

Freaks in Late Nineteenth-Century British Media and Medicine

Submitted by Fiona Yvette Pettit to the University of Exeter as a thesis for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in February 2012

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Abstract

This thesis explores the prevalence of freaks in late nineteenth-century British culture through popular and medical print media. Through their consistent representation and exhibition, freaks became a part of mainstream culture. Due to their regular reproduction, freak narratives and images often perpetuated the lives of freaks long after their deaths; thereby creating freak legacies. This thesis employs the theoretical concept of generativity, drawn from John Kotre's work, to investigate the role of freaks and freak legacies in late nineteenth-century culture. Generativity is the process which allows the continuation of lives after death, through the creation and perpetuation of legacy. Through their regular representation and reproduction in print, I argue, freaks were generative in that they contributed to the perpetuation of their own and others' legacies in late nineteenth-century Britain. In particular, the generativity of freak narratives for medical and popular press readerships is considered to demonstrate the multiple ways freak representations were constructed to suit broad and diverse audiences.

The first two chapters of this thesis examine popular representations of freaks and the last two look at medicine's interaction with freak bodies. The first half of this thesis establishes the mainstream status of freaks by exploring their numerous representations in a diverse range of popular print sources. The first chapter demonstrates some of the ways popular media engaged with freaks and their legacies. In the second chapter, the popular appeal of freaks is further explored through a case study of the two UK visits of the Barnum and Bailey circus at the end of the nineteenth century. Particular attention is paid to the generative use of freaks in building the famous showman Phineas T. Barnum's legacy. Then, the next half of this thesis turns to medical culture to explore the professional engagement with anomalous bodies. Chapter three explores the intricacies of the medicine–freak relationship by demonstrating medicine's attempts to assert authority over freakish bodies. The final chapter examines the importance of legacy to the medical profession and offers an analysis of three freak case studies which demonstrate this aim. These case studies also make up a chapter in *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910*, which is due to be published by Pickering and Chatto in 2012.

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