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Animality, Monstrosity and Normality in Bernard Pomerance's The Elephant Man

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between animality, monstrosity and normality in Bernard Pomerance's The Elephant Man (1977), focusing on the theatrical representation of John Merrick and the conditions of his social recognition. Drawing on philosophical approaches to animality and perspectives from theatre and performance studies, it explores the representation of Merrick's body, the relationship between spectacle and spectatorship, and the significance of speech, artistic creation and social interaction. The article argues that Merrick's changing position in Victorian society does not simply represent a transition from monstrosity to humanity, but exposes the normative expectations through which human identity and social acceptance are defined. By examining the reversal of the gaze between Merrick and Treves, it further shows how the play challenges the boundaries between normality and monstrosity and invites audiences to reconsider their own position as spectators.

Keywords: Animality; monstrosity; normality; theatre; performance; spectatorship; Bernard Pomerance; The Elephant Man.

Introduction. Animality – Humanity

> Tityrus Do you dream of knowing more about this beech tree than it could know itself, if it had thought to induce it to believe that it conceives itself… I do not want to know except my happy moments. Today my soul becomes a tree. Yesterday I felt like it was water. Tomorrow what will I feel like?…

> Can I ascend to the heavens with the smoke of incense or wander high above the plains with the same feeling of power that a vulture has hanging on its slow-moving wings, do I know?
>
> Lucretius You are, then, nothing more than a series of transformations, Titus… (Valery, 2007: 10-11)[1]

This article focuses exclusively on Bernard Pomerance's The Elephant Man (1977), examining how the play stages and interrogates the boundaries between animality, monstrosity and normality through the theatrical representation of John Merrick. Drawing on philosophical perspectives on animality and anthropocentrism, and engaging with approaches from theatre and performance studies, it explores the ways in which Merrick's body is constructed as an object of display and becomes the site upon which distinctions between the human and the animal, the normal and the monstrous, are produced and negotiated. Attention is paid to the relationship between spectacle and medical observation, the organisation of spectatorship, and the social practices through which Merrick gradually becomes recognisable to others. The analysis further considers the significance of speech and artistic creation, as well as the reversal of the gaze in Merrick's later speech about Treves. Rather than interpreting Merrick's changing social position as a straightforward movement from animality to humanity, the article argues that the play exposes the normative criteria through which social recognition is granted and normality maintained. In doing so, it aims to explore how the theatrical representation of Merrick brings into view anthropocentric assumptions and cultural practices through which bodies are classified, interpreted and assigned social value.

Exploring the notion of animality[2], I was inevitably led to a conceptual pendulum oscillating between the human and the animal subject, the rational (human) and the irrational (animal) self[3]. If the constitution of human identity is affirmed or negated through perceived similarities and differences in relation to the other, it seems that the most decisive and seemingly unshakable criterion of comparison lies in rational thought, through which the human subject recognises and reflects upon itself as an entity, in contrast to other forms of living existence, such as the beech tree alluded to Valéry's dialogue[4]. Reason and its derivatives (technique, technology, and the development of the sciences and the arts) have enabled humankind to subjugate and brutally exploit other species, positioning them as inferior[5], throughout the history of Western civilisation, both

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[1] Valery, P. (2007) *Dialogue on the Tree* (trans. Claire Mitsotakis), Agra, Athens, pp. 10-11.

[2] Pefanis, G.P. (2018), *Theatrical Bestiaria . Theatrical and Philosophical Scenes of Animality*, Papazisis Publications, Athens pp. 17-144; Felice Cimatti, *Unbecoming Human. Philosophy of Animality After Deleuze* (translated by Fabio Gironi), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2020, pp. 1-27.

[3] Chinati, regarding the animal element contained in the human, proposes an analogical metaphor between the dipoles human-animal and spirit-body: just as the spirit (which represents the human element) tries to prevail over the body (which represents the animal element) and tame it, so too the human animal (Homo Sapiens) tries to prevail over the non-human animal. Cimatti , *Unbecoming Human* , pp. 2-42.

[4] Although at the end of the dialogue, through a poetic metaphor, Lucretius claims that the tree can be contemplated, but not re-contemplated . Paul Valery, *Dialogue on the Tree* , pp. 38-42.

