The 18th-Century Baron Who Lent His Name to Munchausen Syndrome

In 1951, London physician Richard Asher wrote a journal article about “a common syndrome which most doctors have seen, but about which little has been written.” He described a pattern of seemingly sick patients with dramatic but plausible medical histories, who made countless visits to doctors and hospitals, quarreled with medical professionals, and discharged themselves against advice. In short, these individuals suffered from what’s known today as Munchausen syndrome, a psychological condition in which a patient pretends that they or someone else, often a child, are seriously ill. Had the disorder’s founder embraced medical eponyms as Alois Alzheimer or Burrill Bernard Crohn did, it might have been called “Asher’s disease.” But it isn’t, because Asher wasn’t keen to attach his good name to a pseudodisease defined by the lies of people he considered “hysterics, schizophrenics, masochists or psychopaths of some kind.” Asher instead looked to literature, finding inspiration in Baron Munchausen’s Narrative of His Marvelous Travels and Campaigns in Russia, a now-obscure 1785 novel by German writer Rudolf Erich Raspe. In the vein of Gulliver’s Travels, Raspe’s book—initially published as a series of anonymous articles and later reimagined in countless versions, editions and translations—features the first-person, fantastical stories of Baron Munchausen, a nobleman and retired soldier whose obvious tall tales delight his dinner guests. Among his many adventures, Munchausen flies across the Thames on a cannonball, fights a 40-foot-long crocodile and travels to the moon. Accompanying the stories, naturally, were original illustrations. One such drawing, published in a 1786 edition of the novel, shows Munchausen dangling from a rope tied to a crescent moon. It’s a favorite of Sarah Tindal Kareem, a literary scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, who chose the scene as the cover of her 2014 book, Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder. “The 18th century was a unique moment in time, before clear copyright and libel laws, and there wasn’t a hard and fast distinction between works of fact and works of fiction,” says Kareem. This was very much the case for Raspe’s novel, as his Munchausen was based on a still-living person with virtually the same name. Karl Friedrich Hieronymus, Freiherr (or Baron) von Münchhausen, was a retired German officer who fought with a Russian regiment in two campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. By 1760, he was living a life of leisure in the German countryside, regularly hosting nobles and aristocrats at his Hanover home. Münchhausen earned a reputation far and wide as a good-hearted, generous, lively and dramatic storyteller—though not a liar. Both the real and faux barons started out as well-respected figures. “In Raspe’s book, there’s a frame narrative where Munchausen, who thinks his guests are talking nonsense, tells these even more nonsensical tall tales to poke fun of them and their gullibility,” says Kareem, who estimates that Raspe’s novel was reprinted 100 times over the next two centuries. Every edit and translation introduced changes to the text. “In later editions, however, there’s a shift so that he’s not in on the joke—the joke’s on him,” Kareem explains. “He becomes a buffoon, a liar and a figure of ridicule.”