

Edited by Robin O'Bryan and Felicia Else

Giants and Dwarfs in European Art and Culture, ca. 1350-1750

Real, Imagined, Metaphorical

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Giants and Dwarfs in European Art and Culture, ca. 1350–1750

Monsters and Marvels. Alterity in the Medieval and Early Modern Worlds

This series is dedicated to the study of cultural constructions of difference, abnormality, the monstrous, and the marvelous from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including the history of science and medicine, literary studies, the history of art and architecture, philosophy, gender studies, disability studies, critical race studies, ecocriticism, and other forms of critical theory. Single-author volumes and collections of original essays that cross disciplinary boundaries are particularly welcome. The editors seek proposals on a wide range of topics, including, but not limited to: the aesthetics of the grotesque; political uses of the rhetoric or imagery of monstrosity; theological, social, and literary approaches to witches and the demonic in their broader cultural context; the global geography of the monstrous, particularly in relation to early modern colonialism; the role of the monstrous in the history of concepts of race; the connections between gender and sexual normativity and discourses of monstrosity; juridical and other legal notions of the monstrous; the history of teratology; technologies that mimic life such as automata; wild men; hybrids (human/animal; man/machine); and concepts of the natural and the normal.

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“And just as we consider Pygmies to be dwarfs, so they consider us giants ...
And in the land of the Giants, who are larger than we are, we would be
considered dwarfs by them.”

Attributed to Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Orientalis* (1216–24),
cited as an example of the Scriptural command to avoid judging
the oddities of other men

“Nothing in love: now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.”

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 2



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This volume stemmed from a session on “Giants and Dwarfs” that was originally planned for the Renaissance Society of America conference in Philadelphia in March 2020, but was moved online the following year because of the pandemic. Despite the virtual format, the exchange of ideas was dynamic and exciting, leading us to expand these papers into a broader set of studies for a book project. Although the extenuating circumstances of the pandemic limited research capabilities and extended the initial timeline for publication, our contributors are to be acknowledged for persevering during a difficult period. Special thanks to Erika Gaffney, a giant among editors for her coordination efforts, to Chantal Nicolaes for her herculean oversight of the production process, and to the anonymous reader and Luke Morgan for their earlier comments on the essays. We are also grateful to Gettysburg College for providing financial support.



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Introduction: Giants and Dwarfs as Real, Imagined, and Metaphorical Entities*

Robin O'Bryan

Abstract

This introductory chapter provides a broad survey of the ways in which the enthusiasm for giants and dwarfs pervaded European art and culture in the late medieval and early modern eras. As well as examining dwarfs and the occasional giant who served in the courts, the discussion extends to giants and dwarfs featuring in courtly and public festivities. From there it moves on to show how dwarfs became ubiquitous motifs in painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts, with giants portrayed literally or expressed metaphorically in colossal figures. As the investigation reveals, despite their variations in size, giants and dwarfs were frequently invested with the same symbolism and character traits, assigned magical properties, and viewed in both negative and positive ways.

Keywords: European courts, festivals, chivalric romances, monsters, apotropaia, gender

Published in 1868, Edward Wood's *Giants and Dwarfs* is a treasure trove of facts and legends about giants and dwarfs that range from the real to the improbable to the downright impossible. He tells us of biblical giants like the Nephilim who commingled with the daughters of men, and the mighty Goliath who was eight to twenty feet tall and killed by David.

* The essays in this volume adopt the terminology “dwarf,” recognizing that there is not unanimity among scholars for the use of this term. For related issues, see note 77 below. In accordance with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the plural “dwarfs” is also used rather than “dwarves,” the latter a variant popularized in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien in the 1930s.

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Among the mythological giants, the Cyclops Polyphemus lived in a cave and fed upon human flesh, with Antaeus of Libya meeting his match in his battle with Hercules. In Roman times the emperor Maximinus Thrax (the Thracian, r. 235–38) was said to have topped almost nine feet, his hands so large he used his wife's bracelet for a thumb-ring.¹ Over a thousand years later it was claimed that the Dutch giant Nicholas Kieten could carry men under his arms as if they were children, and that four people could stand together in one of his massive shoes.² Dwarfs, too, were described in equally fantastic terms. Conflated with the mythical pygmies of the monstrous races, they were similarly reputed to live in caves and likewise did battle with Hercules (after he defeated Antaeus with whom they had claimed an alliance). Of actual dwarf individuals, the grammarian and poet Philetas of Cos (ca. 340–ca. 270 BCE) was reputed to be so small and slender he had to keep lead in his pockets to keep from being blown away.³ At the opposite end of the tiny spectrum was Uladislaus Cubitalis, the mighty “pygmy king of Poland,” who lived in 1306 and whose victories in battle were deemed to be more glorious than his full-sized predecessors.⁴

