

PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

CYRANO *de* BERGERAC

by Edmond Rostand



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

CYRANO de BERGERAC



Edmond Rostand



Prestwick House

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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Edmond Rostand was born on April 1, 1868, into a wealthy, refined French family. The young boy was encouraged to explore his imagination, and he had a book of his poems published in a literary magazine by the time he turned sixteen. Rostand went to college to become a lawyer, but a literary career interested him much more, and he never practiced law.

In 1890, Rostand married the poet Rosemonde Gerard, and they had two children.

After two unsuccessful attempts at writing dramas, his play, *Les Romanesques* (*The Romancers*), written in 1894, became popular with the French public, and Rostand was finally a well-known author.

A famous French actor, Constant-Benoit Coquelin, persuaded Rostand to write a play that would showcase his wide range of acting abilities. Out of this association came the masterpiece for which Rostand is remembered, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The story is loosely based on the life of Hercule Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac, who was not a great swordsman, but who did have a large nose—although not as large as Rostand's Cyrano—and was quite vain about it. *Cyrano de Bergerac*, however, marks the end of French dramatic Romanticism, which was soon overtaken by more naturalistic styles.

In 1901, strictly on the popularity of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Rostand was elected to the Académie Française, the prestigious French language institution. Rostand wrote only a few additional plays, none of which were well-received. Despondent and ill, he retired to his estate in the country.

Rostand died on Dec. 2, 1918, a victim of the worldwide influenza pandemic.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

1. To better appreciate *Cyrano de Bergerac*, consider some of the following themes that the play deals with:
 - Intelligence and inner worth are more valuable than physical beauty.
 - People tend to magnify their own faults or flaws, which can lead to low self-esteem and/or self-destructive behavior.
 - Deception often causes unfavorable consequences for both the deceiver and the deceived.
 - Honor, virtue, and moral purity are heroic qualities that are often intertwined with suffering and self-sacrifice.

2. It is important to consider some historical context with regard to two particular time periods: the time and place in which the action of the play occurs and the time and place in which Edmond Rostand wrote the play.
 - A. The play is set in France between the years of 1640 and 1655.
 - France is involved in the Thirty Years' War, a war fought against the Holy Roman Empire mainly over trade routes.
 - France reaches its height in the areas of art, literature, and philosophy, which sets the standard for the rest of Europe.
 - Cardinal Richelieu has recently founded the French Academy, a society of intellectuals and writers.
 - Literature and poetry are discussed at intellectual gatherings called salons, which were popular among educated, aristocratic women and usually took place in the homes of such women.

- B. Edmond Rostand wrote *Cyrano de Bergerac* in Paris, France, in 1897.
- France experiences rapid industrial growth and further growth of its many colonies.
 - English physicist Joseph John Thomson discovers the electron.
 - *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker are published.
 - Realism and naturalism dominate the arts, but a neo-romanticist movement also begins, of which Rostand is a part.
3. As stated above, the late nineteenth century was dominated by realism in the arts. The realist tradition involved frank depictions of everyday life and its mundane activities, important social or political themes, and depictions of the daily struggles people faced, especially those in the lower classes. Rostand, however, along with other artists of his time, broke out of this realist mode and looked back to the genre of romanticism, a literary movement popular in Europe during the late 18th century. Romanticism involves the following characteristics:
- the depiction of intense emotion and expression
 - the importance of action, movement, and drama
 - a focus on the individual and his or her rebellion against social conventions
4. Be aware of numerous references by Rostand to other famous literary works and plays. For example, the balcony scene in *Cyrano de Bergerac* is a parody of the balcony scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Pay special attention, however, to the many references to Alexandre Dumas' 1844 novel *The Three Musketeers*. Rostand was a fan of Dumas' novel, and he both parodies and pays tribute to it in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Here are just a few of the allusions Rostand makes to *The Three Musketeers*.
5. Understand some of the symbols that occur in *Cyrano de Bergerac*:
- Cyrano's nose symbolizes several things. On the one hand, it symbolizes his best qualities: loyalty, virtue, bravery, and independence. It also symbolizes his character's biggest weakness: his insecurities when it comes to love.
 - Cyrano's tears and Christian's blood on the last letter to Roxane symbolize the fact that the two men together made up one romantic hero.
 - The white plume is a symbol of honor, bravery, purity, and moral integrity.