[5] For a historical review of the stages in the Western history of philosophy regarding the established dualism between human and non-human animals, the humanity-animality dipole and human specific authority throughout the course of Western civilization, see Pefanis , *Theatrical Bestiary* p . 17-144.

in the sphere of labour and production and in that of the sciences, the arts and their spectacular forms (Pefanis, 2018, pp. 17–144; Cimatti, 2020, pp. 1–27; Derrida, 2008; Bakunin, 2000 [1917])[6].

In response to this anthropocentric tradition, contemporary humanities and the arts[7], questioning the (moral) legitimacy of the anthropocentric (logocentric) model of power and recognising the common ontological basis shared by different species[8], have increasingly turned their attention towards reconsidering the oppositions and dividing lines that separate human from non-human animals (Wolfe, 2009, pp. 564–575; Pefanis, 2018, pp. 26–29). However, a fundamental problem in this discussion lies in the fact that it is itself conducted in terms of humanity, that is, from an anthropocentric perspective, since human consciousness, articulated through speech, remains an inescapable prerequisite for the (self-)analysis of the human spirit and culture (Derrida, 2008; Cimatti, 2020)[9]. Is it ever possible to transcend humanness and speak about and with non-human animals on equal terms? Is a paradigm shift necessary in order to move beyond this oxymoronic scheme and the paradoxes to which it repeatedly leads us? Or, if we accept that anthropocentrism is inevitable, should we instead seek more holistic and inclusive approaches to the issue (Boddice, 2011, pp. 1-18)?

The incorporation of an aesthetic of animality into contemporary art, understood as a value in itself, may open up an alternative perspective that is well worth exploring, one that could subvert, provoke and stimulate reflection on these issues, as Rob Boddice suggests in discussing Marc Fellenz's position (Boddice, 2011, p. 10). What, then, might an aesthetic of animality mean? Perhaps one that would remind us of, and awaken, the animal dimension within ourselves that we have lost? The acuity of the senses, the speed of reflexes, physical strength and flexibility, sexual instincts, reproductive capacity, physicality in its broadest sense? Returning to Valéry's passage at the beginning of this paper, when Tityrus expresses his desire to experience different forms of life and manifestations of nature in order to attain happiness, invoking the tree, water, air and the vulture, Lucretius replies that he would then be nothing more than a series of transformations. That is, an actor.

Theatrical art, through the performative condition, activates and releases the multiple expressive possibilities of the actor's body (movement, voice, rhythm, reflexes

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Cimatti , *Unbecoming Human,* p . 2-42; Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (ed. Marie-Luise Mallet, transl. David Wills) Fordham University Press, New York 2008, pp . 1-27 · Michael Bakunin , Animality and Humanity (translated by G. Vrisimitzakis, Free Press, Athens 2000 ([1]1917), pp. 14-32

[6] Pefanis, *Theatrical Bestiaria* pp. 17-144

[7] Especially interdisciplinary humanities and studies (animal studies , human animal studies) see Cary Wolfe, "Human, All Too human: "Animal studies" and the humanities", *PMLA* , 124/2, Cambridge University Press, (2009), pp . 564-575· Pefanis , *Theatrical Bestiary* p . 26-29

[8] Semantically and ontologically, the existence of both is mutually interdependent and discourse-determined as described by Derrida and Cimatti. Furthermore, analyses of concepts such as "person", "subject", "perception", "language" and others, each time echo the historical, social, political and cultural context of their time. Regarding the approach to a common ontological basis, see Derrida , *The Animal That Therefore I Am* · Cimatti , *Unbecoming Human* , pp. 2-42·