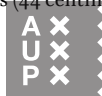
Wood's colorful recounting speaks to the societal fascination with giants and dwarfs that flourished in late medieval and early modern Europe when interest in such human marvels became an overarching cultural phenomenon. Contributing to their popularity was their portrayal in a range of literary works, both ancient and medieval accounts of the monstrous races, as well as theological writings, pseudo-histories, travelogues, scientific tracts, epic poems, and especially the chivalric romances and their parodical offshoots. From the first flowering of the Arthurian and Carolingian legends in the twelfth century until well into the seventeenth, regional authors produced their own variations in which dwarfs and giants played a role, the two often acting in concert with or pitted against each other. Part of folkloric traditions, giants and dwarfs also received prominent attention in the visual arts and entertainments, and in the pageants, carnivals, and fairs that were a mainstay of contemporary life. In this introductory chapter we look at the breadth of ways that the vogue for giants and dwarfs was expressed in European art and culture, touching upon some of the people

1 Wood, *Giants and Dwarfs*, 23.

2 *Ibid.*, 86.

3 *Ibid.*, 267.

4 *Ibid.*, 269. His name Cubitalis no doubt emanates from “cubit,” the ancient unit of measure that was equal to about 18 inches (44 centimeters).



and places, themes and subtexts that will be treated in more detail by the essays in this volume.

Dwarfs and Giants as Court Denizens

After the fashion of the Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors, dwarfs became a common fixture of the imperial, royal, and princely courts throughout Europe, where they served as requisite symbols of status and nobility for the ruling elite.⁵ Within the courtly household, dwarfs assumed a variety of functions. Special dwarf individuals were employed as personal attendants, valued for their loyalty, intelligence, and other remarkable qualities, and sometimes provided with their own servants and horses (and even houses).⁶ Others were entrusted with important tasks. As king of Spain Philip II (r. 1556–98) used his dwarf Gonzalo de Liaño (nicknamed Gonzalillo), not only as a *portero de cámara* (gentleman of the bedchamber), but also for diplomatic activities with the Italian courts, where he acted as informer and art agent.⁷ A few court dwarfs may even have provided spiritual counsel. Records indicate that in the early 1540s a *frate nano* (friar dwarf) accompanied Eleonora of Toledo from Naples to the Medici ducal court in Florence which later saw the Jesuitical dwarf Pietro Barbino in residence, while at the court of the Habsburg king Philip IV (r. 1621–65) in Spain one dwarf was listed as a *monja* (nun).⁸ Dwarfs might also be assigned the role of animal caretaker, serve as playmates to the ruler's children, or amuse the court with buffoon-like antics. Court

5 Although less studied, there is ample documentation of dwarfs serving in the medieval courts in England, Italy, Norman Sicily, Aragon, Castille, Portugal, Burgundy, France, Germany, and the duchy of Guelders. On their role as status symbols in the Italian Renaissance princely courts, see O'Bryan, "Grotesque Bodies, Princely Delight."

6 Catherine de' Medici's dwarfs were supplied with their own servants, and at the Medici court Pietro Barbino was not only allotted a servant but was also provided with a house. More impressive were the benefits accorded Jeffrey Hudson (1619–1682) at the royal court in London. As well as being furnished with a servant, he was given a gentleman's education (including French lessons that allowed him to better communicate with the French-born queen), and was instructed in fencing, shooting, riding, and dancing; see Postlewait, "Court Wonder," and further discussion in this chapter.

7 On Gonzalillo, see Kubersky-Piredda and Pons, "Travels of a Court Jester."

8 The list compiled in 1543 identifying those in Eleonora's household includes an entry for *il frate nano et un servitor* (the friar dwarf and a servant); Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato [hereafter ASF, MdP] 616, ins. 21, fol. 623r. On Pietro Barbino, who may have also offered the duchess spiritual counsel, see O'Bryan, "Tortoise, a Fish," 137. Moreno Villa identifies one dwarf at the Spanish court in 1624 as a nun in *Locos, enanos*, 20.

documents give abundant evidence of the extravagant gifts and luxurious clothing furnished the resident dwarfs, the latter an essential ingredient to enhance their appearance when accompanying their patrons in protocol and in portraiture.⁹ Outfitting the court's dwarfs in elegant fashions was an important marker of status, and hence nobility, in an age when clothes made the man (and woman).

