

Medicine on the big and small screen: *The Elephant Man*

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John Hurt in *The Elephant Man*. Ronald Grant Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

The Elephant Man

Starring: John Hurt, Anthony Hopkins, John Gielgud, Anne Bancroft, Wendy Hiller, Freddie Jones

Directed by David Lynch; released October 10, 1980;
Paramount Pictures; Rated PG; 124 minutes.

Reviewed by Lester D. Friedman, PhD

Parts of this piece appeared in a collection I co-edited with Henry Colt and Silvia Quadrelli, The Picture of Health (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Directed by David Lynch, who later produced films such as *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Wild at Heart* (1990), and the TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), *The Elephant Man* chronicles the compelling personal and professional relationship between Joseph Merrick (called John in the movie) and Frederick Treves. Proteus syndrome—a rare disorder of mosaic growth dysregulation resulting in severe deformities—rendered Merrick odious to Victorian society and initially condemned him to life as a sideshow spectacle displaying his misshapen body to curious gawkers. His condition drew the attention of Dr. Treves, a

surgeon who rescued Merrick from the world of freak shows and brought him to reside in the Royal London Hospital.

Lynch's movie traces Merrick's evolution from circus oddity to London celebrity, exposing the gentle man with artistic sensibilities buried beneath a hideous exterior. Shooting in striking, often shimmering, black and white, Lynch juxtaposes this personal story with evocative images of a rapidly industrializing London, showing the brutality that permeates both Merrick's struggle to have his humanity recognized and the dehumanizing effects of the mechanized world surrounding him.

Lynch's film follows in the footsteps of others intrigued by Merrick's condition and his life, including a seven-paragraph pamphlet, *The Autobiography of Joseph Carey Merrick* (1884), purportedly written by Merrick. Treves published his account of their interaction, *The Elephant Man and other Reminiscences* (1923); the anthropologist Ashley Montague wrote *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity* (1979), and Bernard Pomerance's play, *The Elephant Man*, debuted first in London (1977) and then on Broadway (1979); revivals followed in 2002 with Billy Crudup, and in 2015 with Bradley Cooper in the title role. Although the rumor that Michael Jackson offered half a million dollars for

Merrick's skeleton seems more urban myth than fact, the King of Pop did recall his fascination with Merrick in his autobiography, *Moonwalk* (1988).

Although set in the 1890s, *The Elephant Man* raises myriad issues relevant to 21st century health care, including how to respond to a broad spectrum of differences ranging from physical deformities to socio-economic disparities to racial dissimilarities. It also confronts subjects such as how doctors deal with incurable diseases, the pitfalls of medical research, and the politics of hospital care. At its heart, however, the film delves equally into the education of Treves (played by Anthony Hopkins), who changes from callow professional to compassionate provider, and into the plight of Merrick (played by John Hurt), who comes to value his own personhood through the caring of his physician, with the famous lines: "I am not an elephant! I am not an animal! I am a human being! I am a man!" As such, the film spotlights the evolution of a doctor/patient relationship and raises contemporary questions about the boundaries between patient exploitation, professional exhibitionism, and appropriate medical treatment. In our modern age of technological marvels and genomic medicine, the doctor/patient relationship remains the cornerstone of the entire medical system. Treves begins the film by looking at Merrick as a study specimen, but he ultimately comes to embrace him as a friend.

There is a scene that presents the power imbalance in the medical arena. It begins with a bright light emanating from a projector flooding the screen, gradually dimming to reveal a lecture hall filled with well-dressed physicians awaiting Treves' presentation. Two men wheel in a small, tent-like contraption and part the curtains to reveal its human contents: The Elephant Man. Previously, Lynch always presented Merrick in oversized clothing and covered his face with a hood, so the audience just watched the reactions of others to him. Now, the director continues to tease and tantalize, not permitting the viewer to peek beneath the tent or view the spectacle directly. Only the crooked, shadowy outline of Merrick's malformed body is visible. As Treves delivers a dry, medical description of Merrick's manifold physical ailments, Lynch intercuts his comments with the faces of medical men sitting stunned and staring at the figure exposed before them. Their faces register shock, discomfort, and disgust at the sight revealed to them, which further piques the viewer's curiosity to see Merrick.

Treves begins his talk by stating that he has never "met with such a perverted or degraded version of a human being as this man," he ends by noting that Merrick's

genitals are intact and unaffected by his condition. As he concludes, the doctors applaud, the men wheel Merrick offstage, and the scene fades into the bright projector light with which it opened.

Throughout this scene, Lynch carefully positions the viewer's relationship to Merrick and Treves. First, Treves stands behind a table at the front of the room with anatomical pictures behind him. As the scene progresses, he appears no better than Merrick's former "owner," Mr. Bytes (played by Freddie Jones), a sadistic barker who abused and exploited him as a freak. But while Bytes physically mistreats Merrick, Treves inflicts deeper psychological wounds by offering a cruel introduction and concluding with tasteless comments about the state of his genitals (which is assumed are uncovered).

Lynch arranges the well-dressed assemblage of doctors like the gawkers who earlier paid their guineas to stare at Merrick in the circus. No one protests Treves' callous presentation, his insensitivity to Merrick's physical pain, or his lack of basic respect for another human being. Lynch incorporates the audience as an equally guilty participant in this dispassionate travesty, linking the curiosity to view Merrick's abnormalities with the numb response to Merrick exhibited equally by the unruly circus goers and the austere doctors.

Every interaction with medical professionals incorporates power issues. In what other circumstances would you find yourself nearly naked discussing the intimate details of your life with a person you met scant minutes before? Laymen cannot hope to match the physician's knowledge of medical matters, even with the vast resources of the Internet at their disposal. As we know, the history of Western medicine is replete with examples of the exploitation of patients—particularly the poor, the uneducated, the incarcerated, the mentally ill, and the racially different. Admittedly, humankind has often benefited from these experiments that treat human beings as subjects rather than individuals. What one doctor considers exploitation another may characterize as necessary for the public good. Yet, the power inequities intrinsic to the practice of medicine allow the potential for patient exploitation to remain. *The Elephant Man* allows the viewer to accompany Treves on this journey toward empathizing with, rather than utilizing, a "fellow creature in pain."

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