

Baron Munchhausen and the Syndrome Which Bears His Name: History of an Endearing Personage and of a Strange Mental Disorder

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Summary

Munchausen syndrome, a mental disorder, was named in 1951 by Richard Asher after Karl Friedrich Hieronymus, Baron Munchhausen (1720-1797), whose name had become proverbial as the narrator of false and ridiculously exaggerated exploits. The first edition of Munchausen's tales appeared anonymously in 1785 (Baron Munchausen's narrative of his marvellous travels and campaigns in Russia), and was wrongly attributed to the German poet Gottfried August Burger who actually edited the first German version the following year. The real author, Rudolph Erich Raspe, never claimed his rights over the successive editions of this book. This paper reviews the extraordinary personality of Baron Munchhausen, and the circumstances which led Rudolph Erich Raspe, Gottfried August Burger, and Richard Asher to pay homage to this very endearing personage.

Résumé

Le syndrome de Munchausen est un trouble psychologique ainsi baptisé en 1951 par Richard Asher, en hommage à Karl Friedrich Hieronymus, baron de Munchhausen (1720-1779), qui s'était rendu célèbre parla narration de ses exploits extravagants. La première édition des aventures de Munchhausen apparut anonymement en 1785 (Baron Munchausen's narrative of his marvellous travels and campaigns in Russia), et fut attribuée à tort au poète allemand Gottfried August Bürger, celui qui en réalité édita la première traduction allemande l'année suivante. Le véritable auteur, Rudolph Erich Raspe, ne réclama jamais ses droits sur les éditions successives de ce livre. Cet article décrit l'extraordinaire personnalité du baron de Munchhausen, ainsi que les circonstances qui amenèrent Rudolph Erich Raspe, Gottfried August Bürger et Richard Asher à rendre hommage à ce personnage si attachant.

Baron Munchhausen was not a product of the imagination of a mythomaniac writer. He well and truly existed. Karl Friedrich Hieronymus, Baron Munchhausen, was born on May 11, 1720 at Bodenwerder (*La Grande Encyclopedie*, n.d.). He was a member of an ancient family of Hanover (1). In his younger days, he served with distinction as officer (2) in the Russian campaign against the Turks (3). From 1760, he retired to his es-

tates to live the life of a country gentleman, and died on February 22, 1797 (Williams, 1967a).

He became famous around Hanover as a raconteur of absurdly exaggerated anecdotes of his adventures and exploits as a soldier, hunter and sportsman. A collection of 17 such tales appeared in the eighth and ninth parts of the *Vademecum fur lustige Leute* (1781-1783). An engraved portrait dated 1766, probably by Antonio Canova (1757-1822) (Benezit, 1999) depicts Baron Munchhausen with his hook nose, small goatee beard, handlebar moustache, the rollers of his toupee on the temples, and a braid of hair floating on the wind behind his bare head (Figure 1).

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Portrait of baron Munchhausen, drawing by the author after Antonio Canova (1766) and Gustave Dore (1867).

Baron Munchhausen's narrative was of limitless extravagance, and the fertile imagination of this storyteller brought happiness to those who delighted in his adventures (4) : Baron Munchhausen claimed to have mended with the branches of a bay-tree his horse which had been cut in two by the fall of a portcullis; he saved himself and his horse from drowning by pulling his own hair upwards and holding tight his horse between his knees (5); he bestrode a canonball, harnessed a wolf to his sleigh, threw his silver axe so far that it sank into the moon, danced a Scottish jig in the stomach of a huge fish which had eaten him alive in the Mediterranean, fought against a 40-foot 7-inch crocodile (Carswell, 1987; Burger, 1996). However, some of his tales were shown to have been borrowed, either by himself or more probably by the authors of his *Adventures*, from Bebel's *Facetien* (1508) (6) and Lange's *Deliciae Academicae* (1765) (7) (Muller-Fraureuth, 1881; Gilman et al., 1909).

Gottfried August Burger

Gottfried August Burger was a German romantic poet and a writer of ballads. He was at first believed to be the author of Baron Munchhausen's tales for he probably wrote the preface to their 1785 anonymous edition (*The Cambridge Encyclopaedia*, 1932) (8). He also edited the first German version in 1786, translated from the fourth English edition, with additions of his own.

