A strange, even startling, feature of Renaissance court portraiture was the decision of some aristocratic sitters to be recorded for posterity accompanied by the “other.” In this essay I address the specific choice of a dwarf as portrait companion. Fig. 1 shows a portrait by Giacomo Vighi called L’Argenta of Carlo Emmanuele, duke of Savoy, circa 1570, as a 9- or 10-year-old, standing beside his mother’s pet dwarf Fabio. The birth defect that resulted in Fabio’s physical deformity was a disorder of bone growth, called achondroplasia, a genetic condition consisting in abnormally short stature, short arms and legs, and a


2 For the unfortunate tendency to use the word “other” as if it were a stable term, see Paul Freedman, “The Medieval Other/The Middle Ages as Other,” in Marvels, Monsters and Miracles, eds. T.S. Jones and D.A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo, MI, 2002), pp. 1-14.


4 Vittorio Viale, Mostra del barocco piemontese (Turin, 1963), 2:45, cat. 1.
proportionately larger head in which the forehead is prominent.\textsuperscript{5} Alonso Sánchez Coello’s likeness, from the 1580s, depicting the Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia, daughter of Philip II of Spain, with the well known court dwarf Magdalena Ruiz holding monkeys, can be seen in Fig. 2.\textsuperscript{6}

In this type of double portrait, power relationships were articulated visually. The princes were centralized within the composition and the dwarfs visually marginalized, so that the two figures were clearly differentiated into a protagonist and a subordinate, a status confirmed by visual details. In the case of L’Argenta’s portrait, for instance, only the duke was given a shadow to cast; in that by Sánchez Coello, while the Infanta was positioned against a hanging of rich brocade, her companion was placed against a dark void. In both works, the princes’ prominent, possessive gestures of hand and, in one case, arm, draped across the subordinates’ heads reads as signifying the dominion of the one and the subjugation of the other.

Interpretations, when they are offered, for the inclusion of dwarfs in independent princely likenesses are limited to a celebration of their ownership or recognition of their exotic presence at court. Although these factors obviously played a role, I will propose that the Renaissance pictorial association of the aristocratic self with an unequal partner was more functional. Categorized by their contemporaries both as monstri, monsters, and as maraviglia, wonders of nature, these stunted creatures served as foils to rulers who sought grandeur through pictorial juxtaposition. As Barry Wind has shown for the Baroque period, such subsidiary figures promoted the superiority of the protagonist by demonstrating how much more beautiful, upright and better proportioned he or she was.\textsuperscript{7}

In his *Book of the Courtier* Castiglione famously defined laughter as deriving from una certa deformità, “a certain deformity.”\textsuperscript{8} Given that

\textsuperscript{5} I thank Dr. Daniel Oakes for his help on this issue. See www.medicinenet.com/acondroplasia/article.html.

\textsuperscript{6} Juan Miguel Serrera, *Alonso Sánchez Coello y el retrato en la corte de Felipe II* (Museo del Prado, Madrid, 1990), cat. 29. See also a portrait by Frans Pourbus the Younger of Isabel Clara Eugenia with a female dwarf as a child, 1599, at Hampton Court.

\textsuperscript{7} Barry Wind, *A Foul and Pestilent Congregation: Images of Freaks in Baroque Art* (New York, 1998), p. 3, a source to which I am much indebted.

\textsuperscript{8} Baldassare Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, 2: 20: *Il loco e quasi il fonte onde nascono i ridiculi consiste in una certa deformità, perché solamente si ride di quelle cose che hanno in se disadvienza*. The Singleton translation is used, as edited by Daniel