[9] For an extensive discussion of the paradox of the anthropocentric perspective and the impossibility of overcoming it, see Rob Boddice, " Introduction. The End of Anthropocentrism," *Anthropocentrism Humans, Animals, Environments* (ed . Rob Boddice), Leiden, Boston 2011, p . 1-13· Pefanis , *Theatrical Bestiary* p . 32-33 · Cary Wolfe, p . 568-570 · Derrida, p . 5-6, 37 · Cimatti , pp. 3-5, 25-27

and sensations) (Terzopoulos, 2015, pp. 13–15)[10], while simultaneously awakening and mobilising the bodies of the spectators. This occurs through what has been described as "kinesthetic empathy" (Garner, 2015, pp. 81–103)[11], which enables a form of psychosomatic identification and participation. The theatrical stage, therefore, through the dynamics of shared experience, can potentially function as a "laboratory of embodied ideas" (Pefanis, 2018, p. 26), a space for the construction of meaning and a meeting ground for the human and the animal (human and non-human) (Chaudhuri, 2007, pp. 9–11), raising questions concerning their relationships, similarities and differences, attractions and repulsions, dependencies and autonomies, as well as their mutual definitions and meanings. It is in this light that the present article examines Bernard Pomerance's The Elephant Man, exploring the relationship between the human and the animal through the play's representation of monstrosity and its interrogation of the boundaries separating these categories.

1. The body on display: animality and the production of monstrosity

Pomerance's play, performed in 1977[12], is based on the true story of Joseph Merrick, or John Merrick, as he is named in the play, a man whose body was severely disfigured by a rare condition that ultimately led to his death at the age of just twenty-seven (Pomerance, 1979; Treves, 1923) (Fig. 1). The play draws on The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences by Frederick Treves[13], the doctor who cared for Merrick during the final four years of his life and who also appears as a central character in the play. Very briefly, the action is set in Victorian London between 1884 and 1890, with the exception of one scene that takes place in Brussels. The plot follows John Merrick, who, in the opening scenes, is exhibited in freak shows as a means of survival. When his manager abandons him, having stolen half of his earnings, Merrick turns to Dr Treves for help. Treves takes him to the London Hospital, where he works, examines and treats him, and secures his continued residence there for the next few years, until his death (Pomerance, 1979). In scene 2, Treves presents Merrick before an audience of medical students in the hospital amphitheater, turning the examination into an occasion for medical observation and knowledge. Although the purposes of these settings differ, both the freak show and the

[10] Theodoros Terzopoulos refers extensively to how, through the continuous physical practice of theatrical techniques, the hidden and repressed archetypal body in actors is activated, which functions as a "source of unprecedented psychosomatic energy" that allows them to "fertilely cultivate sensation, instincts, and imagination." Terzopoulos, Th. (2015) *The Return of Dionysus* , Athens: Attis Theatre pp. 13-15

[11]Stanton B. Garner explains that neurological research on the brain's mirror neurons has shown that a person can experience the movements, reactions and emotions of other people they observe as if they were their own through "kinesthetic empathy" that allows them to identify with the other. However, because the process of psychosomatic identification can be traumatic for a person in their daily life and therefore activate distancing mechanisms for self-protection, theater is a safe space for releasing emotional associations and therefore can also function psychotherapeutically. Stanton B. Garner, " In Search of Merrick: Kinesthetic Empathy, Able- Bodiedness , and Disability Representation", *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* , 29:2, (2015), pp. 81-103.

[12] The play, as performed at Hampstead Theatre in London in 1977 and at the Booth Theatre in New York in 1979, consists of 21 separately titled scenes and 18 characters. The text was published in 1979, two years after its first production. Pomerance, B. (1979) *The elephant man* , New York: Grove Press.

[13] Frederick Treves, *The elephant man and other reminiscences* , Cassell and Company, London-New York 1923. https :// archive . org / details / elephantmanother 00 trevuoft [21/11/2022]

hospital amphitheater organize a collective gaze that turns Merrick's body into an object of observation and interpretation. The freak show presents his body as an object of entertainment and curiosity, whereas the hospital frames it as an object of medical scrutiny and scientific inquiry. In both contexts, however, Merrick is placed before an audience whose act of looking contributes to the construction of his identity as an extraordinary and abnormal body.

Most of the scenes take place in the hospital, where we follow Merrick's personal and social development through his interactions with the doctor and with distinguished visitors from the upper bourgeoisie and aristocracy. Having learned his story through the press, these visitors seek his company and maintain their interest in him until the end. Yet Treves's care for Merrick may also be considered in a more ambivalent light: alongside his genuine concern for the man, one might ask whether Merrick also serves to affirm the doctor's own virtues and his identification with the ideals of Victorian society. On a second level of reading, I would argue that the play stages what appears to be the protagonist's transition from a state of animality and monstrosity to one of humanity.

