

Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac

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smart

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AN EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH OF BOB JONES UNIVERSITY

An Introduction to *Cyrano de Bergerac*

Cyrano de Bergerac: An Heroic Comedy in Five Acts premiered in Paris on Dec. 28, 1897, at the theater of Porte-Saint-Martin. The play was both a literary anomaly and a smashing stage success. It brought great acclaim to the young French poet-playwright Edmond Rostand (1868–1918). Soon after enjoying one of the most enthusiastic audience receptions in theater history, *Cyrano* became popular on stages around the world.

In an era in which naturalism and realism prevailed, Rostand had dared to offer his sophisticated audience a heroic comedy in verse. This opulent period piece stood in stark contrast to the mundane “slice of life” drama that was standard fare on the French stage. The works of writers like Emile Zola and Henrik Ibsen centered on such contemporary social problems as crime, poverty and illness, bringing the environment of the lower classes into the theater.

In contrast, Rostand's *Cyrano*, set in 17th-century France, presents poetry, love and idealism in a plot full of high adventure and swashbuckling romance. The action takes place in Paris, on the battlefield at Arras during the Thirty Years' War and in a sheltered cloister in the French countryside.

In addition to a vivid historical backdrop that calls for attractive stage spectacle, *Cyrano* engages the heart in an exquisite story of unrequited love. The plot is quasi-historical, based on the life of the French soldier-poet-philosopher Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–1655), a classmate of Moliere and one of the most famous swordsmen of his day. He was also an innovative writer, a scientist and a man with a legendary long nose.

In Rostand's play Cyrano loves a beautiful woman named Roxane but believes that no woman could ever love him because of his huge, grotesque nose. Cyrano agrees, however,

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Darren Lawson as Cyrano, Classic Players 2013



Classic Players 1975



The historical Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-1655)

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to help his rival, a handsome young soldier named Christian de Neuville, win Roxane's heart through love letters, romantic poetry and flowery speech. As the courtship progresses, neither Christian nor Roxane discovers Cyrano's secret love for Roxane.

In Rostand's famous balcony scene, Cyrano first whispers to Christian and then actually speaks the romantic words that win Roxane's heart. Shortly after Christian and Roxane marry, Christian dies in the wars, and Roxane takes up life in a nunnery as a widow in mourning.

Then fifteen years later, as Cyrano himself is dying from an ignominious wound, Roxane discovers the truth. Thus Cyrano's brilliant but unfulfilled life ends in a brief moment of triumphant love. Having defied cowardice, compromise and falsehood throughout his life, Cyrano finally defies death itself.

For audiences and actors alike, Cyrano is one of the most appealing and complex characters in dramatic literature. He is a swashbuckler who stands on a chair and forces an actor from the stage, composes a ballad while dueling, and defends a man against 100 attackers.

But his heroic stature encompasses wordplay in addition to swordplay. Cyrano is a verbal wizard. Like Hamlet, he is a man of wit, intelligence and passion as well as one who engages in detached, often ironic contemplation of his own actions.

If Cyrano is a heroic figure of swagger and grandiloquence, flourish and gallantry, boastful jests and bravura, he is also a sad, sensitive poet and lover who masquerades as a clown. In short, Rostand has turned the flamboyant historical figure of Cyrano de Bergerac into literature's ultimate homage to the spirit of the romantic hero. 🍷



Bob Jones Jr. as Cyrano, Classic Players 1951

Panache, the French word for "white plumes," literally denotes the plumes above a soldier's headgear. But it also refers to a certain flair or swagger that serves as the outward sign of a person's noble internal qualities. The "white plumes" that adorn Cyrano's hat symbolize freedom, his good name, the deeds that decorate or clothe his soul, his bristling wit, his courage, truth—in short, all that is noble in Cyrano's character. In the end of Rostand's play, Cyrano has nothing left but his *panache*.

In a 1901 speech to the French Academy, Rostand remarked that *panache* serves as a comfort or consolation that still waves in the air when the man who displays it suffers defeat or depression. It may, in fact, appear even more glorious after the wearer's failure. It is not a symbol of mere stoicism but of grand, stylish stoicism.



Edmond Rostand (1868-1918)

Rostand's Literary Technique and Philosophy

Although Rostand wrote several other plays, none was as widely admired as *Cyrano*, a drama that employs free-flowing poetry to blend symbolism and sentimentality, wit and dramatic action. By portraying the protagonist as a poet and man of letters, Rostand created the ideal frame for displaying his own gifts for writing witty poetry, beautiful love letters, showy diatribes and spontaneous comments on every subject imaginable.