As well as individual dwarfs offering their services to potential patrons, the court and its agents undertook efforts to acquire dwarfs from local provinces and other territories, near and abroad. Dwarfs were also presented as diplomatic gifts. In the sixteenth century dwarfs from Poland were popular, bestowed by Polish royals such as Sigismund II Augustus (r. 1530–72) and other Polish officials to the European courts with which they wished to curry favor.¹⁰ Although dwarfs of any size and bodily structure were welcome additions to the courtly entourage, especially desirable were those individuals possessed of proportionate stature, the dwarfs presenting as scaled-down versions of a body of normative stature.¹¹ Period chronicles, letters, and other writings took careful note of these “ideal miniatures.”¹² Arriving at the royal court in London in 1577 the proportionate female dwarf Thomasin de Paris became Elizabeth I's cherished companion, the queen favoring her with expensive gifts and dressing her in the latest fashion.¹³ Two years later Queen Regent Catherine de' Medici wrote the French ambassador to Constantinople, asking him to procure her one or two of the “well formed” (*bien formez*) dwarfs that were to be found in the circle of the sultan, and promising to reimburse him forthwith.¹⁴ Bianca Cappello, wife of Grand Duke Francesco I de' Medici (r. 1574–87), followed suit, her ambassador in Warsaw tasked to find her a dwarf *ben proportionata* (“well-proportioned”).¹⁵

9 Dwarfs were sometimes even provided with their own tailors. Court records for Catherine de' Medici list expenses paid to the dwarf's tailor in 1585; *Discours merveilleux*, 118.

10 Among the beneficiaries of dwarfs from Poland were Grand Duchess Bianca Cappello at the Medici court in Florence, Queen Catherine de' Medici, Emperor Charles V, King Philip II of Spain, Archduke Ferdinand II in Innsbruck, and Cardinal Ippolito Aldobrandini shortly before being elected Pope Clement VIII in 1592.

11 The definition given by the Mayo Clinic (“Dwarfism”) for proportionate dwarfism is when “all parts of the body are small to the same degree and appear to be proportioned like a body of average stature.”

12 Seemann uses this terminology in her essay in chapter 6.

13 See Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, 110.

14 The 1579 letter is quoted in Médicis and Baguenault de Puchesse, *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, 189 n. 1.

15 ASF, MdP 5928, fol. 106, letter from Alberto Bolognetti to Bianca Cappello, dated February 2, 1582.



In 1633 the French ambassador Duc Charles de Créqui came to the Holy See accompanied by his dwarf Michael Magnanus, lauded as “the marvel (*maraviglia*) of all Rome” for his tiny stature and proportionate limbs.¹⁶ Around the same time the proportionate dwarf Jeffrey Hudson, nicknamed “Lord Minimus,” was enlisted to serve as the personal attendant to Henrietta Maria de’ Medici, Queen Consort to Charles I of England (r. 1625–49). As well as Jeffrey’s use in royal diplomacy, he became famous for his exploits (including having been captured by pirates).¹⁷

Much less prominent because of their rarity, giants duly figured in European court life although not operating in the same capacity. (Nor, not surprisingly, does it appear that they were ever presented as diplomatic gifts.) In the mid-fifteenth century, the Burgundian duke Philip the Good (r. 1419–67) had the giant Hans, who was described by a chronicler as “the largest, without artifice, that I have ever seen.”¹⁸ In Jean de Chassanion’s *De gigantibus* (first published 1580), the French canon reported that King François I (r. 1515–47) had come across a giant in Bordeaux and lured him to his court to serve as a guard; finding court life was not to his liking the giant soon departed.¹⁹ The Catalonian giant Don Juan Biladons joined a host of dwarfs listed among the retainers of Philip IV in 1636, although that giant’s tenure also seems to have been short.²⁰ Giants were also attached to the Tyrolean courts of the Habsburg archdukes, where one served as a gatekeeper, another as a bodyguard.²¹ And at the courts of the English kings James I (r. 1603–25) and his son Charles I, two giants, Walter Parsons and William Evans, were assigned the role of porter, their heft duly perceived to be appropriate to their station.

16 See Lavin and Lavin, “Duchesnoy’s ‘Nano di Créqui,’” 133 and n. 9; and Lingo, *François Duchesnoy and the Greek Ideal*, 105. Magnanus is discussed further by O’Byrne in chapter 8 of this volume.

17 Postlewait provides the best account of Jeffrey’s life in “Court Wonder,” but also see Southworth, *Fools and Jesters*, 152–61; and Griffey, “Multum in parvo.”

18 [...] “ung geant plus grant, sans nul artifice, que je visse oncques”; quoted in de la Marche, *Mémoires*, 2:362.

19 Chassanion commented on his *mira corporis magnitudine hominem*; *De gigantibus*, ch. 6, 27–28; and cited in Wood, *Giants and Dwarfs*, 87.

20 Moreno Villa, *Locos, enanos*, 48.

21 In addition to Niklas Haidl who functioned as a gatekeeper for Archduke Sigmund (discussed by Rabanser in chapter 5 and see n. 39 below), the giant Bartlmä Bon (Bartolomeo Bona) served as a *Trabant* (bodyguard) for Archduke Ferdinand II. I thank Thomas Kuster for this information on Bon.