The first scene of the play introduces us to the atmosphere of the Victorian era and to a freak show in which, among others, John Merrick is exhibited as a unique case of the monstrous human, provoking both fear and laughter, as well as mockery. The words of Ross, his troupe leader, who addresses passers-by in an attempt to attract them as spectators, leave no doubt about the dire circumstances in which the protagonist finds himself:

> ROSS Pain and agony! Repulsive, hideous, he will find no solace anywhere. Come. Only two pennies! Come on, people! He has never been so ugly, so deformed, crippled forever, just as he will be in pain for the rest of his life! (Pomerance, 1979: 19)[14]

The protagonist's placement within this setting, where pain and physical vulnerability are exploited for public entertainment, together with Ross's disparaging language, conveys the social and private context of the grim reality that the play unfolds. It is an era in which bodily difference is socially stigmatised and the suffering body is in danger either of remaining permanently excluded from public space and visibility or, conversely, of becoming an object of public display, exhibited as an exemplary figure of horror and difference. Such representations were also sustained by a social imaginary steeped in superstition, which often placed the blame for a child's bodily difference on the mother, particularly during pregnancy (Wilson, 2002, pp. 1–25)[15]. Prejudice against bodily deformity had also acquired a scientific legitimacy as early as the eighteenth century, when the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus classified certain people with physical

[14] All quotations from the play are taken from the 1979 Grove Press edition (hereafter cited parenthetically by page number).

[15] Wilson takes a historical look at the beliefs/traditions found in different countries and cultures even today, with various recorded examples, where the birthmark, something special that a newborn bears , is the result of a desire, a longing of the mother who, during her pregnancy, was not satisfied, or was unable to handle a psychological trauma, or was so "sinful" that she was punished with giving birth to a monstrous creature. It is even said that in the case of John Merrick, his mother had an accident at a zoo and suffered traumatic shock when she was confronted by an elephant, hence the form her child took on. Ibid. pp. 2-8.

anomalies under the category *Homo monstrosus,* distinct from *Homo sapiens* (Wilson, 2002, pp. 8–9).

In this light, one could argue that the public exhibition of people with bodily differences could also serve a normative function. The terrifying "other" affirms and reinforces the spectator's sense of belonging to the category of the normal *Homo sapiens* and the able-bodied. Treated as creatures of a lesser God, those designated as *Homo monstrosus* are thus positioned in a relation of proximity to non-human animals, condemned to exploitation, exclusion, ridicule and violence on account of their appearance (Chaudhuri, 2007, pp. 15–16)[16]. This dehumanizing logic is also evident in the language used by the characters throughout the play. Ross repeatedly calls upon the crowd to "Come and see for yourself!" (p. 19), presents Merrick as "the wrath of nature" (p. 20), and later denounces him as a "Monster of nature!" and a "failed monster" (p. 27). The Souvlitses refer to the exhibited people as "a public insult" (p. 26), while Ross addresses them as "animals" and demands that they "learn the right words" because they are in the asylum (p. 26). Even the policeman who intervenes to save Merrick from the crowd addresses the others in disparaging terms (p. 28). The Controller's remark that the crowd "wanted to tear him to pieces!" (p. 28) further conveys the violence that underlies the spectacle.

2. From animalized body to social recognition

In the opening scenes, Merrick is deprived of privacy and denied dignity and respect by those around him. He seems to have no right to an identity of his own other than that of the exhibited "monster", whether in the entertainment venues or in the hospital amphitheatre. However, when he moves to the hospital, where he spends the remaining years of his life with the help and care of the doctor, the hospital staff and his distinguished visitors, he gradually comes to experience conditions in which these dimensions of his personhood can emerge and be recognised. He thus moves towards becoming what he seems to have desired from the beginning: a socially recognised human subject whose identity is not defined by his external deformity. Merrick's gradual transformation from the monstrous, animalised figure he has been made to represent into a subject whose identity is no longer defined by these designations is articulated through a series of symbolic changes:

Smell. His previous stench, associated with the strong smell of animals, is repeatedly used to express disgust and rejection: "You're a stench! Go away, dirty! Go away! Away from me! Dirty, just a stench" (p. 27). This gives way to the daily baths he receives in the hospital, which may be read as a symbolic element of the civilising process through which he is gradually incorporated into a different social environment.

