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DWARFS AS SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CYNICS AT THE COURT OF PHILIP IV OF SPAIN: A STUDY OF VELÁZQUEZ' PORTRAITS OF PALACE DWARFS

Catherine Closet-Crane

In 1644, Velázquez painted individual portraits of the court dwarfs Francisco Lezcano, Don Diego de Acedo and Sebastian de Morra. Now in the Prado Museum in Madrid, these portraits are believed to be those recorded in the 1701 inventory of the Torre de la Parada, the King's hunting lodge at El Pardo. They differ significantly from the then common genre of paintings depicting people with physical deformities. Velázquez did not portray the dwarfs as "human attractions" or grotesque entertainers but as individualized characters. Yet Enriqueta Harris wrote that the portraits of the dwarfs were not "suitable" subject matter to be seen in the company of Velázquez' painting *Philip IV Hunting the Wild Boar* (1635-37, London, National Gallery) and other paintings with classical themes displayed at the Torre (Harris 132). Contrary to her unfounded assertion, I argue that they were indeed suitable subjects, and that they were intended to be seen together with Velázquez' portraits of the Cynic philosopher Menippus and of Aesop the moralist (both 1636-40, Prado Museum), as well as with Rubens' portraits of the philosophers Democritus and Heraclitus (both 1635-37, Prado), which were then hanging at the Torre.¹

In his portraits of the dwarfs Velázquez did not simply reaffirm the three men's humanity; he symbolically elevated them above their contemporary fellow men at court. In this article I demonstrate how Velázquez used Baroque rhetorical devices to identify the men Lezcano, De Acedo and De Morra, who happened to be dwarfs, with the philosophical tradition represented by the Greek Cynics. The

¹ Rubens' paintings of the Greek philosophers and Velázquez' Aesop are briefly discussed by Antonio Domínguez Ortiz' in his *Velázquez* (New York: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989): 203-9.

conceits that Velázquez employed for his portraits of the dwarfs as well as the social commentary and the symbolic meaning embedded in these images have remained largely unnoticed by scholars who have mostly commented on the dwarfs' physical abnormalities and speculated negatively about their mental capabilities. I will show how Velázquez manipulated Baroque visual rhetoric and the device of *conceitismo* to characterize the dwarfs as hermits in the tradition of the Desert Fathers of Egypt, in order to further characterize them as Cynics in the classical sense of the term.

I. Analysis of the portraits of Lezcano, de Acedo and de Morra.

The Dwarf Francisco Lezcano "El Vizcaíno" (oil on canvas, 107x83 cm, ca. 1644. Prado) is the portrait of a dwarf who is recorded to have entered the service of Prince Baltazar Carlos in 1634 and died in 1649 after the death of the prince. Lezcano's arms and legs are short and his forehead and nose are prominent features; those physical characteristics are those of achondroplasia which is also called short limb dwarfism.²

The focus in Velázquez' portrait is on the man's face and hands which are illuminated by sunlight coming from the left behind the viewer. Lezcano is holding what could be a deck of cards or a very small book. A number of authors have interpreted his facial expression and his fingering of the object as the demeanor of a mentally deficient individual.³ I find this shallow interpretation profoundly shocking as Velázquez' portrait of Lezcano gives no clues as to the dwarf's mental development and intelligence. Lezcano's attitude can merely be interpreted as pensive as if he were pausing while in a conversation with his portraitist; and there is perhaps a trace of arrogance or amusement in the tilt of his head.

Lezcano is seated on a promontory, his figure standing out against a background rendered in loose painterly strokes of dark

² Of the hundreds of forms of dwarfism, achondroplasia is the most common and the least debilitating. Representations of dwarfs presenting the characteristics of achondroplasia are recorded throughout the history of art as far back as the Old Kingdom of Ancient Egypt.

³ As reported by Ortiz citing the 1828 Prado Catalogue and the Velázquez scholar Moragas: 218, 222.

In 1957, the German author E. Tietze Conrat wrote: "Nino de Vallecas does not look as if he could learn anything . . ." (*Dwarfs and Jesters in Art*, trans. Elizabeth Osborne. New York: Phaidon, 1957): 30-31.

earthen browns. Without realistically depicting geological features Velázquez implies an overhang, a rocky outcropping and a distant mountainous landscape. Space directly behind Lezcano seems to recede into the depths of a cave. In the portrait of the dwarf, the rock overhang acts a visual metaphor for the hermit's cave.⁴

