Victorian Freaks
Tromp, Marlene

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The essays in this section are attempts to open some broader questions, through examination of particular material examples of freakery. Heather McHold’s essay serves as an introduction to the debates about who had the authority to demand ownership of and talking rights on “freakery,” examining P. T. Barnum in the context of his English reception. While her discussion reveals the role of performance advertisements and a rhetoric of middle-class respectability on medical discourse specifically, her argument also challenges us to think through what other British institutions might have been competing to create or might have been in part created by the discourse of freakery. Joyce Huff’s essay on Daniel Lambert and cultural rhetoric of consumption speaks to specifically British notions of consumption and class dynamics. Her essay provides an English refuguration of scholarship on American consumer capitalism and freakery. Finally, Timothy Neil’s essay offers a unique look at another freak discourse—that of animal freaks—to investigate the nineteenth-century English obsession with enfreakment. Based on rarely seen archival materials from the British National Fairgrounds Archive, his essay focuses on the role animal freaks played in relation to human freakishness.
Even as You and I

Freak Shows and Lay Discourse on Spectacular Deformity

Heather McHold

But for one particular trick which Dame Nature has played each one of them, these sports of Fortune are just men and women, with the feelings and habits, the likes and dislikes, the occupations and amusements of the rest of the world.

—The Strand Magazine (February 1898)

Introduction

In the late 1880s an English poster announced the marriage of Patrick O’Brien and Christanna D. Dunz. It declared: “When the Reverend Mr. Ruoff began the marriage service [at the Protestant Church in New York City] there was perfect silence. The groom’s response came in a sharp, clear voice, while the bride’s was smothered by tears. When the service was over . . . the groom . . . fumbled around in a clumsy way . . . then gave [the veil] a quick twitch, and bending down, kissed the bride with a smack which resounded through the whole church, and caused a hearty round of applause.” While Christanna’s tears and Patrick’s composure would have appealed to contemporary gender expectations that brides appear emotional and grooms brave, the O’Briens’ marriage ceremony was controversial in other ways. Despite the fact that both the Episcopal and Anglican churches deemed marriage a sacrament, Patrick and Christanna reported that this New York wedding was the third
time they had married each other.\textsuperscript{2} Those who performed superfluous wedding ceremonies had vociferous critics, including, for example, a contributor to the \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, who complained that P. T. Barnum made a practice of “turning the solemn rites of marriage into a public entertainment for the gaping crowd of curiosity hunters.”\textsuperscript{3} Nevertheless, for the O’Briens and many other Victorian couples, the spectacle of the marriage ceremony and the fantasies it evoked were far more important than the wedding’s liturgical importance.

The O’Briens had a special interest in spectacular marriage ceremonies because they were both close to eight feet tall and were exhibiting as giants in late-Victorian London. This account of their marriage also reported the dates and times that the couple would exhibit in London, and as a deliberate marketing document, this handbill is especially useful to historians of culture. The narratives that showmen put forward as they sought paying audiences for human oddities were shaped by contemporary ideologies and designed to temper historically specific tensions. Indeed, patterns within the advertisements for what Victorians called “freak shows” suggest that the market success of those exhibiting as freaks relied largely on their ability to encourage curiosity in physical oddness without aggravating intense British cultural anxiety about the spectacle trade, physical degeneration, and working-class leisure. Indeed, while Americans savored hucksterism and prized the sassy defiance that mass culture presented to the values of social and intellectual elites as essential elements of Jacksonian national identity, tomfoolery, crowds, and class insubordination caused considerably more social and cultural tension in late-Victorian Britain. In order to help alleviate intensifying British antipathy toward itinerant freak show stars and their display before working-class crowds, late-Victorian showmen consistently put new emphasis on how those exhibiting their physical deformities expressed respect for gender difference, domestic virtue, hard work, productivity, and consumerism.

This specific selection of qualities was significant, for these were the priorities of British Evangelicalism and had become the distinct markers of respectable middle-class identity.\textsuperscript{4} Ultimately, the handbills, memoirs, posters, and journal articles publicizing Victorian human oddities reveal the expansion of middle-class ideologies and the British Evangelical tradition into one of the most unstable sectors of working-class society.