Speech. From Merrick's initially limited speech and monosyllabic responses in the first scenes, when he is described as an idiot — "He's an idiot, he doesn't understand... he hears his own name, that's all" (p. 27) — we move towards the eloquence he gradually displays in the hospital, where he develops increasingly complex conversations with the doctor and his other visitors.

[16]Chaudhuri explains how the myth of beauty influences all theories of discrimination and authoritarian models such as speciesism, racism, sexism. Chaudhuri (pp. 15-16).

Skills and artistic creation. In the opening scenes, in the freak show, Merrick does absolutely nothing; he is simply an exhibit, deprived of any possibility of agency or perspective: "John Merrick has no hope! His condition is finished!" (p. 19). In the hospital, however, he discovers the opportunity to develop and practise his artistic interests and skills, such as painting and miniature sculpture. Through these activities, he gradually gains recognition and admiration from visitors belonging to the upper bourgeoisie and aristocracy. The Duchess, for instance, exclaims: "How beautiful the model is becoming, Mr. Merrick!" (p. 46); the Lord encourages him: "Congratulations! Keep going, keep going!" (p. 46); while Mrs Kendall declares: "You are an artist, John Merrick, an artist!" (p. 47). Merrick himself makes this distinction explicit when his former impresario visits him at the hospital: "Do you see this church? I'm making it... I'm not some little dog jumping around in the circus!" (p. 52).

Critical thinking. From the helpless creature presented in the opening scenes, who does not even react to his exploiter or to the people who mock him, Merrick gradually develops, during his stay in the hospital, into a witty and reflective man who engages with various ethical questions (scenes 9 and 16). He comes to recognise the doctor's power over him and to question the ethical implications of the power relations that have developed between them. By scene 17, he is even able to describe, with irony, the doctor's "normal life" and "normality". Merrick himself offers an insight into this development somewhat earlier, in scene 11, during his conversation with Mrs Kendall: "Before I started talking to people, I had not thought about all this, because I had no one who cared to think about it" (p. 44).

Charity. From the condition of crude and brutal exploitation in the circus, Merrick now moves to a situation in which he is able to sustain himself through the charity prompted by the fame he has acquired. Members of the bourgeoisie visit him, showering him with gifts, compliments and courtesies: "Accept these silver brushes and the comb with my wishes"; "I brought you a cane with a silver handle" (p. 46). Merrick, for his part, appears to have a clear understanding of this mutual exchange, of the supply and demand of what we might schematically call "humanity". One of his comments about the doctor in scene 17 is particularly revealing: "From his forehead projects a normal vision of philanthropic contemplation – what we call a 'state of complacency'".

Social recognition. From a position of almost complete isolation, in which he is an object of ridicule and is regarded as a threat who inspires fear in those who encounter him - "How can you live when you see in the eyes of those who look at you the terror and hatred?"; "he is trampled in the crowds who pay to see him and scream in terror" (p. 20) — Merrick becomes the focus of attention and a central interlocutor of his doctor, Mrs Kendall, the Bishop and other distinguished visitors. Moreover, he becomes the figure through whom they themselves construct and affirm their identities: a model, or mirror, for their self-definition through the positive similarities they perceive between themselves and him, rather than through the differences that had previously defined him as "ugly", "repulsive", "hideous", "crippled", less human and more monstrous. In scene 13, his recognition as a human being and as a figure of social value reaches its dramatic climax, as his interlocutors compete to demonstrate how many characteristics they share with him:

BISHOP I fought just as he fights (…)

GOM He seems practical like me (…)

MRS. KENDALL He is gentle, soft, kind - almost like a woman (…) He looks a lot like me.

