

Born to Reign:
Velázquez's Gendered Portraits of the Spanish Infantes

Xena Fitzgerald
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King Philip IV ruled the Hapsburg Monarchy of Spain from 1621 to 1665. Under his reign Spanish imperial portraiture glorified the royal children as promises for the future success of the empire. Of course, due to their wealth and nobility, Philip's heirs experienced a rare and distinctive type of childhood. Grace Coolidge explains, "children of royal households were the first to be recognized as such in societies under the old regime, which traditionally did not view childhood as being different from adulthood."¹ Even so, childhood did not last long and the children were regarded with intense expectation and responsibility to someday become powerful rulers. Diego Velázquez's portraits of the infante, or prince, Baltasar Carlos who lived from 1629-1646 and the infanta, or princess, Margarita Teresa who lived from 1651-73. Today I will discuss how portraits of both children under the age of six use gender to promote each child's ability to rule as mature and capable adults. Although Velázquez represents the gender and power differences between the two children from their first portraits, he polarizes these distinctions as they age. He represents Baltasar Carlos as increasingly active and masculine and he represents Margarita Teresa as increasingly feminine and ready for marriage.

As a prominent figure in the Spanish court of King Philip IV, Velázquez served first as official court painter to the king, as well as in three other court positions closely related to Philip and his family. 18th century painter and theorist, Antonio Palomino, mentions the affection that Philip felt for Velázquez and notes that Philip even honored

¹ Grace Coolidge, *The Formation of the Child in Early Modern Spain* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 183.

him with the key to the royal bed-chamber.² Javier Portus describes how Velázquez, in his role as court portraitist, QUOTE “... used his art and culture to glorify the king and his entourage and played an important part in propagating the image of the monarchy.”³ END QUOTE. Velázquez’s respected status at court allowed him to interact directly with the infantes and infantas. Although most of Philip’s children died before the age of three, Diego Velázquez painted those that lived longer, including Margarita and Baltasar, continuously throughout their childhoods.

Velázquez painted his first portrait of the infante Baltasar Carlos (Fig. 1) to commemorate the swearing of the oath of allegiance to the prince by the Cortes of Castile.⁴ In his two-tiered skirt *de aceitera* (like a cruet) elaborately embroidered with gold, the two year-old infante stands regally in the center of the composition wearing his red sash of office and armored collar of his captain-general costume.⁵ Framed by rich red velvet curtain and burgundy oriental carpet, textures of royal splendor, he holds an object of military power in each small fist. In his right, a baton of command, and in his left, a sheathed sword.⁶ Instead of wearing it, his black hat with white feathers rests on a deep crimson cushion to his lower left. Apart from his delicate facial features, his bare head exposes his only undoubtedly infantile quality: his wispy blond hair.

² Antonio Palomino De Castro Y Velasco, *An Account of the Lives and Works of the Most Eminent Spanish Painters, Sculptors and Architects, and Where Their Several Performances Are to Be Seen* (London: Printed for Sam. Harding, 1739), 52.

³ Javier Portus, *The Spanish Portrait: From El Greco to Picasso* (Scala Arts Publishers, 2006), 31.

⁴ Jonathan Brown, *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁶ *Ibid.*,

To his lower right, a person of small stature, referred to at the time as a dwarf, turns his head to look back toward the young prince. While any adult of average height would tower over the infante, picturing him with a dwarf contributes to his power instead of diminishing it. Similar in height, Velázquez situates the dwarf lower in the composition and twists his body backward to direct attention and prestige toward Baltasar Carlos. Through their posture and the objects they hold, the infante, an adult-like child, and the dwarf, a childlike adult, function as foils. Victoriano Roncero López describes Baltasar Carlos's pose as QUOTE "appropriate for a king... already endowed with the seriousness and solemnity appropriate to the heir of the imperial crown."⁷ END QUOTE Alternately, the posture of the dwarf is informal and childlike. The dwarf furthers the juxtaposition between the two by holding a rattle and apple, casual and infantile objects that contrast with the military possessions that Baltasar must now hold instead of childish playthings.