Using social reactions to human oddities and monsters in order to track contemporary cultural priorities is not new. Historians have shown that in ancient times, responses to severe deformity reflected contem-
porary notions of fate, and before the Enlightenment, most communities expressed their general feelings of human insignificance and lack of control by tracing human anomalies to supernatural forces, divine will, or excessive maternal imagination.\(^5\) In the early Renaissance, Europeans expressed their growing faith in an omnipotent but benevolent God by arguing that God made monsters to punish humankind and to encourage penitence for sins such as greed, blasphemy, idleness, and insubordination.\(^6\) In the seventeenth century, the intellectual connection between deformity and sin lessened to some extent, and Europeans began to value cases of remarkable deformity as fascinating products of the natural universe. In fact, Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston have used monstrosity's late seventeenth-century representations to track the growth of a Baconian, “catalogue everything,” methodology in natural science.\(^7\) They explain that by the eighteenth century, monsters had become desirable objects for curiosity cabinets and private museums, and they note that, on the popular level, the market in spectacular exhibitions flourished as communities flocked to see examples of “Nature’s wonderful diversity.” Dennis Todd adds that during this period of increasing social mobility, “men of taste” also expressed growing fears of social disorder and began to complain that the popular exhibition of monsters and other wonders of nature encouraged mental laziness and lawlessness.\(^8\)

Unfortunately, modern European historians have largely ignored the cultural history of late-Victorian freak shows. Scholars who have looked at the subject have generally limited their research to the question, “What were the various kinds of freaks?” They have catalogued the kinds of human anomalies on exhibit, but most have failed to analyze the social construction of freak identity and its historical specificity. Two prevailing assumptions have discouraged research on European freak shows. First, many historians assume that spectacular exhibitions had lost their cultural significance by 1850 because an early-Victorian regulatory campaign had closed most of the traditional fairs where human anomalies had exhibited.\(^9\) Second, historians have also assumed that modern medical knowledge had made freak shows obsolete by 1850 by removing the mysteries behind human deformity.

Both of these theories deserve review. Freak shows outlasted the legislative assault on the old fairs by developing a more corporate approach to their industry and moving exhibitions into grand halls such as Astley’s Theatre, the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, the Alhambra in Leicester Square, the Royal Aquarium, Piccadilly Hall, and St. James’ Hall.
Moreover, claims that medical knowledge quashed popular curiosity in human anomalies by 1850 also prove inaccurate. The scientific study of deformity’s causes in a new field called teratology was far from secure at the end of the nineteenth century, and medical knowledge had only a marginal role in the popular culture of sideshows. In fact, sideshow managers used medical testimony selectively to increase wonder rather than dispel it, and audiences continued to flock to freak shows well into the 1890s.

Moreover, the late nineteenth-century cultural history of spectacular exhibitions deserves more attention specifically because, as the literary critic Mary Poovey argues, issues that contemporaries constitute as problems “mark the limits of ideological certainty,” and because, while human anomalies had long contributed to concerns about the boundaries of normalcy and raised fears of social disorder, the French scientist B. A. Morel presented a theory of degeneracy in 1857 that created a new level of anxiety about deformity across Europe. Morel intensified Victorian uneasiness with deformity and exhibition culture by suggesting that physical weaknesses or degenerate traits (1) progressed and intensified with age, (2) were produced by intemperate living, and (3) were dominant in heredity. By the 1880s Victorian degeneracy theorists were arguing that people with deformities were sure to become an increasing burden on society and that families showing physical oddities would undermine national stamina if their reproduction was not regulated through eugenics. The rise of Morel’s degeneracy theory meant that the deformed raised concerns about more than the bounds of normalcy; they also began to feed rising anxieties about Britain’s racial and political decline.

