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Humanities Core 27702

10 June 2020

Animalized Enfreakment: The Elephant Man

Throughout history, the disabled body has been surrounded by mystery and scrutinized by society, and as a result, freak shows became a prevalent source of entertainment in the nineteenth century and the late twentieth century. Specifically, during this time period, several freak show performers were catapulted into stardom because of their disabilities or appearances, and among these prominent freak show performers is Joseph Carey Merrick, the “Elephant Man.” Merrick was born in Leicester, England on the 5th of August in 1862, and although he was born in seemingly perfect condition, he suffered from a congenital condition (Howell & Ford 58). This medical condition resulted in “thick lumpy skin” similar to that of an elephant, and although Merrick’s body was covered in these growths, it was most noticeable on his face and head (see fig. 1) (Merrick 256; Howell & Ford 368). From a young age, Merrick faced discrimination from others because of his deformity, and this prejudice and hatred would prevail for the majority of his life. In truth, Merrick’s life experiences were painful because the disabled body was viewed with disgust and horror during the Victorian era, and freak shows built on these beliefs and views to commodify the disabled body. Specifically, Merrick’s account in the 3-page pamphlet titled “The Autobiography of Joseph Carey Merrick” allows us to understand the adversities and judgment disabled people faced during this time period (see fig. 2) (Howell & Ford 343). Furthermore, Merrick’s case brings into question the ethics of freak shows and the

morality and issues of the medical gaze while examining the boundaries between humanity, animality, and disability through his animalized enfreakment.

During the nineteenth century, Victorian society largely ignored the needs of disabled people because they were a reminder of the imperfections of humanity, and this is evident in Merrick's treatment. According to Merrick's account in his autobiographical pamphlet, after his mother died, his father married his landlady. This union would prove troublesome to Merrick because his new stepmother was intent on tormenting him. She viewed him with disgust because of his deformity, and according to Merrick, she wasn't satisfied until he began searching for work. However, as Merrick began searching for an occupation, he quickly realized it would be a difficult endeavor; as a result of his deformity, "people would not come to the door to buy" his "wares" (Merrick 257). This caused Merrick great pain because he was unable to earn a living, so he went hawking on his own. But, unfortunately, his condition continued to worsen, and this attracted crowds of people who would gather around him and gawk at him. This specific detail is relevant because it portrays the unfair treatment disabled people suffered; they were viewed as inhuman or unnatural by others. Furthermore, while people were intrigued by disabled people they also viewed them with disgust and horror. For instance, according to Cindy Lacom in her article "The Time is Sick and out of Joint': Physical Disability in Victorian England," disabled people were simultaneously comforting and discomforting to spectators: "The freaks are both a visual signification of difference, comforting to spectators because they are not the ones on display, and a reminder of potential sameness" (549). They made spectators uncomfortable because they were a symbol of the grotesque and monstrous; people found themselves unable to glance away from the reality they were being presented with. While the disabled body may differ

from a “normal” body, our humanity establishes a firm connection between us. As a result, people tried to disrupt the connection between disabled people and able-bodied people.

In particular, England’s industrial growth introduced the concept of “normal” bodies in the workforce, and this concept further affected the image of disability because it portrayed disabled people as inhuman. According to Maria Rovito in her article “The Victorian Freak Show and the Spectacle of the Elephant Man,” England’s industrialization transformed the human body into an ‘extension of the machine,’ and this caused “the idea of the ‘normal’ man” to rise to prominence (6). This industrialization portrayed disabled bodies as broken, and it “punished individuals who could not support themselves, condemning many people with disabilities to the social role of parasite” (Lacom 547). Industrialization is referred to as a machine because there were several factories housing machinery built during this era, and the workers in these factories had to adapt to the loud and fast-paced environment for fear of being fired. Additionally, while industrial growth created new occupations for people during the Victorian era, they were incredibly exploitative, and it was an exhausting occupation. As Rovito and Lacom have suggested, disabled people were essentially barred from working in these factories because their bodies were excluded from the image of normalcy. These factory positions were made in mind for “normal” able-bodied people, and if a person did not meet these criteria, they were viewed as disposable and easily replaceable. These workers were functioning as interchangeable cogs in a machine. Moreover, this discrimination forced disabled people to depend on others’ charity to survive because their perceived value was based on their efficiency, and this resulted in the rise of freak shows. In order to earn a living, disabled people began finding employment with freak shows where their bodies were commodified.