Similarly, Velázquez painted his first portrait of the infanta Margarita (Fig. 2) when she was also two years old. The young princess glows brightly against a dark blue-green curtain while standing on a similar red and black ornamental rug. Velázquez portrays her with two feminine objects: a fan and a glass vase of flowers. She holds the closed fan in her left hand and rests her right next to the vase on what appears to be a table covered in the same jade fabric as the curtain behind her. The table does not have a sharp edge and recedes somewhat awkwardly back into space. The peculiarity of the table is emphasized by its miniature dimensions, as it is an appropriate size for the infanta but would be no taller than height of a short stool for an average adult. Just as the presence of the dwarf

⁷ Victoriano Roncero López and Esther Cadahía, "The Court Jester in 16th and 17th Century Spain: History, Painting, and Literature," *South Atlantic Review*, 72, no. 1 (2007): 107.

detracts from Baltasar Carlos's shortness, Margarita's tiny table reduces the obviousness of her infantile height.

As she has not yet adopted the highly gendered clothing of her later years, Margarita's floor-length skirt has two tiers and a similar gently sloping silhouette as her brother's in his first portrait. She has not yet been subjected to the wide womanly *guardainfante* skirt. She does wear a few feminine accessories: a delicate gold necklace, matching bracelets and a gold chain worn as a bandoleer.⁸ Her peach and silver dress is embellished with a black lace collar and cuffs and pink satin bows on her chest, shoulder, and waist. These features parallel adult fashions and although she is stout like a child, it is her round cherubic face and thin short hair, unadorned with any bows or feathers that she wears in later portraits, that inform the viewer of her young age.

By the time the children turned five, the style of their portraits focused on their gender to represent them as mature. In an equestrian portrait from 1635 (Fig. 3), Balthazar Carlos wears a highly masculine outfit of a black jacket, pants, white stockings, and red satin sash. An extravagant white plume tops his black hat. Velázquez portrays Baltasar in an active and dominant role, outdoors beneath a large sky, on horseback, and observed by several other figures. Behind him and to the left, stands a court dwarf clad in red. Three men dressed in black stand back and to the right. Deeper in the background, his parents and governess stand on a balcony of a large building to watch the young prince ride.⁹ Perched astride a rearing black pony in the lower left quadrant of the composition, Baltasar Carlos commands attention as the front-most figure. Mounted on a

⁸ Julian Gallego, "Velázquez," in *Velázquez*, ed. John O'Neill. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), 259.

⁹ Enriqueta Harris, "Velázquez's Portrait of Prince Baltasar Carlos in the Riding School," *The Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 878 (1976): 271.

pony instead of full sized horse contributes to the presentation of Baltasar as a full grown adult, just as the dwarf did in his baby portrait. Also similar to the first portrait, Velázquez emphasizes Baltasar Carlos's royal significance and power by placing him the highest compositionally even though he would be the shortest figure in actuality. Unfazed by the dramatic movement of his pony, Baltasar gazes outward with a serene expression that conveys his skill and composure.

Enriqueta Harris informs us that in the 1635 portrait Baltasar Carlos is at the Buen Retiro practicing his riding under the direction of Count Duke Olivares, Master of the Horse, the court member responsible for the Baltasar's education in horsemanship.¹⁰ The lance being handed to Olivares, the leftmost figure, is not a weapon, but a tool for running at the ring, a traditional entertainment festivity in Philip IV's court and presumably the next task that Baltasar will practice.¹¹ In the portrait, the infante is performing *levade*: an exercise in *haute école* riding during which the horse bends its haunches in a deep squat and raises its front forelegs for as long as possible, typically no more than five seconds.¹² Executing *levade* is perfect for demonstrating the rider's skill and thus his power, and even capability to rule.