Burger was born on December 31, 1747 (9) at Molmerswende, near Halberstadt (Wodtke, 1967). He studied theology at Halle and law at Gottingen, and became a magistrate at Altengleichen in 1772. In 1774, he married Dorette Leonhardt, but soon fell in love with her sister, the "Molly" of his poems. Dorette died of phthisis in 1784, and Burger married "Molly", who unfortunately died in childbirth the following year. He did not have a more happily married life with a third wife, whose shameless infidelity resulted in their divorce. Disappointed by



his conjugal life and the many criticisms that were levelled at his poems (by Johann Christian Friedrich von Schiller, among others), affected in turn by phthisis, Burger hanged himself on June 8, 1794 at Gottingen.

Gottfried August Burger became famous through his popular ballads (10), his sonnets, and his fragmentary translations of Homer, Shakespeare, and Ossian. He was also editor of the *Musen Almanach* from 1778 (11).

Rudolph Erich Raspe

Rudolph Erich Raspe was the anonymous author of the first edition of Baron Munchhausen's tales. He is known to have met the baron in his younger days.

Raspe, the only son of an official of the Mines Department, was born in 1737 at Hanover. He studied natural sciences and philology at Gottingen and Leipzig, and returned then to his native city where he was appointed secretary of the state library. At the age of 26, he became famous through the publication of his *Specimen Historiae Naturalis*, a treatise on volcanic geology (12). He also published the posthumous works of Leibniz (*Oeuvres philosophiques Latines & Frangoises...*, 1765), and was one of the first to interest himself in Ossian's poems (13) and in Percy's *Reliques* (14). In 1767, he was appointed professor of archaeology and custodian of the Landgraf collection of gems and coins at Kassel. In the following years, he

was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London (1769), and temporarily settled in Venice. He was then recalled to Kassel to be accused of having stolen pieces from the Landgraf collection: in 1775, he finally had to flee to England to escape arrest, and this incident earned his dismissal from the Royal Society. He founded at Entral (Cornwall) a testing laboratory for the metallurgic industry (15), and went back again to London where he compiled over a period of five years the catalogue of a famous private collection of gems. In the last years of his life, Raspe masqueraded as a mining expert, swindled Sir John Sinclair by pretending to discover gold and silver on his estate (1791), and fled to Ireland, where he died of fever at Muckcross in 1794 (Williams, 1967b).

Though *Baron Munchhausen's Adventures* immediately proved to be a bestseller, Rudolph Erich Raspe never claimed his rights over this book (a good ten editions and translations appeared in his lifetime). The grounds for this silence are unknown.

Munchausen syndrome

Munchausen syndrome (16) is characterized by "habitual presentation for hospital treatment of an apparent acute illness, the patient giving a plausible and dramatic history, all of which is false" (Dorland, 2000). It is believed to be rare, though no epidemiological studies are available (Fenelon, 1998). This eponym was created in 1951 by Richard Asher (1912-1969), a London physician to the Central Middlesex Hospital, and head of the Mental Observation Ward (17). This publication, with only two literary references as a bibliography, appeared in the *Lancet*, and included three cases of Munchausen syndrome: "Here is described a common syndrome which most doctors have seen, but about which little has been written. Like the famous Baron von Munchausen, the persons affected have always travelled widely; and their stories, like those attributed to him, are both dramatic and untruth-

ful. Accordingly, the syndrome is respectfully dedicated to the baron, and named after him".

By extension appeared the term "Munchausen syndrome by proxy" for children (Meadow, 1977) or even adults (Krebs et al., 1996), "a form... in which one person intentionally fabricates or induces signs and symptoms of one or more physical or psychological disorders in another person under their care" (Dorland, 2000). One of the most notorious cases is that of the nurse Beverley Allitt, who was convicted at Nottingham Crown Court in May 1993 of thirteen cases of murder or causing grievous bodily harm to children in her care at the Grantham and Kesteven General Hospital (Lane, 1995).

Conclusion

Munchausen syndrome was named after Karl Friedrich Hieronymus, Baron Munchausen, an eighteenth century narrator of false and exaggerated exploits. In 1951, the London physician Richard Asher recognized this strange mental disorder in some of his patients, and therefore decided to pay homage to this very endearing personage. This paper aimed at illustrating the importance of history and literature in medical terminology.