Through the commodification of his body, Merrick's exhibition as the "Elephant Man" allowed him to establish himself as a working man and granted him visibility in the eyes of the public. As his condition worsened, Merrick became unable to continue working, and according to his account in the pamphlet, he decided to be exhibited in the freak show because he wanted to humbly earn a living (Merrick 258). This account reinforces Merrick's struggles with his identity and masculinity because he was unable to fulfill his expected role as a provider. For instance, in Nadja Durbach's article "Monstrosity, Masculinity and Medicine: Re-examining 'the Elephant Man'," she claims "the ability to earn enough to support oneself and one's family was essential to working-class notions of masculinity" (202). These core values were important in England during the Victorian era because society associated masculinity with financial stability. Furthermore, Victorian men placed a strong value on being able to provide for themselves and their families because their ability to work represented their strength and capacity. Unfortunately, oftentimes, disabled people weren't able to provide for themselves or contribute to their family's expenses because like Merrick, they were denied employment opportunities due to their disability and appearance. The only immediate solution available to them was to be exhibited in a freak show, and their earnings from the freak show allowed them to actively participate in a capitalist economy and regain a sense of normalcy (Lacom 549). Specifically, Merrick's manager, Tom Norman, claims in his memoirs that Merrick refused to beg for money; he claims Merrick did not want to 'live off of charity' (Durbach 202). These feelings may stem from Merrick's working-class background because Merrick had been working in unskilled occupations from a young age; therefore, he might have felt desperate to begin earning a living again and reassert his masculinity, and the freak show granted him this opportunity. Through the

freak show, he was able to distance himself from the “parasitic” nature typically attributed to disabled people and remain an active part of society.

Furthermore, Merrick was transformed into a half-man and half-elephant freak to garner more attention, and this animalized enfreakment exemplifies the complex process of creating a freak persona suitable for audiences. Despite their popularity, freak shows had to maintain an image in order to continue receiving the attention of the public. For instance, in the chapter “Exotic and Aggrandized: Modes of Presenting Freaks,” Robert Bogdan claims that the mode of presentation was an essential aspect of the freak show because “By using imagery and symbols they knew the public would respond to, showmen created for the person being exhibited a public identity, a presentation, a front, that would have the widest appeal, attract the most people, collect the most dimes” (139). As a result, freak show managers would actively change aspects of an individual’s story or present them in an exotic manner to increase revenue, and Tom Norman was no stranger to this method. By depicting Merrick as half-human and half-elephant in advertisements, Norman was able to gather crowds of people while Merrick toured as the “Elephant Man” because these images were able to support “the spectacle of the freak as an object to be observed within a habitat, much like creatures at a zoo or fair” (Rovito 16). Merrick’s deformity also reinforced his animalized enfreakment because, in addition to his thick lumpy skin, some of Merrick’s limbs resembled that of an elephant’s. According to Michael Howell and Peter Ford in their chapter “A Living Specimen,” Merrick’s “proportions were grotesque: a measurement of 36 inches was recorded for the head’s circumference, another of 12 inches for that of the right wrist and one of 5 inches for the most swollen finger of the right

hand” (47). These particular qualities allowed Merrick to truly embody the “Elephant Man” because it added to the illusion of his freak persona.

Additionally, by utilizing theories of maternal impression, Merrick’s condition was successfully transformed and weaved into a tale that would draw the attention of the public because it relied on scientific mysteries. During the Victorian era, people believed babies suffering from deformities were caused by maternal impressions; they believed the mother’s fear had been imprinted on the baby and resulted in deformities. In fact, Merrick also believed in these theories, and in his pamphlet, Merrick claims his deformity was caused by maternal impression because his mother had become frightened by an elephant during an animal procession while she was pregnant with him (255). In particular, the theories behind maternal impression increased the mystery behind Merrick’s exhibition because they allowed people to speculate for themselves, thus generating more publicity (Bogdan 161). Furthermore, these maternal impression theories further humanized individuals suffering from deformities because before these theories were widely believed by the public, deformed people had been seen as demonic or a “sign of a forthcoming disaster” (Bogdan 160). This theory was also beneficial to Merrick’s enfreakment because it removed the blame from him and portrayed him as a poor unfortunate individual. As a result, while Merrick’s enfreakment was animalized, the audience was able to perceive his suffering and sympathize with him.