At the same time, the long-standing complaints that spectacular exhibitions and popular fairs encouraged social anarchy, sexual license, and violence continued. The deformed who exhibited themselves for profit sparked social anxiety because they were often itinerant show people who, as they traveled from fair to fair, seemed independent of society’s stabilizing institutions: family and parish. Moreover, fair patrons themselves also inspired considerable anxiety. As licensing advocates were quick to point out, fairs had, since the mid-eighteenth century, been attracting fewer middle-class families while the overall number of working-class patrons grew. This was a time when bourgeois writers described working-class men as “brutes . . . brought up in the darkness of barbarism,” and reports of rowdy and promiscuous mobs of working-class fairgoers commonly made it into the press.
Despite managerial attempts to secure the respectability of spectacular exhibitions by moving them from fairgrounds into grand halls, exhibition stars and their promoters remained on the outlying borders of decency. As Peter Bailey explains, “Next to the pub . . . the music halls became the most embattled institution in working-class life, as reform groups strove variously to close them, censor them or reproduce their essential appeal in facsimile counter-attractions purged of vulgarity.”

As a result, articulating the respectability of human oddities became essential to profits. Freak show promoters began to put unprecedented emphasis on the personal qualities of the exhibited deformed, and in 1898 the journalist Arthur Goddard clarified the common strategy for Victorian freak advertisers in a remarkably self-conscious article titled “‘Even as You and I,’ at Home with the Barnum Freaks.” Applying the relatively new form of the personal interview, Goddard constructed typical promotional biographies for several well-known exhibition figures and emphasized details such as marital status, work history, manners, and material possessions. As he did so, Goddard argued explicitly that visiting these freaks at home made him especially able to conclude that these stars were “normal” despite their physical oddities. Notably, as Goddard insisted that “these sports of Fortune are just men and women, with the feelings and habits, the likes and dislikes, the occupations and amusements of the rest of the world,” his “rest of the world” was not just the able-bodied but specifically those respectable folk who honored their families, respected gender boundaries, worked hard, and hoped for material success. Ultimately, the narrative choices in late-Victorian freak show documents reveal that showmen believed that extending notions of bourgeois respectability to human oddities would draw audiences.

This trend was consistent with a cultural shift in the British working class more broadly. From mid-century, the notion of respectability had become increasingly popular among music hall performers and the working classes that made up the majority of freak show audiences, and these groups expressed respectability in specific ways. As Lois Rutherford reveals, from the 1860s music hall dancers and singers expressed their own respectability in terms of “acquiring a respectful independence by means of providential collective self-help, typically associated with upwardly mobile artisans and skilled workers.” Nevertheless, for regular-bodied entertainers, these claims were auxiliary to performance announcements. Handbills for these performers very rarely mentioned whether the dancer, singer, or musician was polite, nice, or well educated.
In freak discourse, by contrast, the personal expression of respectability took center stage. In an attempt to moderate the intense social and cultural suspicion of the exhibited deformed, British showmen told stories about the exhibited freaks that elevated the values traditionally affiliated with the puritanical middle class. For example, show barkers sought status for the deformed by emphasizing how the exhibited expressed and valued a strong work ethic, self-sufficiency, gender propriety, and polite behavior.\(^{21}\) That said, it is important to recognize that showmen were more concerned with profits than accurately representing how freaks actually lived. As advertisers presented the respectability of freaks in historically specific ways, they were most interested in exploiting the societal assumption that deformity precluded respectability. Show barkers traded in irony rather than accuracy. Yet however romantically ironic, and even specifically because of their self-conscious irony, the marketing biographies of late-Victorian freaks tell an important tale about the expansion of British middle-class ideologies into working-class consciousness.

**Spinning Freak Biographies**

The marriage ceremony figured centrally in late-Victorian advertisements for giants and dwarfs. Indeed, this advertising theme was so consistent that few remained single. In addition to the O’Brien wedding, other spectacular ceremonies featured the midget Don Santiago de Los Santos and a similarly small woman, the giants Colonel Bates and Anna Swan, the midgets General Mite and Lucia Zarate, and Minnie Warren (sister of Lavinia, who was married to General Tom Thumb) and fellow midget Commodore Nutt. In addition to recognizing that marriage had long been a marker of respectable bourgeois adulthood, freak show marriage ceremonies reflected the increasing popularity of formal marriage among the working class. Interestingly, as John Gillis points out, while registering a marriage became more attractive to the working class after mid-century, civil marriage was a more popular option for those who sought to save expenses.\(^ {24}\) Not surprisingly, for human oddities seeking to impress audiences, the church ceremony, with all of its implications for pomp and publicity, was the rule.