Notes

1. One of his ancestors, Gerlach Adolph, baron Munchhausen (1688-1770) contributed to the foundation and prosperity of Göttingen University (Gregoire, 1877), but members of this family were recorded as far back as 1149 (Moure, 1978).
2. He was first lieutenant at the age of 20, captain ten years later.
3. He enrolled in the regiment of Prince Anton Ulrich of Brunswick, the nephew by marriage of Tsarina Anne (Fenelon, 1998). The Russo-Turkish War of 1735-1739 broke out in autumn 1735 after the Crimean Tartars violated the Russian frontier in an expedition to the

- Caspian Sea. The Treaty of Belgrade (September 18, 1739) put an end to this war. All that Russia obtained was the destruction of Azov as a fortress, and the recognition of Russian sovereignty over the territories of the Zaporozhian Cossacs, which Turkey had hitherto claimed (Rimbaud, 1898; Leslie, 1967).
4. Baron Munchhausen's tales inspired many French and German artists, illustrators and caricaturists : Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) in 1809, Gustave Dore (1832-1883) in 1862, and George Cruikshank (1792-1878) in 1867, among others. They also inspired a cinema success produced by Terry Gilliam, with John Neville as the baron (1988, Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.).
 5. This story provided Paul Watzlawick with the title of one of his psychology books (1988).
 6. Heinrich Bebel (1472-ca. 1516) was professor of poetry at the University of Tubingen. His *Facetiae* appeared in the early sixteenth century (Adams, 1967), but we could not find any copy of the 1508 edition which is supposed to have been the source of some stories (*La Grande Encyclopedie*, n.d.). However, Bebel edited some books of the Italian humanist Gian Francesco Poggio-Braccioloni (1380-1459) whose stories, also titled *Facetiae*, went through at least 20 editions or issues before 1600.
 7. Probably the German poet Samuel Gotthold Lange (1711-1781).
 8. Heinrich Doring, the biographer of Burger, corrected this error and showed in 1824 (Webster, 1970) or 1847 (Williams, 1967b) that the author was actually Rudolph Erich Raspe. However, the tradition which attributed Baron Munchhausen's tales to Burger remains firmly fixed in literary circles: a 1996 edition of this book still bears the sole name of Burger on the cover (Burger, 1996). At the end of 1786, Smith sold the rights to another Oxford bookseller, G. Kearsley.
 9. Or October 31 (Burger, 1996).
 10. *Lenore* (1773), *Die Kuh* (1784), *Der wilde Jager* (1785), *Der Kaiser und derAbt* (1785), among others.
 11. The *Musen Almanach* was founded in 1770 by Heinrich Christian Boie (1744-1806) and Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter (1746-1797). It was published by the young poets of the literary group known as the *Gottinger Hain*, founded in 1772. To this group belonged also Johann Heinrich Voss (1751-1826), Ludwig Heinrich Christoph Holty (1748-1776), and the brothers Christian (1748-1821) and Friedrich Leopold Stolberg (1750-1819).
 12. This might be the source of the tale in which Baron Munchhausen is thrown down into a volcano where he meets the God Vulcan, and takes advantage of his hospitality to charm Venus.
 13. Ossian, the son or grandson of Fingal (Gregoire, 1877), was a legendary Irish warrior and bard of the 3rd century A. D. His poems were believed to have been translated by the Scottish poet James Macpherson (1736-1796) under the title of *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763) (Thomson, 1967; Webster, 1970). This was a literary hoax: Macpherson was actually the author, and not the translator.
 14. The *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* were edited in 1765 by Thomas Percy (1728 or 9-1811), an English antiquary and poet, bishop of Dromore from 1782 to his death. They were based on an old manuscript he rescued from a friend's house, where parts of it had been used to light the fire, and edited at William Shenstone's (1714-1763) suggestion.
 15. He probably wrote the first edition of Munchhausen's tales at that time.
 16. Munchhausen has been corrupted to Munchausen (deletion of the umlaut and one h) in literature and medicine.
 17. Richard Asher is also famous for his description of myxoedematous madness (Asher, 1949).

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Biography

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