Social constructs have also had a major influence on the way we view disability; consequently, Merrick’s inability to speak intelligibly supported the narrative of the “Elephant Man” since he was viewed as inferior, emphasizing the relationship between language, disability, and animality. Humans have used language to distinguish themselves from other species for

centuries and used it to justify their superiority. For instance, according to Sir Frederick Treves' memoir "The Elephant Man," when he first met Merrick in 1884, he "supposed that Merrick was an imbecile and had been imbecile from birth" because his face was devoid of emotion, and he was incapable of making his "utterances understood" (272-273). Treves' harsh judgment sheds light on the relationship between language, disability, and animality because his initial thoughts reflected ideals from Western philosophical tradition since he viewed language as an essential aspect of humanity (Ferguson 117). Treves thought Merrick's inability to convey emotion and articulate himself intelligibly was evidence of his stupidity without considering the difficulties his deformity presented him with. This notion is further reinforced by Christine C. Ferguson's chapter "Elephant Talk: Language Enfranchisement in the Merrick Case" in which she claims "The disabled body is deemed alien, not simply by virtue of irregular appearance or function but by the extent to which it is unable to perform the external cultural rituals associated with evolved humanity—the cojoining of thoughts to signs, for example" (120). If they were unable to verbally communicate with others, disabled people were socially viewed as inferior because this signified a lack of humanity. In fact, some people believed the inability to speak was a form of divine punishment, and they believed physical deformity was a visual representation of this punishment. Therefore, people treated disabled people with the inability to speak harshly because they were unable to voice themselves and stand against the discrimination they were facing. Disabled people were also likened to animals because they were perceived to be brainless creatures, and without a voice to defend themselves, they were left powerless, relying on others to articulate their narratives. This allowed Merrick's animalized enfreakment to perform well in the eyes of the public because his inability to speak drew a connection between his disability and

animality reinforcing the narrative of the “Elephant Man.” Specifically, in the chapter “Zoos, circuses, and freak shows: A cross-movement analysis,” Sammy Jo Johnson claims “It is ableist notions of what constitutes a ‘voice’ and ‘speaking out’ that positions animals as silent” (59). These ableist notions were particularly damaging because it equated disabled people with animals and forced them into a submissive role in society. Disabled people were objectified and viewed as curiosities, and their conditions were a source of scientific speculation.

In addition, Frederick Treves’ relationship with Joseph Merrick brings into question the morality and issues of the medical gaze because Merrick was essentially a living specimen. After Merrick had been abandoned by his road manager, he returned to London, and as fate would have it, he was reunited with Treves. As a surgeon at the London Hospital, Treves was able to secure Merrick with room and board at the hospital, and this allowed for Treves to maintain a close relationship with Merrick while staking “an exclusive claim to control over the exhibition of ‘the Elephant Man’s’ deformities” (Durbach 206). Later, in his memoir, Treves heavily criticized freak shows, and he portrayed them as deplorable businesses. He thought Merrick’s life had been “one dull record of degradation and squalor” (Treves 300). Treves thought the freak show had stripped Merrick of his humanity and autonomy. However, there is a certain sense of hypocrisy in these notions because Merrick was also exploited by medical professionals at the hospital. After Merrick became a permanent resident at the London Hospital, Merrick was photographed and displayed before others for scientific purposes, and “Treves, in fact, not only repeatedly photographed Merrick naked but brought a variety of medical practitioners to see him in the flesh” (see fig. 3) (Durbach 206; Howell & Ford 361-362). This particular behavior raises questions about the morality of the medical gaze because on separate accounts Merrick had

expressed discomfort at being seen nude (Durbach 206). Interestingly enough, hospital officials were instructed to keep Merrick from being bombarded by curious visitors (Durbach 206). It seems Treves and the other medical professionals only condoned the exhibition of Merrick's deformity through a scientific lens. They were only concerned with the scientific discoveries his condition could yield; therefore, they disguised their true intentions by portraying the hospital as a safe haven.

Moreover, while he was a resident at the London Hospital, Merrick was gradually being forced to surrender his autonomy. The hospital essentially functioned as a gilded cage for Merrick because "By casting Merrick as a charity patient, the hospital transformed him from a wage earner into a member of the deserving but dependent poor, a position that was inherently emasculating and infantilizing" (Durbach 203-204). This dependence on charity may have caused Merrick turmoil because he was left at the mercy of the medical professionals at the London Hospital; he was no longer able to work and reestablish his sense of independence. Furthermore, he was isolated from others at the hospital to preserve his dignity (Durbach 206). This allowed the hospital to remain in control of Merrick's schedule and his visitors, and it effectively reduced his contact with unauthorized visitors. While Merrick was isolated from others in the hospital, he was expected to entertain several distinguished visitors because their donations allowed Merrick to remain a permanent resident at the hospital. For instance, the Duke of Cambridge and the Princess of Wales visited Merrick several times while he was alive. These particular visits reinforce Merrick's loss of autonomy because while he may have enjoyed the company of certain visitors, these visits were transactional "as it was only the elite, whose philanthropy paid for Merrick's upkeep, who were entitled to see him in the hospital" (Durbach