Showmen did more than emphasize the pairings themselves. They also bolstered the appeal of their investments by clarifying that the freak marriages functioned. For most couples, this meant that show barkers
reported that babies were born. Barnum so valued the legitimacy children gave to marriages that when Tom Thumb and his wife, Lavinia, proved barren, Barnum rented a baby for them. When it became inconvenient to keep up the ruse, Barnum reported that the child had died. The appeal of this farce was remarkably long lasting. More than thirty years later, an article in *The Strand Magazine* reported that “In 1866, Mrs. Stratton presented her husband with a baby, which, however, died early, of inflammation of the brain.” In the 1880s another giant named O’Brien and his wife Annie joined their peers in spectacular parenthood. They increased the efficacy with which their “baby” promoted their exhibition and marked their creation of a nuclear family by naming him Brian O’Brien.

Productive work also figured as a marker of desirable normalcy in late-Victorian freak show narratives to the extent that F. M. L. Thompson’s description of the respectable working class applies to exhibition freaks. Exhibited human anomalies wanted audiences to know that, like other aspiring members of the lower working class, they were “fiercely self-reliant and determined to live on their own resources and to not suffer the indignities of poor relief, charity, or ruinous debt.” Those on display expressed their shared faith in the respectable value of work by recounting work histories, family traditions of employment, prejudice against malingerers, and even pride in financial success. For example, the biographers of Robert Hales, the Norfolk giant, reported that Hales had worked as a wherryman before he “set up in the Craven Head Tavern, Drury Lane.” There, in addition to being both exhibit and licensed victualler, Hales claimed to be a “Professor of Galvanism.” In a similar vein, Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, dedicated half of his late-century, six-paragraph autobiography to his employment history and reported that he had worked making cigars, peddling with a license, and then “hawking on [his] own account.”

Other freak show stars emphasized that they came from families that valued hard work. For example, Charles Tripp, a famous armless man, reported that he was the son of an engineer who had worked on the Grand Trunk Railway in Canada. Eli Bowen, a legless success, informed audiences that he had passed on a good work ethic to his offspring by bragging that his son had become an attorney and justice of the peace in America. Joseph Merrick recounted the humiliation he felt when his inability to find work brought censure from his family. He wrote: “When I went home for my meals, my step-mother used to say I had not been to seek for work. I was taunted and sneered at so
that I would not go home to my meals, and used to stay in the streets with an hungry belly rather than [suffer her criticism that] ‘That’s more than you have earned.’”

In fact, Merrick so valued his identity as an effective member of society that he failed to mention the time he spent in the Leicester workhouse (which was four years) and described himself only as a patient in the Leicester infirmary.

Freak show texts also presented the deformed as “respectable and normal workers” by highlighting exhibited people’s financial independence and trade success. For example, accounts of Millie-Christine, who were born as slaves in North Carolina, declared that the twins had purchased their own freedom with their profits from exhibiting and would soon emancipate their parents. Tom Thumb’s financial success was the most remarked upon, and in 1894 The Strand noted that Tom Thumb brought in more than 150,000 pounds during his European tour of 1845 and 1847.

Victorian showmen also expressed the growing influence of middle-class ideology in what was largely a working-class discourse by emphasizing consumerism among freaks. Time and again, showmen used products to depict the deformed as respectable participants in British society and suggested that exhibited freaks shared the middle class’s interest in domesticity, financial security, and leisure time. Notably, the growing significance of consumer goods in freak discourse was consistent with a larger cultural trend to affiliate products with success and other cultural values. As they linked the deformed with possessions that held increasing cultural meaning, freak show promoters articulated both the growing national fascination with abundance and the fantasy that all Britons might come to enjoy a surplus of civilizing consumer products.