TREVES I find him to have a restless, inquisitive spirit (…) He is like me, Freddy Treves. (Pomerance, 1979: 48)

3. The reversal of the gaze: normality under examination

In the final scenes, John Merrick's transformation, his transition from his animal self to his human self, appears to have been completed. He has become a kind and witty speaker, a studious and pious man, with artistic interests and skills. But what were the conditions and sacrifices required for this transformation to take place? He had to adapt to established rules and obey them, even when he did not believe in them, because this was supposedly "for his own good", as Dr Treves repeatedly emphasised. He also had to renounce the expression of his sexuality, a sacrifice that may be understood as part of the suppression of his animality. In this respect, he seems indirectly to question the authority of science and human civilisation to impose such demands upon him. The freak show presents his body as an object of entertainment and curiosity, whereas the hospital frames it as an object of medical scrutiny and scientific inquiry. In both contexts, however, Merrick is placed before an audience whose act of looking contributes to the construction of his identity as an extraordinary and abnormal body.

We encounter this critical perspective in his long monologue in scene 17, in which Merrick describes Dr Treves in terms similar to those he had used to describe himself, particularly his physical condition, when addressing the students in the university amphitheatre in scene 2. The doctor has now become the object of Merrick's observation, in a symbolic reversal of their roles:

> MERRICK […]The left hand is weaker and more righteous. Here we see it protectively covering the genitals, which are considered organs of shame and must be punished: for their own good.[…] When this poor fellow was a child, he had a mental split that resulted in disability, and so he is unable to feel as others feel. […] If we had cared earlier, we might have prevented it. But now the situation has spread to East and West. (Pomerance, 1979: 57-58)

Conclusion: the renegotiation of animality, monstrosity and normality

Through the theatrical representation of John Merrick, Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* brings into question the boundaries separating animality, monstrosity and normality, exposing the cultural and social processes through which these categories are constructed and maintained. Merrick's trajectory, from the exhibited figure of the freak show to a socially recognised subject within the hospital, does not simply represent a

transition from animality to humanity. Rather, it reveals the conditions under which an already human subject becomes recognisable and acceptable to others. His gradual acquisition of speech, the development of his artistic abilities, his critical thought and his participation in social life appear to facilitate this recognition. Yet these same processes also expose the normative expectations to which he is required to conform: cleanliness, eloquence, self-discipline, religious devotion and obedience. His apparent social integration is therefore accompanied by restrictions and sacrifices, most significantly the renunciation of his sexuality, which raises questions about the price of acceptance within a society organised around specific ideals of normality.

The ambivalence of Treves's relationship with Merrick further complicates this process. The doctor's care and protection coexist with relations of authority and dependence, while the philanthropy of Merrick's distinguished visitors may also serve to affirm their own moral and social identities. In this respect, Merrick gradually ceases to be merely the object of other people's observation and becomes capable of examining and judging those who observe him. The long monologue in scene 17, in which he turns the language of medical examination back upon Treves, marks the culmination of this reversal of the gaze. The doctor, who had previously occupied the position of the observing and interpreting subject, becomes himself an object of scrutiny. Through this reversal, the play unsettles the authority of scientific knowledge and philanthropic benevolence, revealing their possible entanglement with the norms and power relations through which bodies are classified and evaluated.

The theatrical dimension of this process is equally significant. By placing Merrick's body before the gaze of other characters and, ultimately, before that of the audience, the play recalls the spectacle of the freak show while also exposing the mechanisms of looking, categorisation and judgement that sustain it. The spectator is thus invited to consider the relationship between the public that once gathered to stare at Merrick, the medical observers who sought to understand his body and the theatrical audience that watches his story unfold. The stage becomes a space in which the boundaries between observer and observed, normality and monstrosity, human and animal are repeatedly brought into question.

Ultimately, *The Elephant Man* does not offer a simple reversal in which the monstrous becomes human and the normal becomes monstrous. Rather, it exposes the instability of the very distinctions upon which such classifications depend. Merrick's story reveals that monstrosity is not an inherent quality of the body but a designation produced through particular cultural perceptions, social practices and relations of power. By making visible the processes through which humanity and normality are attributed, withheld or negotiated, Pomerance's play challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that organise the relationship between the human and the animal. It also turns the question of recognition back towards the spectator, inviting a reconsideration not only of the body that is being observed, but also of the gaze through which it is judged.