207). The hospital attempted to justify the commodification of his body through the medical gaze because “For middle-class Victorians, selling one’s labour power for manual tasks was appropriate within the industrial capitalist system, but other forms of bodily commodification, such as prostitution or in this case the exhibition of a freakish body, challenged norms of respectable behaviour” (Durbach 203). These beliefs further dispel the morality of the medical gaze because the medical gaze also objectified and dehumanized disabled people. Specifically, Merrick’s visitors actively participated in these practices because they used their money and connections to witness his condition firsthand. While their fascination may have seemed innocent or like a natural reaction, it contributed to the lifelong struggle Merrick endured to establish his humanity.

In fact, after his death, Merrick’s skeleton was placed on display at the Royal London Hospital, further reinforcing the underlying connection between the medical gaze and the objectification and dehumanization of the disabled body. On the 11th of April, 1890, Merrick passed away while he was in bed. He was found lying on his back, and this was strange considering he was unable to sleep lying down because his head was too heavy. However, in his memoir, Treves claims Merrick’s desire to be a normal human being led to his demise:

He often said to me that he wished he could lie down to sleep ‘like other people’. I think on this last night he must, with some determination, have made the experiment. The pillow was soft, and the head, when placed on it, must have fallen backwards and caused a dislocation of the neck. Thus it came about that his death was due to the desire that has dominated his life – the pathetic but hopeless desire to be ‘like other people’. (292-293)

This particular interpretation of Merrick's death is callous because it portrays his desire to be normal as a foolish thought, and it ignores Merrick's pain and suffering. Moreover, Treves seems detached and dismissive of Merrick's struggles as a disabled person. For instance, Treves claims Merrick's desires were 'pathetic,' and this judgment is especially cruel because Treves had maintained a close relationship with Merrick. If anybody could have understood his longing for normalcy, it would have been Treves, considering he had behaved as a parental figure for Merrick. Specifically, in his memoir, Treves claims Merrick's death had freed him from his tortured life. Perhaps, Treves seemed indifferent because he viewed Merrick's death as a kindness since his condition left him in constant pain. In comparison, Norman believed he had committed suicide to escape the medical gaze; he believed this was Merrick's "last expression of bodily control, an act of manly defiance that was ultimately an explicit refusal to be further objectified" (Durbach 208). Throughout his lifetime, Norman believed that the hospital had been a more exploitative environment than the freak show because the hospital kept Merrick from establishing himself as a working man capable of supporting himself. Instead of granting him newfound freedom, the London Hospital imprisoned Merrick because he was forced to surrender his autonomy and become a living specimen for medical professionals to examine. In truth, Norman's notions were further reinforced because after Merrick passed away, his flesh was stripped off and his bones were "boiled down" (Durbach 208). After this, they displayed his skeleton and body casts in the Royal London Hospital, and once again, the "Elephant Man" became a source of scientific speculation. His skeleton was examined by several medical professionals in an attempt to classify his condition, and while scientific progress will always be relevant, this display is a bleak reminder of the morality and issues concerning the medical gaze.

Due to the rare nature of his condition, Merrick remained a source of scientific interest throughout his lifetime, and while his skeleton has been useful in several scientific breakthroughs concerning his condition, it seems inhumane to continue to objectify and dehumanize his body after his death. It has been over a century after his death, and his remains have not been laid to rest. This is truly saddening because Merrick struggled with his identity his entire life. Even in his last moments, he desperately wanted to be normal, and his skeleton will forever remain a symbol of his pain and sorrow because even in death he could not escape the medical gaze.