The props of a comfortable domestic life figured most prominently and consistently. For example, Laloo, a boy with a parasitic twin, usually appeared seated on a fringed Victorian chair or standing with his arm resting on a fancy chair in a room adorned with wallpaper and a framed picture of a boat. The joined twins Rosalie and Josephine Blazek, known as the Pygopagi twins, stood for their exhibition portrait on a plush ottoman in a well-appointed parlour. Tom Thumb highlighted his disposable income and good taste by showcasing his miniature carriage. Like Tom Thumb also, Millie-Christine appeared in a variety of outfits. While the twins’ dresses ranged from simple smocks to well-tailored bodices and skirts in rich fabrics, they consistently wore double strands of pearls. The armless Jeanne Rosalie Raymon also adorned herself well.
She appeared with a watch as well as a feathered hat. Other commonly featured possessions included fine boots, jewels, and books.

In addition to paying homage to good taste and disposable income, product images appealed to the Victorian belief that leisure time distinguished the respectable. Not surprisingly, freak show narratives differentiated between how men and women ought to spend their free time. Representations of male exhibition figures often featured a variety of athletic activities. For example, illustrations of Chang and Eng showed them hunting, rowing, playing badminton, and fishing with the appropriate equipment and attire.\(^{44}\)

In a similar manner, Arthur Goddard sought to make his readers at home with a sword swallower, Delno Fritz, by noting that this exhibition star was “a devoted cyclist, and something of an amateur baseball player.”\(^ {45}\) With such images, showmen took advantage of a growing cultural discourse that affiliated amateur athleticism with respectability.\(^ {46}\)

As Peter Bailey explains, the mid-Victorian middle class, who had had access to sports through the public schools, became increasingly interested in how athletics might foster the nation’s military preparedness and desirable capitalist values. These beliefs continued into the twentieth century, when one writer explained that “Manly sports, as they should be played, tend to develop unselfish pluck, determination, self-control and public spirit.”\(^ {47}\)

The leisure activities that female freaks claimed to pursue were also gender appropriate. These, by contrast, tended to assert the human oddity’s modesty and dedication to domesticity. The giant Leah May, for example, made a point of why she did not like to bicycle. Using irony to good effect, May explained that she had not joined many New Women in this activity because she did not wish to make a spectacle of herself. “I have always wanted to very much,” she declared with presumed reserve, “but think what a machine for me would look like!”\(^ {48}\) Instead of bicycling, May filled her time with domestic pursuits, for example, “embroidering an intricate pattern for a tablecloth or some such piece of feminine handiwork.”\(^ {49}\) Many female oddities claimed to have similar, domestic-centered interests. For example, when Goddard visited the bearded woman Annie Jones, he found her “finishing a lesson on the mandoline.”\(^ {50}\) Anna Swan’s pamphlet suggested that Miss Swan spent much of her time entertaining friends at home and declined to mention that this giant had, in fact, acted briefly on the New York stage.\(^ {51}\)

Finally, the most moving example of material culture’s importance in the construction of respectable normalcy for audience-seeking
Victorian freaks comes from the life of Joseph Merrick. According to his doctor and patron, Dr. Frederick Treves, Merrick asked for a “silver-fitted dressing bag,” which contained a silver-backed brush and comb, a shoe-horn, a hat brush, ivory-handled razors, and a silver cigarette case. Treves was fascinated by this request since Merrick’s deformities made him unable to use these items in a normal way. Ironically, Treves himself identified the symbolic power of the kit, but he underestimated it as he described the bag as “theatrical ‘property.’” Consistent with his tendency to infantilize Merrick, Treves saw the kit only as a prop for Merrick’s innocent “play acting” at being a “real swell.” In light of the interest in respectable normalcy across the freak discourse and the trend to link products with status, in particular, it seems probable that Merrick was interested in more than fantasy play. Most likely, Merrick valued the kit because, like his contemporaries, he had special appreciation for how products represented the possession of desirable qualities. This kit’s contents announced that Merrick appreciated the bourgeois ideals of good taste, cleanliness, and financial comfort.