The style of the play is eclectic. Rostand draws from dozens of French writers of different periods up through the 17th century, in which *Cyrano* is set. He incorporates several passages by the historical Cyrano de Bergerac and includes allusions to his humorous novels about interplanetary voyage that are prototypes of science fiction, *The Comical History of the States and Empires of the Worlds of the Moon and Sun*.

It is not merely Rostand's literary technique that places him outside the mainstream of drama in his day. *Cyrano* dates from the era in which Paris's avant-garde theater, Theatre Libre, was a showplace for naturalism. But rather than writing in this modern vein, Rostand created an old-fashioned verse drama about heroes, beautiful maidens, sword fights, romance and poetry.

Naturalism is a 19th-century artistic-intellectual movement that purports to represent reality in a scientific, truthful manner. Naturalistic playwrights present theater audiences with a "slice of life" onstage—that is, situations, characters and settings that mimic real life in all its sordid details. Since life is not beautiful, they theorize, art should not misrepresent it as such. Their works usually include frank depictions of the human body and its natural functions. They write in flat prose, avoiding all forms of heightened language.

Naturalistic drama reflects the philosophy of determinism, the idea that the quality of a person's life is entirely predetermined by his or her heredity and environment. It posits that men and women have the freedom to make few if any truly meaningful free-will decisions in life. No one can transcend his or her background. Those whose parents have failed to lead fulfilled lives are doomed to a similar existence. Further, people do not shape history; they are shaped by it.

Writing in the heyday of naturalism in Paris, Edmond Rostand in *Cyrano de Bergerac* eschewed both determinism and naturalism. Instead of reflecting the ugly side of such subjects as war and rivalry in love, Rostand idealizes them, representing them in an elevated fashion as fairer and nobler than they are in real life. "Idealism in life" has been defined as "the character of those who regard the ideas of truth and right, goodness and beauty, as standards and directive forces."

Cyrano belongs to the literary tradition of romanticism, which encompasses idealism and heroism. In the character Cyrano, Rostand created a true hero through whom he depicts the power of a great soul to rise above mockery and disappointment. Because the play appeared at a time when audiences seemed to prefer science and machinery above chivalry and poetry, many critics were stunned that a romantic drama like *Cyrano* could succeed in sophisticated Paris.

In reality, however, *Cyrano* succeeded because of, not in spite of, Rostand's romanticism. The qualities that seemed to doom the play to failure on the Paris stage actually became the major components of its success. It offered audience members wit and humor as well as an occasion to exult in the hero's triumphs and cry over his sad fate in love. It gave them a respite from personal and social problems. Yet Rostand's masterpiece, rather than an escapist fantasy, is a thought-provoking drama that probes the human condition and reflects the playwright's insight into universal themes. 🍷

Cyrano de Bergerac

A SUMMARY OF THE PLAY BY EDMOND ROSTAND

Cyrano de Bergerac, guardsman and poet, is cursed with an enormous, bulbous, blossoming beak of a nose. To compensate for his fixed belief that no woman can ever love him on account of this affliction, he has made himself renowned in Paris for his personal bravery and the charm of his verse.

Cyrano is not without enemies, in part because he dares to stand against all wrongdoing and in part because the beautiful woman he secretly loves, Roxane, is much sought after. Viscount de Guiche, an evil nobleman, wishes to have Cyrano killed. He also wants Roxane for himself even though he is a married man. He thus plans to secure her hand in marriage for his friend Valvert, another proud and immoral aristocrat who is so undiscerning as to mock Cyrano's nose.

After a spectacular duel with Valvert, Cyrano receives an urgent message from Roxane that leads him to believe she may actually love him. He finds, however, that she imagines herself in love with the handsome Christian de Neuville, a newly enlisted guardsman, and wants Cyrano to bring them together.



Putting aside his own love, Cyrano offers his powers of expression to assist Christian in winning Roxane. Cyrano's eloquence in the many letters signed with Christian's name and the feeling in his voice as he declares his love under Roxane's balcony one dark night bring about the marriage of Christian and Roxane. A few minutes later the regiment is ordered away to the siege of Arras.

Although their company is outnumbered, starving and facing almost certain death, Roxane daily receives a letter signed with Christian's name. Irresistibly drawn by these letters, Roxane dares to drive through the enemy line to reach Christian's side.

When Christian sees the power another's letters have had over Roxane, he suddenly realizes that it is Cyrano and not he whom she really loves. He insists that Cyrano tell her the truth and leaves the scene. Before Cyrano has divulged the secret, however, Christian, mortally wounded, is carried back to the camp. When Cyrano whispers in his ear, "I have told her; it is you she loves," Christian dies a happy man.

After Christian's death Roxane goes to live in a convent. For the next fifteen years, Cyrano makes it his custom to call on her every Saturday at the stroke of three. In spite of innumerable enemies and abject poverty, Cyrano displays an invincible spirit at these meetings.