When one compares the landscapes in Velázquez' portrait of Lezcano and his *Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Paul the Hermit* (ca. 1634, Prado), it is obvious that their composition follows the rules of the same iconographic tradition. Both St. Paul and St. Anthony were *anchorites* and became the first of the Christian hermits known as the Egyptian Desert Fathers.⁵ *Anchorites* were early Christian ascetics who from the end of the second century onwards refused to fulfill their civic duties and exiled themselves from cities to live in the Egyptian desert. Renouncing their possessions and abandoning civilized conventions, *anchorites* embraced a lifestyle which was similar to that of the Greek Cynics although their ideological pursuits were ultimately different.⁶ I propose that in Lezcano's portrait Velázquez made use of the landscape as a pictorial rhetorical device to allude to the philosophical tradition of the Greek Cynics. Exploiting Baroque *conceitismo* and adapting the literary device of metalepsis, Velázquez compressed in Lezcano's portrait a sequence of metaphors and allusions to make a social comparison between the dwarf court entertainer and the Greek Cynics via the visual allusion to the eremitic tradition. By rejecting the established social order, the early Christian hermits sought purity, while the Cynics sought freedom from restraint by assuming that their "special mission was to rebuke rulers and public officials" and that their special privilege was to exercise freedom of speech.⁷ In the case of the court dwarfs it is not so much that they rejected society and its established order but that because of their deformity they were confined in a microcosm where they were given freedom of speech as their special privilege in order to amuse the court.

⁴ Ortiz citing Gallego mentions the appearance of this geological feature but he does not pursue his analysis further: "the cave or shelter is a propitious setting for meditation, of the kind that Ribera's hermits usually seek": 221.

⁵ St. Paul the Hermit died ca. 342 A.D. St. Anthony Abbot, Anthony of Egypt, founded his first hermitage in the desert wilderness in 305 A.D. and died ca. 356 A.D.

⁶ Like the Cynics, the anchorites were rebels; in the cities they would riot to criticize the ways of life of their contemporaries and to attract followers. In the Fourth century, encouraged by Theophilus, anchorites marched to Alexandria to destroy pagan temples and build churches in their place.

⁷ Farraud Sayre, *Diogenes of Sinope*, (Baltimore: J.H. Frust, 1938): 7-13. For a discussion of Greek Cynicism and the early Christians see Gerald F. Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

Lezcano's deformity had gained him the social privilege of becoming a member of the king's entourage and of observing life at court. His apparently innocuous role of court entertainer gave him a powerful intellectual weapon in the form of freedom of speech. Lezcano could mock and criticize the ills of court society through play, parody and satire. The dwarf enjoyed the brash freedom of speech that the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope demonstrated in his legendary interaction with Alexander. A conceptual link is thus established between Lezcano, Menippus the Cynic and Aesop the moralist who enjoyed that same freedom of speech.

The Dwarf Don Diego de Acedo, 'El Primo' (oil on canvas, 107x82 cm, 1644. Prado) portrays a court secretary suffering from diastrophic dysplasia also called proportionate dwarfism. Technically, Diego de Acedo was not a dwarf but a midget; he was short but normally proportioned. De Acedo is recorded to have been present at the court of Philip IV from 1635 until his death in 1660; he held the position of King's Undersecretary and Keeper of the Seal. According to Enriqueta Harris, the portrait was painted at Fraga in 1644.⁸ Velázquez might have painted the Undersecretary while he was recording details of the battlefield to recount the victory over the French for the royal annals.

Like Lezcano, Diego de Acedo is portrayed in the outdoors seated on a promontory. De Acedo is dressed like a gentleman of the court and wears a hat which is a sign of his elevated status. The gaze of Diego de Acedo is impenetrable; he seems weary and lost in his thoughts perhaps pondering upon the necessity of wars. To the right of the sitter, faint light colored horizontal strokes allude to a mountain ridge. The atmospheric depiction of a very distant landscape does not betray the small stature of Diego de Acedo; dignified and rather princely, he appears to dominate this natural environment. The presence around him of books, inkwell and pen seems incongruous but these objects have multifarious narrative functions. On the most basic level, these attributes of de Acedo's office are a reference to the dwarf's social standing. The objects are also visual cues that make the viewer aware of de Acedo's deformity: the man's tiny hands are resting on an enormous book open in his lap that functions as a proportioning device. Lastly, in the otherwise desert landscape, the books are a visual metaphor that alludes to the iconography of St.

⁸ After the defeat of the French, Philip IV traveled to the battle site at Fraga with de Acedo and Velázquez in order to be portrayed in the same grand manner as his victorious ancestor Charles V was painted by Titian after the Battle of Mühlberg. (Harris 113).

Jerome and to classical portraits of philosophers. By adapting the literary device of *mise-en-abîme*, Velázquez was able to associate de Acedo to the hermit saint and the ‘Desert Fathers’; the erudite viewer, in the context of the Torre de la Parada, could take the *conchetto* further and connect de Acedo and the Greek philosophers.