6. Understand some of the motifs that occur in the play:

- fighting and war
- poetry and letters
- the Moon and the night sky
- society and its hierarchies
- Greek mythology and ancient heroes

*I wished to dedicate this play to Cyrano's soul,
But since his soul has now passed into you,
Coquelin,[†] it is to you that I dedicate it.*
E.R.

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

D R A M A T I S P E R S O N A E

CYRANO DE BERGERAC†
CHRISTIAN DE NEUVILLETTE
COUNT DE GUICHE
RAGUENEAU
LE BRET
CARBON DE CASTEL-JALOUX
THE CADETS
LIGNIERE
DE VALVERT
A MARQUIS
SECOND MARQUIS
THIRD MARQUIS
MONTFLEURY
BELLEROSE
JODELET
CUIGY
BRISSAILLE
THE DOORKEEPER
A LACKEY
SECOND LACKEY
A BORE
A MUSKETEER
SECOND MUSKETEER

A SPANISH OFFICER
A PORTER
A BURGHER
HIS SON
A PICKPOCKET
A SPECTATOR
A GUARDSMAN
BERTRANDOU THE FIFER
A MONK
TWO MUSICIANS
THE POETS
THE PASTRY COOKS
ROXANE
SISTER MARTHA
LISE
THE BUFFET-GIRL
MOTHER MARGUERITE
THE DUENNA
SISTER CLAIRE
AN ACTRESS
THE PAGES
THE SHOP-GIRL

The CROWD, TROOPERS, BURGHERS, MARQUISES, MUSKETEERS, PICKPOCKETS,
PASTRY COOKS, POETS, CADETS, COMEDIANS, ACTORS, VIOLINISTS, PAGES,
CHILDREN, SPANISH SOLDIERS, SPECTATORS, INTELLECTUALS, NUNS, etc.

The first four acts take place in 1640; the fifth act takes place in 1655.



A C T I

A Performance at the Hotel de Bourgogne[†]

The hall of the Hotel de Bourgogne, in 1640. It is a sort of tennis court arranged and decorated for a theatrical performance.

The hall is oblong and seen from an angle, so that one of its sides forms the back of the right foreground, and meeting the left background, makes an angle with the stage, which is partly visible.

On both sides of the stage are benches. The curtain is made up of two tapes-tries which can be drawn aside. Above the proscenium are the royal arms. There are broad steps from the stage to the hall. On either side of these steps are the places for the violinists. The footlights consist of a row of candles.

There are two rows, one over the other, of side galleries. The highest row is divided into boxes. There are no seats in the pit of the hall, which is the real stage of the theater. At the back of the pit, some benches form steps, and underneath the steps is a staircase which leads to the upper seats. There is an improvised buffet containing candles, vases, glasses, plates of tarts, cakes, bottles, etc.

The entrance to the theater is in the center of the background, under the gallery of the boxes. A large door is half-open to let in the spectators. On the panels of this door, in different corners, and over the buffet, are red placards bearing the words, "La Clorise."

At the rising of the curtain, the hall is in semi-darkness, and still empty. The candle-holders are lowered in the middle of the pit, ready to be lighted.

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

Scene I

The public, arriving by degrees. TROOPERS, BURGHERS, LACKEYS, PAGES, a PICK-POCKET, the DOORKEEPER, etc., followed by the MARQUISES. CUIGY, BRISSAILLE, the BUFFET-GIRL, the VIOLINISTS, etc.

[*A confusion of loud voices is heard outside the door. A TROOPER enters hastily.*]

DOORKEEPER: [*going after him*] Wait! You must pay your fifteen sols!†

TROOPER: I get in free!

DOORKEEPER: How so?

TROOPER: I'm a soldier in the King's Cavalry!†

DOORKEEPER: [*to SECOND TROOPER who also enters*] And you?

SECOND TROOPER: I get in free as well. I'm a musketeer!

FIRST TROOPER: [*to the second*]

The play doesn't begin until two. Let's have a bout with the foils to pass the time.

[*They begin fencing.*]

A LACKEY: [*entering*] Psst—Flanquin!

SECOND LACKEY: Is that you, Champagne?

FIRST LACKEY: [*taking cards and some dice out of his jacket pocket*]

Look what I've brought. Let's play!

SECOND LACKEY: Good idea, my rogue friend!