Then one Saturday as he proceeds to make his call, an enemy pushes a log from a window, causing it to fall on Cyrano's head, breaking his skull. He hides the injury from Roxane but begs to be allowed to read Christian's last letter, which she carries always next to her heart.

Only when in the gathering darkness Cyrano reads the letter through without faltering does Roxane realize that he was the writer and that through all the years it has been Cyrano whom she loves.

CYRANO DE BERGERAC





Matt Jones as Christian, Elena Taylor as Roxane and Darren Lawson as Cyrano, *Classic Players* 2013

The Character of Cyrano

Cyrano de Bergerac is a larger-than-life character who dominates performances of the Rostand play in which he appears as title character. This swashbuckler who duels his way across the stage is also a gentleman who excels in verbal sparring. He is a man endowed with extraordinary gifts as well as an admirable figure of honor, justice, courage, loyalty and self-sacrifice.

But the hero of *Cyrano de Bergerac* is a complex character. While he is the personification of chivalry, courage and poetry, he also epitomizes poverty, worldly failure and ugliness. Because his nose is abnormally large and grotesque, Cyrano is burdened with a sense of inferiority that adversely affects his relationships and ultimately shapes his life. Still he learns to live with his unattractive outward appearance and even feel affectionate toward the nose he believes no woman could ever love.

Cyrano is above all a love story, the enactment of a love triangle plot in which one beautiful woman, Roxane, is the love-of-a-lifetime for two gallant men, Cyrano and Christian. Neither man enjoys a life of happiness with this woman, yet the play is a comedy because the main character remains uncompromising as he struggles to attain an ideal. Although he does not succeed, he displays an extraordinary degree of courage, love and loyalty.

A number of plot episodes define and emphasize the difference between Cyrano's outward appearance and his inner beauty. Rostand, in fact, creates most of the drama in his play by employing the age-old contrast between physical appearance and inner worth.

The crux of the story is that Roxane, herself the epitome of beauty, mistakes beauty of face for beauty of soul when she falls in love-at-first-sight with Christian. It is not until the play's final scene that she realizes she loves Cyrano's soul more than she ever loved Christian's physical beauty.

From the very beginning of the play, Rostand depicts Cyrano as a person who dares to go against the entertainment and fashion of his day. Before he enters, the audience hears his voice challenging the celebrated actor Montfleury and sees his long arm waving a cane above the heads of the crowd, an action that symbolizes his relationship to the world as a man who stands against the popular crowd.

Cyrano then sums up his values as opposed to those of society: "I carry my adornments on my soul. I go caparisoned in gems unseen, trailing white plumes of freedom, garlanded with my good name . . . and swinging at my side courage, and on the stones of this old town making the sharp truth ring like golden spurs!"

A Note on the Translation

Of the many English adaptations of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the one created by American poet Brian Hooker for Walter Hampden's 1923 production has long been a favorite among American directors. Hooker translated Rostand's rhymed iambic hexameter, the standard meter of French poetry, into unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Soon we learn that Cyrano has no money and wants no patron, a predicament that in itself makes him a failure by worldly standards. Then Cyrano reveals his standard of conduct: "to be admirable in all!" This is an idealistic philosophy to which he remains true throughout the play.

Having made the nature of Cyrano's external conflict clear, Rostand then introduces the internal conflict his protagonist experiences. "I love," says Cyrano to his friend Le Bret. Why is this love problematic for Cyrano? "The shadow of my profile on the wall!" Cyrano's ugly outer appearance belies the beauty of his inner essence. The person who is wise looks beneath the surface appearance to discover the inner essence of another person. But in Cyrano's environment, no one does so until the very end of the play, when Roxane at last sees him for who he is.

The test of Cyrano's loyalty to his creed—"to be admirable in all!"—intensifies when he learns of Roxane's attraction to another man, whom Cyrano becomes actively involved in aiding. First he lends his eloquence to Christian by writing letters for him to give Roxane.

Then when Christian determines to "speak for himself" and fails, it is Cyrano who again comes to his rescue. In this scene (Act III, scene vi) near the midpoint of the drama, Rostand's theme becomes clear as Cyrano remarks ironically to Roxane, who believes him to be Christian, "Love seeketh not her own."

On a larger scale, Rostand's theme is the contrast between the self-sacrificial nature of true love and the self-serving nature of the material world. The characters who represent these two extremes are Cyrano and the Viscount de Guiche. They are nowhere contrasted so clearly as when they meet outside Roxane's house in the final scenes of Act III. De Guiche has come under the cover of darkness to woo Roxane. He has disregarded his military duty to do so, and it is obvious that his intentions are not honorable.