The Dwarf Sebastian de Morra (oil on canvas, 106x81 cm, 1644. Prado) is the portrait of a short-limbed dwarf with achondroplasia. Sebastian de Morra came to Madrid in 1643 from the service of the Cardinal Infante Ferdinand to the service of Prince Baltasar Carlos; he died in 1649. According to the literature de Morra was Baltasar Carlos’ buffoon.

De Morra’s figure is set against a non-descript dark background varying from light brown to greenish brown. The expensive white lace collar and cuffs of his outfit bring attention to his face and hands. His red cape trimmed with gold creates a dramatic contrast and acts as a *repoussoir* by bringing the focus on De Morra’s face. The dwarf would seem to be “floating” except for the play of light which allows the viewer to make out the horizontal plane on which the man is sitting. This type of background is atypical of the idea of Baroque space as plenum; De Morra seems to exist in a vacuum which is filled with his psychological presence. Sebastian de Morra looks straight ahead. His stunted legs project forward resting on a horizontal plane which brings him eye level with the viewer. De Morra’s hands, whose fingers cannot be seen, rest on his sides close to his waist. The body language of the dwarf expresses defiance and contained anger or revolt. His grave expression, his somber eyes and his penetrating gaze have a dramatic impact. De Morra remains inexorably remote in the shadows of an empty space and symbolizes both the quintessential hermit and Cynic who have completely detached themselves from the physical world.

II. Velázquez’ psychological characterization of dwarfs as Cynics

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, there was a renewed interest in the portrayal of individualized types both in literature as well as in character and genre paintings.⁹ Characterization typical

⁹ In Spanish literature: Quevedo, *La Vida del Buscón* (1626, “The Life of a Scoundrel”). In French literature: La Bruyère, *Les Caractères ou les mœurs de ce siècle*, first published 1688, “The Characters, or Manners of the Age.” Second publication with the addition in 1699 of *Les Caractères de Theophraste traduits du grec* (“The Characters of Theophrastus translated from the Greek”).

of Hellenistic art and classical comedy was transmitted to Spain of the Golden Age through the treatises of Theophrastus (third century B.C.E.). In the first decade of the seventeenth century, the Spanish writer Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645) wrote *La Vida del Buscón Llamado Paco* (The Life of a Scoundrel Named Paco) a picaresque novel which offered a corrosive vision of society as seen through the eyes of a vagabond characterized as a scoundrel. As genre paintings Velázquez' *bodegones* are characterizations of popular types, they are the visual equivalent of Quevedo's literary depictions of vernacular Spanish life. Like the writer of the picaresque novel Velázquez used rhetorical devices to introduce different levels of meaning in the narrative of his genre paintings. In appearance Velázquez' *Old Woman Frying Eggs* (1618. National Gallery, Edinburgh) and his *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1618. National Gallery, London) are both kitchen scenes; a closer analysis reveals in the background of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* the religious scene that gave the painting its title. The device used to introduce the religious narrative is a visual *mise-en-abîme*: a picture within the picture destined to an erudite audience.

Velázquez' portraits of Lezcano, de Acedo and de Morra have in common with his *bodegones* the use of rhetorical devices. In the portraits of the three men Velázquez' use of *conceitismo* is complex and involves educated imaginative leaps from the visual to the conceptual. It is only by studying the portraits of the dwarfs as a group and in the context of the Torre de La Parada alongside the portraits of Menippus and Aesop that one is able to reconstruct the narrative that reveals the ideological message contained in the paintings. In the portrait of Lezcano, there is a specific pictorial allusion to the lives of hermits and to St Paul's cave. In the portrait of Don Diego de Acedo the allusion to the cave is replaced by the conceit of the hermit as sage in the iconographic tradition of paintings of St. Jerome at work. In the portrait of Sebastian de Morra the alienation from social life and mundane pursuits is further abstracted through the total lack of a recognizable environment; Velázquez presents De Morra as existing only in an intensely emotional psychological realm (inside the cave of the hermit/philosopher).

The particularity of these three portraits resides in the fact that the dwarfs appear to us as Velázquez saw them: not as the grotesque court entertainers or buffoons of Renaissance paintings, not as curiosities, but as individualized characters sufficiently removed from the social environment of the court to be visually characterized as hermits, and psychologically and ideologically characterized as Cynics. I propose that in the portraits of the dwarfs Lezcano, de Acedo

and de Morra, Velázquez was alluding to the freedom of speech and intellectual stance of the Greek Cynics, a minor Socratic school founded in the fourth century B.C.E. who favored diatribe, humor and satire over philosophical argumentation.