John Moffitt explains, "The equestrian portrait was a form rich in historical associations, and in the seventeenth century the sitter's horsemanship alone—that is, his ability to ride well—could in both a literal and metaphorical way say much about his station and character."¹³ To portray Baltasar Carlos on horseback was to represent him in

¹⁰ Ibid., 272.

¹¹ Ibid., 270-1.

¹² John Moffitt and Walter Liedtke, "Velázquez, Olivares, and the Baroque Equestrian Portrait," *The Burlington Magazine* 123, no. 942 (1981): 536.

¹³ Ibid., 532.

the context of the sovereignty, a dominant theme in contemporary equestrian portraiture representing “an accomplished horseman who thereby demonstrates an ability to rule.”¹⁴ Painting the young Baltasar Carlos as an experienced horseman promoted a vision of the infante as a skillful, capable, and masculine ruler. Although equestrian portraits of women did exist, none of Philip IV’s daughters were painted on horseback.

In Velázquez’s portrait of Margarita at five years old (Fig. 4), the infanta fills nearly the entire composition. She is the sole focus of the painting and her elaborate costume displays her wealth, elegance, and femininity. Her blond hair styled in waves reaches down to her shoulders and is fastened with a pale peachy bow. Velázquez’s sensitive rendering of her facial expression, a skill praised by his teacher and father-in-law, Francisco Pacheco,¹⁵ holds the viewer’s attention with calm and noble sincerity that displays Margarita’s ability to act refined and mature. She wears the same white dress with black accents and central red bow as in her famous group portrait, *Las Meninas*, painted later that same year. Her lustrous skirt expands rigidly outward from its gathering at her thin waist in the center of the portrait, splitting the composition horizontally. The rigid skirt rushes downward at almost a ninety-degree angle until it skims the bottom of the frame and nearly stretches the entire width of the canvas. Encompassing the entire bottom half of the portrait, Margarita’s *guardainfante* style skirt gives the appearance of a feminine body that she does not have.

In 1656, the same year that Velázquez painted this portrait, Margarita’s older sister, María Teresa, wrote a letter to Margarita’s governess expressing how proud she

¹⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁵ Francisco Pacheco, “The Art of Painting,” in *Artists' Techniques in Golden Age Spain: Six Treatises in Translation*, ed. Zahira Veliz. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 103.

was of Margarita for behaving in a manner “so dignified” and “so womanly” at a court event.¹⁶ This portrait demonstrates the expectation that around the age of five girls should begin acting mature and composed. In comparison to her first portrait, Margarita’s hair and dress both characterize her as mature and womanly. Margarita’s long and natural hair can be interpreted as a sign of her womanly virtue since Charlene Villasenor Black explains that devotional texts of the time encouraged women to grow their hair long as a sign of subjugation to men and to appear “pleasing to divine eyes” since long hair resembled a natural veil.¹⁷ The length of Margarita’s hair also makes her appear older and more distinctly female, distinguishing her from her almost androgynous infancy and from boys of a similar age.

Margarita’s *guardainfante* style skirt was worn by women of diverse age, class, marital status.¹⁸ However, moralists condemned the large stiff skirt as immoral since *guardainfante* literally means “baby protector” as a reference to the skirt’s supposed (but unlikely) ability to hide illegitimate pregnancies.¹⁹ Despite being banned in 1639 by sumptuary law, the skirts became the official court style and, as Zahira Veliz remarks, QUOTE “...under the influence of Queen Mariana their size... increased to amazing proportions.”²⁰ END QUOTE. The infanta followed the fashion trend and after her initial portrait as a toddler, she wears them in all Velázquez’s portraits of her. The silhouette of

¹⁶ Coolidge, *The Formation of the Child*, 179.

¹⁷ Charlene Villasenor Black, “Love and Marriage in the Spanish Empire: Depictions of Holy Matrimony and Gender Discourses in the Seventeenth Century,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 32, no. 3 (2001): 648.

¹⁸ Amanda Wunder, “The Spanish Farthingale: Women, Fashion, and Politics in Baroque Spain” (presentation, Seminar in Renaissance and Early Modern Material Culture, Bard Graduate Center, New York City, November 5, 2014).