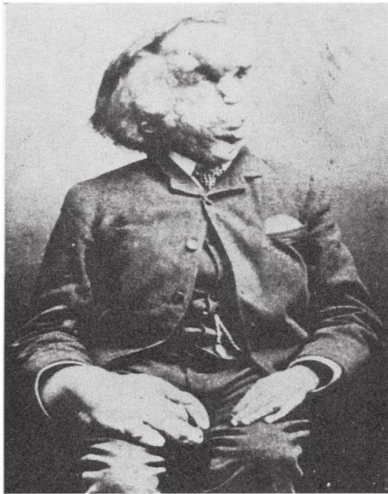
Altogether, the case of Joseph Carey Merrick's animalized enfreakment forces us to evaluate our own prejudices because it confronts us with our ignorance, and it effectively portrays the adversities disabled people have endured throughout the Victorian era. For instance, when people first witnessed the "Elephant Man," they exclaimed in horror and shock because his deformity was deemed as too "monstrous;" however, theories of maternal impression allowed the audience to sympathize with Merrick once they were reminded of his humanity. Freak shows were able to draw people in because they used different modes of presentation, and showmen utilized several techniques to blur the lines between animality and humanity. In particular, Merrick's animalized enfreakment is significant because it allows us to understand the impact of social and cultural constructs on disabilities. Additionally, Merrick's exhibition as the "Elephant Man" presented us with issues we have never experienced, and these issues are important to consider because they force us to acknowledge our misgivings and our ableist behavior. As a society, we need to modify our behavior and beliefs to prosper; we must address the injustices being committed against disabled people. Furthermore, through the medical gaze, we are able to understand the scientific scrutiny disabled people face. For instance, while the London Hospital

initially represented a fresh start for Merrick, his treatment there was simply an extension of the objectification and dehumanization that he suffered while being exhibited as the “Elephant Man.” Overall, Merrick will be remembered as an exceptional human being throughout the remainder of history, and his suffering and animalized enfreakment will continue to educate people and highlight the stigma disabled people endure.

Appendix

1. Fig. 1. Joseph Merrick in his 'Sunday Best'. Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. "Plates."

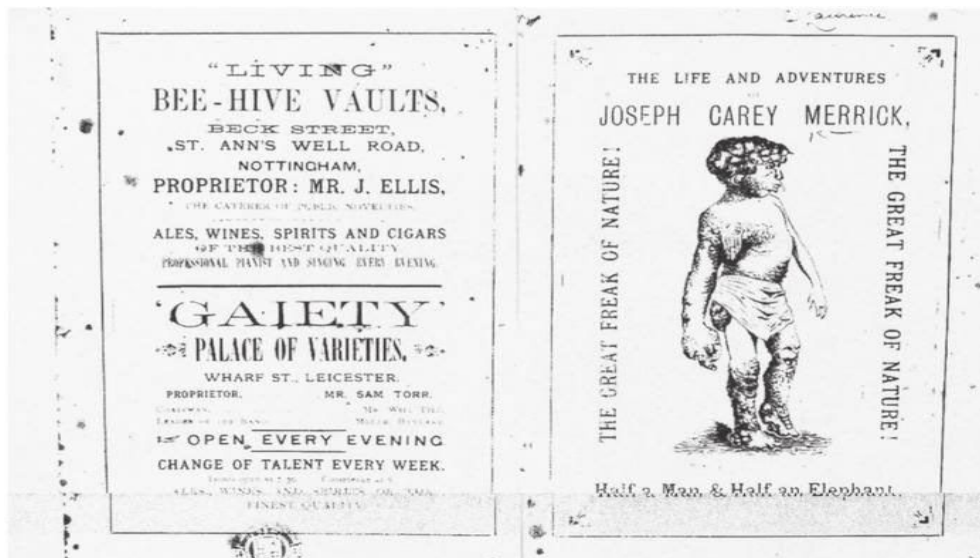
The True History of the Elephant Man, Scribd ed., Allison and Busby, 2011, pp. 368.



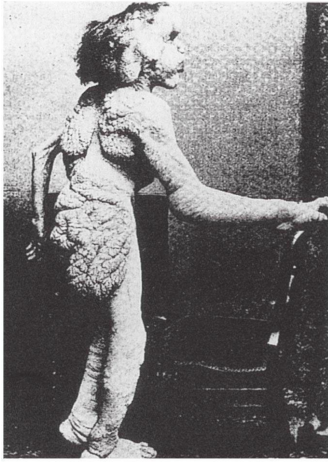
2. Fig. 2. The back and front covers of the pamphlet containing Joseph Merrick's

autobiography (*British Museum*). Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. "Plates." *The True*

History of the Elephant Man, Scribd ed., Allison and Busby, 2011, pp. 343.



3. Fig. 3. This photograph, probably one of the last taken, dates from 1888, when Joseph still had about 2 years to live. Howell, Michael, and Peter Ford. "Plates." *The True History of the Elephant Man*, Scribd ed., Allison and Busby, 2011, pp. 361-362.



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