates and other details are often inconsistent.

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2 José Moreno Villa, _Locos, enanos, negros y niños palaciegos siglos XVI y XVII: gente de placer que tuvieron los Austrias en la corte española desde 1563 a 1700_ (Mexico D.F.: La Casa de España en Mexico, 1939), 11.
As Moreno Villa discovered, to be ‘a dwarf’ was not an official role with a start date and regular monetary payments from one particular royal office. As a result, his evidence had to be gleaned from the accounts of different departments. It is likely that some dwarfs were employed solely to entertain and it is indicative of this that the bureaucrats who kept the household accounts often lumped dwarfs in together with entertainers of average height and locos, a loose category that embraced the genuinely insane and people who were talkative and did not adhere to convention.

Individuals were judged differently depending on whether their behaviour was understood to be natural or artificial, that is put on for effect. People of average height who entertained with a mixture of physical and verbal humour, almost like actors, were morally suspect because they were not making the best of God’s gifts. On the other hand, the locos and dwarfs were not condemned as immoral because their unusual minds and bodies were God-given.

It was the monarch’s religious duty to protect everyone in his realm, including those considered to be physically or mentally handicapped. The presence of dwarfs and ‘imbeciles’ at court therefore allowed the royal family to fulfil its charitable duty towards these less able members of society and provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate their moral, intellectual and physical superiority. Enhancing their companions’ height by contrast was one of the dwarfs’ roles at court and in paintings in which they appear with elite figures.

Moreno Villa’s catalogue contains the given names and, in most cases, a few dates and details relating to some 175 gente de placer resident at

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3 Moreno Villa, Locos, 16.
4 Sebastián de Covarrubias, Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana, o Española (1611), ed. Martín de Riquer (Barcelona: Editorial Alta Fulla, 1998), 770.
5 Fernando Bouza, Locos, enanos y hombres de placer en la corte de los Austrias: Oficio de burlas (Madrid: Ediciones Temas de Hoy, 1996), 87. John Southworth, Fools and Jesters at the English Court (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), 5–6, provides a useful overview of the entertaining role of fools and dwarfs in early modern Europe and the distinction between natural and artificial fools.
6 Covarrubias, Tesoro, 243 (bufón); 437 (chocarrero), and 981 (truhán). See also Bouza, Locos, 20, 25–6.
7 Bouza, Locos, 23.
10 Bouza, Locos, 161.