**Conclusion**

For the deformed on exhibit in Victorian England, the intellectual connection between respectability, behavior, and personal possessions was essential. Indeed, it was the secret to market success. Contrary to what historians have assumed thus far, the freak show industry did not fold under moral pressure or accede to medical incursion at mid-century. In fact, the freak show trade paid little attention to contemporary medical debate. Nineteenth-century showmen continued to advertise human oddities as remarkable examples of nature’s majesty, as their eighteenth-century predecessors had done, and while the Victorian medical community was fascinated with how deformities came about, the freak show industry only spoke of deformity’s causes in the most traditional way; they continued to champion the power of maternal emotions on the unborn even as many doctors were challenging maternal impression theory. Moreover, if freak show promoters were interested in the general medical community’s growing professional status, it was because medical interest in freaks helped showmen counter claims that human oddities only appealed to the superstitious and uneducated crowds vilified by social reformers. For the most part, showmen referred to both real and imagined medical interest in exhibited human anomalies because
medical patrons lent status to freaks in much the same way that elite and royal audiences had done for centuries.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, these traditional advertising themes alone were not enough to promote human anomalies. The “moral revolution” that had closed many popular fairs did more than encourage showmen to move their shows into the grand exhibition halls. To respond to the moral campaign to control popular leisure, rising cultural interest in respectability, fears that deformed bodies housed immoral characters, and growing concern about degeneracy, Victorian showmen put new emphasis on the humanity of freaks and their roles as cultural players. Personal histories that emphasized such things as marital status, dedication to work, and access to material comforts appeared increasingly alongside the old advertising themes. Ultimately, showmen in Britain made human oddities seem worthy of their spectators by insisting not only that the exhibited were remarkable examples of normal human development but also that these exhibition stars were exemplary participants in bourgeois culture.

Their attempt to make audiences feel comfortable with those on display by publicizing customarily private details was well calculated. The strategy was effective because it expressed and exploited two specifically Victorian phenomena. First, it took full advantage of contemporary belief in the ideology of separate spheres. Since the domestic world was considered sacrosanct and a protective haven from the public sphere where, on the other hand, competition and free trade wearied and corrupted men, there was an implicit understanding that information about the private lives of freaks was somehow more authentic than regular advertising material. Second, biographical narratives capitalized on the rising cultural dominance of the middle-class values that came out of the British Evangelical tradition. Showmen made human oddities attractive to audiences anxious about physical and moral degeneracy by conscientiously constructing personal histories for freaks that both highlighted well-recognized markers of middle-class respectability and established these qualities as the standards for normalcy. The workings of romantic irony in freak show biographies are historically significant, then, both because they reveal the growing cultural significance of Evangelical middle-class ideologies across Victorian society and because they helped extend the significance of those traditionally middle-class ideologies about gender difference, domesticity, hard work, and consumerism from markers of respectability within a class into markers of British normalcy across the boundaries of class and physical form. As
Arthur Goddard put it, when human oddities expressed the behaviors and beliefs traditionally recognized as part of middle-class Evangelical seriousness, they became the cultural peers of their diverse audiences, or “even as you and I.”

Wonder was not dead in late-Victorian Britain. But the nature of wonder had changed since the early eighteenth century. While eighteenth-century audiences marveled at how freaks denoted nature’s diversity and power, in the period after 1850 wonder rested in the extension of respectable normalcy to those on the boundaries of physical difference. Human anomalies marketed themselves by championing their physical oddities while simultaneously insisting on their cultural propriety. They did not yet describe themselves as patients with histories that doctors could best illuminate. As a result, even though their industry was under attack, the nineteenth century can be considered a good period for the exhibited deformed. Integrated into the natural world, they were better able to present themselves to audiences not simply as individuals with remarkable bodies but also as fellow citizens who shared a comforting set of values and were worthy of respect.

Notes

1. Arthur Goddard, “‘Even as You and I: At Home with the Barnum Freaks,” The Strand Magazine (February 1898): 493–96. Also in the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Freaks Collection, folder 1, hereafter cited as “J. J., Collection Folder number.” The church was at Smithfield Street and Sixth Avenue.

2. Ibid. They had married in Pittsburgh on November 20, 1883, and also at an undisclosed date in Louisville before a crowd of three thousand.


4. In Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have described the restructuring of family relationships and identity according to a rising respect for evangelical seriousness, domestic morality, and gender division as central to the construction of the middle class. Dror Wahrman suggests that political language shifted from affiliating “middle classness” with studied and sensible public opinion to include “domestic virtue, . . . religiosity, . . . an evangelical impulse, [and] social control” after 1832. See Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 378.