By the time de Guiche arrives, however, Cyrano has already successfully won Roxane—not for himself but for Christian—and in a brilliant ploy, he forestalls de Guiche while Roxane and Christian are married.

Thus Rostand's theme comes through clearly: de Guiche, scorning both honor and duty, seeks to fulfill his own desires while Cyrano, scorning his desires, uses his gifts to make others happy. In an aside to the audience in the balcony scene, he says of Roxane, "Dear, you may take my happiness to make you happier, even though you never know I gave it you—only let me hear sometimes the distant laughter of your joy!"

During the war Cyrano keeps Roxane and Christian's love alive through writing letters and risking his life to deliver them from the battlefield. The letters so stir Roxane that she braves the desolate, embattled countryside to reach her husband. When she arrives, it is apparent that Cyrano's words have done more than strengthen love; they have been a catalyst in developing Roxane's noble nature to its full potential. Her words to Christian reveal that her heart is no longer captivated by a handsome face and sparkling wit. Cyrano's words under her balcony and in the letters he has since written on Christian's behalf have made Roxane realize that true love does not consist in externals. She now loves the soul, the essence, of the man whose words she has absorbed.

During the years that Roxane is in a convent mourning Christian's death, Cyrano is not the only person who visits her regularly. De Guiche also comes. As he converses with her at the beginning of Act V, we learn that over the years Cyrano's consistent strength and inner beauty have not only encouraged growth in his beloved Roxane but also brought about changes in one of his bitterest enemies. Once self-seeking and cruel, de Guiche has come to realize the futility of a self-centered life. He remarks to Roxane that the way of "pride and power" leads only to the "whisper of dead leaves" of "dry illusions" and "vain regrets." The wealth, power and prestige he attained did not satisfy him. It is ultimately Cyrano's way of life that he has grown to respect. De Guiche describes Cyrano as a man who "has lived out his vows./ Free in his thoughts, as in his actions free!"

Even after Cyrano has been mortally wounded, he defies death by concealing the injury and keeping his Saturday appointment with Roxane. During this visit he asks to read "Christian's" last letter. As he does so—in the dark from memory—Roxane finally realizes the truth. Refusing to accept the gravity of the situation, she exclaims to Cyrano, "Live, for I love you!" (V.v.136).

It is, however, too late. In delirium the dying Cyrano still fights falsehood, prejudice, compromise, cowardice and vanity. Death then comes to separate him from his "laurels," or his literary and military triumphs, and even from his "rose," Roxane (V.v.198).

In spite of all, however, he takes with him his good name, unstained and unspotted from the world—"Mon Panache." 🍷



Coquelin, the first Cyrano

Rostand and the French Theater

When *Cyrano* premiered in 1897, Rostand already enjoyed a degree of popularity in Paris theater circles for writing plays that were regarded as poetic, noble in theme and effective vehicles for good acting. He created the title role in *Cyrano* for the celebrated actor-manager Constant-Benoit Coquelin. To play opposite Coquelin, the playwright chose the most famous French actress of the day, Sarah Bernhardt, who had successfully played the leading role in Rostand's *The Princess Far Away*.

During the rehearsal period for *Cyrano*, word spread around the city that the play was written in old-fashioned poetry and featured a sword-wielding hero, beautiful ladies, moonlight and romance. Because Paris audiences were accustomed to seeing realistic dramatizations of society's direst problems on the stage, the theater world began to anticipate a negative opening-night reception for Rostand's new work.



Sarah Bernhardt, c. 1878

To offset the financial loss they expected, the managers of Porte-Saint-Martin cut the budget for costumes and sets. Rostand responded by contributing his own money to provide the elegant costumes he had envisioned for the production. He also reportedly became so frustrated with the set designer that he almost attacked him.

Fearing the worst, Rostand apologized to his friend Coquelin for involving him "in a disastrous adventure." On opening night, however, Coquelin held the audience spellbound from *Cyrano's* dramatic first entrance to his dying words. In the words of one historian, "Theatergoers cheered *Cyrano's* triumphs, sighed at his suffering, laughed at his witty wordplay, and cried as his fate became known." After the curtain fell, the applause continued for a full hour. In spite of all predictions, *Cyrano de Bergerac* enjoyed one of the most enthusiastic opening-night receptions in theater history.

"In our image-conscious society, where extreme make-overs of everything from faces to houses get huge television ratings, we have lost the values of honor, courage and love. *Cyrano* reminds us...what true values are."

—BARBARA VAN HOLT



Beneth Jones as Roxane and Bob Jones Jr. as Cyrano, *Classic Players* 1975



Bob Jones III as Cyrano and Ron Pyle as de Guiche, *Classic Players* 2004