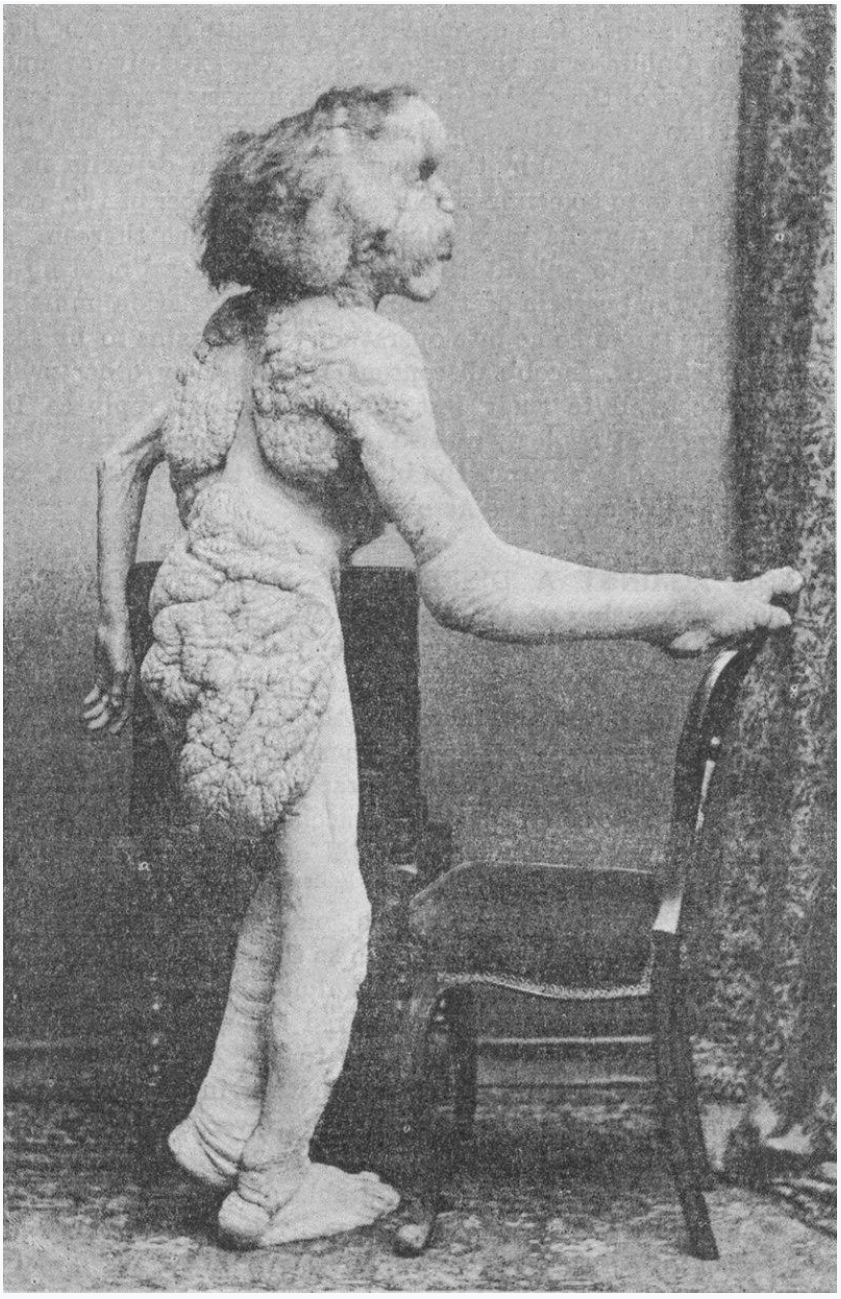


Figure 1. This photograph by an unknown artist was published in 1890 in the British Medical Journal announcing the death of Joseph Merrick. "Death Of The 'Elephant Man.' The British Medical Journal, vol. 1, no. 1529, JSTOR, 1890, pp . 916–17. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20238863. [29/11/2022]

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