

Acknowledgements

We thank all the families who took part in this study, the midwives for their help in recruiting them, and the whole ALSPAC team, which includes interviewers, computer and laboratory technicians, clerical workers, research scientists, volunteers, managers, receptionists and nurses.

Author contributions

L.R. and A.T. conceived and designed the study. L.R. analysed the data and wrote the first draft. All authors contributed to the interpretation of data for the work and provided critical revisions. All authors read and approved the submitted manuscript.

Funding

The UK Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust (grant ref.: 217065/Z/19/Z) and the University of Bristol provide core support for ALSPAC. This publication is the work of the authors and L.R. and A.T. will serve as guarantors for the contents of this paper. A comprehensive list of grant funding is available on the ALSPAC website (www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac/external/documents/grant-acknowledgements.pdf). The primary outcome measures for age 25 data used in the paper were specifically funded by the Wellcome Trust (204895/Z/16/Z). R.B., G.D.S. and E.S. work in a unit that receives funding from the University of Bristol and the UK Medical Research Council (MC_UU_00011/1 and MC_UU_00011/3). This research was funded by the Wellcome Trust (204895/Z/16/Z). For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a CC BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Declaration of interest

None.

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Psychiatry in the arts

The Napoleon delusion: 200 years later

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The year 2021 marked 200 years from the death of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), the Emperor of the French, one of the most celebrated and controversial political figures in history. Napoleon’s epic life – his rise to power and his fall from glory – has continued to have an overwhelming effect on minds during the past two centuries. The ‘Napoleon delusion’ – the delusional belief of being Napoleon Bonaparte himself – is a classic stereotype in psychiatry, which seems to have been assimilated in modern pop culture as well. In artworks, films, comic books and strips, the unusual but characteristic bicorn hat and hand-in-jacket pose are a strong visual that immediately suggests the madness of its wearer. As known, this disorder is part of grandiose delusions (or delusions of grandeur), a subtype of delusion that occurs in people with a wide range of psychiatric diseases, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

As described by Laure Murat in her book *L’Homme qui se prenait pour Napoléon* (2011), the first cases occurred in 1840, as a consequence of the return of Napoleon’s remains to France. The writer Alphonse Esquiros (1812–1876) recorded the admission of 14 cases to Paris’s Bicêtre Asylum in that year. The legend of Napoleon, a self-made man of bourgeois heritage who had succeeded in ascending to the throne of France on his own will and courage, thrilled many key representatives of the new Romantic generation. Playing a central role in the writings of Romantic authors even long after his death – for instance *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) by Alexandre Dumas (1802–1870) or *War and Peace* (1865) by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) – was certainly key to his legacy being passed down intact through these centuries, as much as the birth of cinema and modern mass media. The origin of the Napoleon delusion in these was likely the play *The Misleading Lady* by Charles W. Goddard (1879–1951) and Paul Dickey (1882–1933), originally intended for theatrical performance in 1913 and then novelised 2 years later. It was made into a silent film in 1920; the Napoleon delusion character inspired the 1922 film *Mixed Nuts*, starring Stan Laurel (1890–1965). Stan plays a salesman peddling a book about Napoleon; after he is hit on the head by a brick, he believes he actually is Napoleon, recruiting neighbourhood children as soldiers to recreate a famous battle. Stan is committed to an insane asylum, where he continues to behave like the French emperor. Parodied in the Bugs Bunny cartoon *Napoleon Bunny-Part* (1956), the cliché can be still found in the 21st-century adult animated science fiction sitcom. People affected by this disorder became the main characters of comic strips and jokes among children, so that Napoleon became the prototype of the insane in the asylum.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2021.166>.

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The British Journal of Psychiatry (2022)
220, 75. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2021.166