6. Ibid., 47.


12. Francis Galton and Karl Pearson headed the eugenics movement in Britain. Galton used the threat of progressive morbid heredity to justify social control of reproduction through interventionist and restrictive social policies, or “negative” eugenics. Hoping to segregate degenerates from the healthy breeding pool, he called for the extinction of degenerate lines through forced sterilization of epileptics, the feeble-minded, and others classed as “unfit.” His follower, Karl Pearson, advocated less oppressive, “positive” interventions such as financial rewards for mothers of the educated classes and government control of health education. Both men included deformed persons in their lists of degenerates and had little hope for positive evolution among society’s “undesirables.”


17. Chris Waters describes the campaign against working-class entertainment as part of a “profound crisis in bourgeois ideology [and] self-perception in the city.”
22. See Evanion 1851 for an example of the brief presentation style that characterized advertisements for physically normal music hall performers. The bill simply lists the performers: “Sam Redfern, the Black Philosopher, The Mademoiselle Bertolto, Juvenile French Character Singer and Dancer . . . Miss Lillie Western, America’s Greatest Versatile Musical Artiste.”
24. John Gillis traces working-class animosity to church weddings and a general inability to afford marriage licenses in the 1840s. He also suggests, however, that by the 1850s “the combined forces of economic, social, and political change had begun to alter the conditions of working-class life in such a way that the alternatives to legal matrimony no longer seemed feasible or attractive.” By the 1880s, he continues, “marriage fees were no longer a real obstacle, and for those who did not wish to have to treat their neighbors . . . civil marriage was one inexpensive way of avoiding the publicity of wedding in a local church.” See For Better or for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 228, 235.
27. Thompson, 199–200.
28. He did so after touring with Barnum from 1848 to 1851. “Giants and Dwarfs,” 433–34.
29. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Merrick, 224.
34. Ibid.
35. Handbill from Piccadilly Mall exhibition in February 1885, Evanion 2905.
36. “Giants and Dwarfs,” 434. M. R. Werner notes that a London magazine reported this same figure on September 18, 1847. See Barnum (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), 96. (My thanks to Frederick Fleischer at the Barnum


39. J. J., Freaks 1; Evanion 461. Also see Evanion 2526, another bill from the Nottingham Goose Fair, October 1887, which depicts Laloo seated inside next to a window.

40. The mother wore a dress that reminded readers of the girls’ peasant background, but the father was drawn in more formal attire and held reading material that attested to his literacy. See Evanion 4552.


42. In 1885 Millie-Christine's show pamphlet depicted them in diamond- and zigzag-patterned skirts under off-the-shoulder bodices. See Evanion 2905. Mr. and Mrs. Patrick O'Brien were also natty dressers. See Evanion 1870.

43. J. J., Entertainments, folio 6. An illustration of the stout dwarf “Chip,” the Boy Wonder, offers another example of an exhibition figure possessing a fancy, silver- or bone-handled walking stick. See Evanion 715.

44. Other images showed them driving an open carriage, cutting trees, plowing a field, and playing instruments while wearing suits and sitting on a sofa. See Evanion 482.

45. Goddard, 495. Admittedly, Delno Fritz was not technically deformed, but Goddard thought it appropriate to group him with Barnum’s other physical freaks, and, since he was a member of the exhibition trade, Fritz’s public persona and status were certainly matters of concern.

46. Bailey, Leisure and Class, 143–44.

47. H. B. Philpott, London at School: The Story of the School Board (1904), 127, quoted in Bailey, Leisure and Class, 137.

48. Goddard, 496.

49. Ibid., 6.

50. Ibid., 495.

51. It declared that “Miss Swan has spent the greater portion of her life in her own home” and explained that her “genial amiability of disposition and pleasing intelligence” had won her many friends. Pamphlet on “The Nova-Scotia Giantess, Miss Anna Swan” with material on Chang and Eng and Zoebida Luti, in J. J. F.1, 29–30.

53. Ibid., 241–42. Why Treves infantilized Merrick is another interesting question. A complex set of beliefs certainly played a part in his condescension, including his own professional struggles and medical identity, his class prejudices, and his exposure to Victorian theories about human development and atavism.