[*They both sit down on the floor.*]

FIRST LACKEY: [*taking a candle-end from his pocket and lighting it*]

I've stolen for us a little light from my master.

A GUARDSMAN: [*to a SHOP-GIRL who comes toward him*] How nice of you to come before the lights are lit!

[*He grabs her at the waist.*]

ONE OF THE FENCERS: [*receiving a thrust*] A hit!

ONE OF THE CARD-PLAYERS: A club!

GUARDSMAN: [*following the girl*] A kiss!

SHOP-GIRL: [*trying to free herself from his grasp*] Stop! They'll see us!

GUARDSMAN: [*drawing her to a dark corner*] Now they can't!

A MAN: [*sitting on the floor with some others who are all eating food*] By coming early, one can eat in comfort.

Glossary

Dedication

Coquelin – Benoit-Constant Coquelin (1841 – 1909) was Edmond Rostand’s favorite actor and played the part of Cyrano de Bergerac when the play first opened in 1897. It is said that Rostand wrote Cyrano de Bergerac specifically for Coquelin so that he could play the title role.

Dramatis Personae

Cyrano de Bergerac – The character of Cyrano de Bergerac is based on a real person, Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac (1619 – 1655), who was a novelist, playwright, and soldier living during the time in which the play is set. While Edmond Rostand based his character on the real Cyrano, the events and the storyline of the play are mainly fictional, as is Cyrano’s extremely large nose.

Act I: Scene i

Hotel de Bourgogne – [French] Hotel Burgundy; a theater built on the site where the Dukes of Burgundy had lived during the 14th and 15th centuries. The fact that the opening scene occurs in a theater highlights the importance of the theater in 17th century France. Notice how nearly all members of society are represented at the theater—from pickpockets to aristocrats.

sols – coins used in France during the Middle Ages; twenty sols equaled one Tournoise pound—the basic form of currency during that period.

“I’m a soldier in the King’s Cavalry!” – Any soldier, musketeer, or royal official was allowed free admission into the theater. Actors were opposed to this practice because their pay was based on ticket sales. The playwright Molière eventually succeeded in getting Louis XIV to put an end to the practice.

Burgundy – a variety of wine grown in the Burgundy region of France

Rotrou – Jean de Rotrou (1609 – 1650) was a French playwright who worked under the patronage of Cardinal Richelieu during the time in which the play is set.

Corneille – Pierre Corneille (1606 – 1684), a French playwright considered to have mastered the art of classical tragedy. He is best known for his tragedy “Le Cid” (1637).

Balthazar Baro – (1600 – 1650), a French playwright and novelist

the ‘Cid’ – a reference to a 1637 play by Pierre Corneille (see note: *Corneille* above) about El Cid (1043 – 1099), a legendary Spanish military leader during the 11th century who later became the subject of an epic poem and many plays

Vocabulary

ACT I; SCENE I

burghers – middle-class citizens (bourgeois); merchants

falsetto – a high-pitched male voice

foils – fencing swords

lackeys – low-level servants

marquises – noblemen who rank one below the ranking of a duke

oblong – rectangular

pages – messenger servants

proscenium – an area of a theater between the orchestra and the curtain

troopers – soldiers on horseback; cavalrymen

ACT I; SCENE II

candelabra – a candle holder that holds several candles at once; a chandelier with candles

coquettish – flirtatious

duenna – a governess; chaperone

ode – a type of lyric poem usually addressed directly to a particular idea or object

triolet – a type of poem containing eight lines in each stanza, with the first line repeated as the fourth and seventh lines and the second line repeated as the eighth line

ACT I; SCENE III

incredulously – skeptically; in disbelief

obsequious – submissive, fawning

pastoral – pertaining to the pleasant country life; rural

persecute – to oppress or harass

viscount – a nobleman whose rank is one below that of an earl

ACT I; SCENE IV

affable – pleasant, friendly

appendage – an attachment (usually referring to a part of the body)

conch – a type of large shell

envoi – a short passage at the end of a poem

farce – a comedic play containing much slapstick and a far-fetched plot

parry – to deflect; to sidestep

pedantic – excessively wordy in a pretentious way

scabbard – a case for a sword

tragedian – an actor who plays tragic characters

ACT I; SCENE V

protuberance – something that projects outward; a lump or bulge

sublime – inspiring; of the highest moral worth