The Greek Cynics believed in living life according to what nature had intended. They were noted for their austere lives and their scorn for social customs and conventions. Because there were similarities in the ways of life and ideology of later Cynics and of the first Christians, the Greek Cynics are considered to be the precursors of the *anchorites* and of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century. This helps explain why Velázquez characterized the dwarfs as hermits; it also refutes Enriqueta Harris' proposition that the portraits of the dwarfs did not belong in the company of such distinguished Greek philosophers as Democritus, Heraclitus, Menippus and Aesop in the Torre de la Parada.

Menippus of Gadara was a third-century B.C.E. philosopher who followed the Cynic philosophy of Diogenes of Sinope. He was a slave by birth and later purchased his freedom. Menippus developed a literary genre to criticize contemporary institutions, conventions and ideas in a mocking satiric style that combined prose and verse. This literary genre was revived in the sixteenth century and became extremely fashionable in Golden Age Spain; it was called Menippean satire.

According to Herodotus, Aesop was a slave who lived in the sixth century B.C.E. He gained freedom from his master and went to Babylon as a riddle solver to King Licurgus. Aesop was the author of moralizing fables featuring beasts, which he used as political arguments.¹⁰ While there is no record of the physical appearance of Menippus, Aesop was reputed to be ugly but wise and tradition described him to be a dwarf.¹¹

At Pacheco's Academia in Seville Velázquez interacted with painters, poets and writers and was educated in the study of letters. Velázquez was an erudite man; he read the classics as well as the works in prose and verse of his contemporaries. It is very likely that in Madrid he met the Castilian humanist and satirist Francisco de

¹⁰ The first known collection of his fables was produced by Demetrius Phalareus in the fourth century B.C.E. In the seventeenth century, Aesop's fables inspired the fables of Jean de La Fontaine.

¹¹ The central medallion of a kylix from the fifth century B.C.E. depicting Aesop with a fox portrays the moralist as a dwarf with achondroplasia holding a walking stick (The Vatican, Gregorian Museum); it corroborates the tradition.

Quevedo who was the master of a complicated form of expression called *conceitismo* depending on puns and elaborated conceits.¹² In such a cultural context, it is plausible that Velázquez saw the analogy between the Greek philosopher Menippus, the moralist Aesop and the palace dwarfs who also used mockery and satire in their social function. Thus it makes sense that Velázquez would chose *conceitismo* and metaphor to characterize the dwarfs as seventeenth-century Cynics. It can be argued that the painter translated visually the rhetorical form of the Menippean satire to make his point. In his naturalistic portraits of the dwarfs Lezcano and de Acedo, Velázquez painted “the truth” without embellishments; at the same time he quoted a religious iconographic model bringing together disjointed images of the dwarf and the hermit. In the larger context of the pictorial program for the decoration of the Torre de la Parada, the portraits of the dwarfs were juxtaposed to the portraits of Greek thinkers, thus creating a new set of apparently disjointed images. Armed with the knowledge (available through translations from the Greek) of the ideological continuity from the Greek Cynics to the early Christians and the Desert Fathers, the erudite viewer could reconstruct Velázquez’ story.

The dwarfs Lezcano, de Acedo and de Morra were at the court of Philip IV primarily because of their deformity; it was for them a better alternative than life outside the court. They were never enslaved but their predicament was similar to that of Menippus and Aesop; their role was to keep company to the royal family in exchange for being well fed and clothed. Lezcano and de Morra in particular, had to entertain and amuse the little prince. The dominant mode of cultural production during the Golden Age was the burlesque mode (Contag 56); the dwarfs and the buffoons provided the court with an element of burlesque because of their deviation from the norm. Velázquez saw the burlesque of the situation differently; prisoners of deformed bodies, the palace dwarfs had in his eyes acquired a noble status because they had the intellectual freedom of philosophers, poets and writers. They could caricature, mock and openly criticize what they observed in their environment. They had unrestrained freedom of speech because they were thought to be fools. Their satire could be blunt and more direct than Baroque writers’ satirical prose and poems. The writers had to navigate cautiously in order to keep their

¹² For discussions of Velázquez, Góngora and Quevedo refer to Lía Schwartz’ “Velázquez and two poets of the Baroque” (*The Cambridge Companion to Velázquez*, ed. Suzanne Stratton Pruitt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For further readings: Ignacio Navarrete, “Góngora, Quevedo, and the End of Petrarchism in Spain” (*Orphans of Petrarch. Poetry and Theory in the Spanish Renaissance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

patronage. The dwarfs were “part of the family”; at worst the dwarfs could be reprimanded but mostly they were for the king a truthful if impertinent voice unencumbered by the weight of social etiquette. Following in the footsteps of Diogenes of Sinope the dwarfs were the king’s friends and, like Velázquez his painter, they were the only people in his entourage the king could trust to give him an uncensored view of reality.

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