¹⁹ Zahira Veliz, “Signs of Identity in “Lady with a Fan” by Diego Velázquez: Costume and Likeness Reconsidered,” *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 1 (2004): 84.

²⁰ Wunder, “The Spanish Farthingale;” Veliz, “Signs of Identity,” 84.

the *guardainfante* exaggerates her femininity and physical maturity by amplifying the shape of a woman's hips, even though the five year-old infanta was still pre-pubescent and unable to bear children at the time of the portrait. The *guardainfante*'s association with fertility emphasizes Margarita's marriage potential, the main component of her power and responsibility as a future queen.

Margarita wore the same white *guardainfante* in Velazquez's second, more famous portrait of her that year, *Las Meninas*. *Las Meninas* has been understood through various and drastically diverse interpretations.²¹ For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss the work only as a portrait of the infanta Margarita, and her future as queen. In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez places an intense focus on the infanta because of her importance for the Hapsburg dynasty, which at the time was lacking a living male heir since Baltasar Carlos had died and Philip's new wife, Mariana of Austria, had not yet given birth to a son. At the age of five, Margarita's future marriage and role as a queen was already being considered. Even though she is only present in her reflection, Queen Mariana is the second most dominant person in the group portrait after the infanta. Apart from Velázquez, all of the court members depicted in the painting were under the authority of the Queen. Nanette Salomon argues that by intentionally giving the Queen the privileged position on the left side of the King in the mirror, Velázquez references and promotes the infanta's future court position and QUOTE "clearly opts for the dominance of the traditional mother-child relationship."²² END QUOTE. Interestingly, Margarita and her mother were not particularly close since the young and somewhat sickly Queen was pre-

²¹ Jonathan Brown, "On the Meaning of *Las Meninas*," in *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 57-77.

²² Nanette Salomon, "A Woman's Place: The Queen in 'Las Meninas,'" *Notes in the History of Art* 4, no. 2 (1985): 73.

occupied with producing a male heir.²³ Therefore, the emphasis on the Queen is purely symbolic of the future responsibility that Margarita would one day assume.

The brevity of childhood in Early Modern Spain prompted great pressure on the young heirs to appear mature and capable as rulers. Whether or not the children could fulfill their courtly expectations, it was Velázquez's duty to represent them as though they could. In discussing Velázquez's responsibility to use traditional conventions to portray the royal children, Moffitt comments: QUOTE "Art is itself a visual code, being the direct reflection of certain rigidly observed social structures fulfilling important didactic functions."²⁴ END QUOTE. However, I go beyond Moffitt's statement to argue that rather than reflect social expectations, these portraits *promote* social roles and expectations. As a master of portraiture, Velázquez is able to subtly represent the young Baltasar and Margarita as esteemed and sophisticated figures who command respect. Although Velázquez portrays their gender and power differences in each of their first portraits, it is not until they near five years old, what was then considered the end of childhood, that he portrays them as hyper masculine and hyper feminine. Velázquez employs the dichotomy of gender to advertise their maturity and thus their ability to rule.

²³ Coolidge, *The Formation of the Child*, 181.

²⁴ John Moffitt, "The Theoretical Basis of Velázquez's Court Portraiture," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 53, no. 2 (1990): 219.



Fig. 1 Diego Velázquez, *Don Baltasar Carlos with a Dwarf*, 1632. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced from ArtStor, www.artstor.org



Fig. 2 Diego Velázquez, *Infanta Margarita Teresa in a Pink Gown*, 1653. Oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna. Reproduced from ArtStor, www.artstor.org



Fig. 3 Diego Velázquez, *Equestrian Portrait of the Infante Baltasar Carlos*, 1635. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Duke of Westminster, Eccleston. Reproduced from ArtStor, www.artstor.org



Fig. 4 Diego Velázquez, *Infanta Margarita Teresa in White Garb*, 1656. Oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna. Reproduced from ArtStor, www.artstor.org

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