

## Savinien de Cyrano

### The life of Savinien de Cyrano

Savinien de Cyrano, better known as Cyrano de Bergerac, was born on 6 March 1619 in Paris, Rue des Deux Portes, later renamed Rue Dussoubs. Son of Abel de Cyrano, a lawyer, and Esperance Bellenger. He died on 28 July 1655, at the age of thirty-six in Sannois.

Cyrano's family were originally Sardinian immigrants. The family name Cyrano was a French version of the Italian surname Cirano. Cyrano's first name was Savinien named after his paternal grandfather, who had begun life as a Sardinian fishmonger. Cyrano worked hard to shake off his humble origins and transform himself from Savinien de Cyrano into Cyrano de Bergerac, descendent of a great family of Gascon noblemen. Cyrano himself manipulated this image vigorously, at different times in his lifetime he signed himself in each of the following ways: Alexandre de Cyrano Bergerac, Hercule de Bergerac, de Bergerac, de Bergerac Cyrano and De Cyrano de Bergerac. Besides that he was a paradoxical figure: in his lifetime the real Cyrano was much loved and much hated. As a result opposing accounts of the man struggle for dominance, no single version is strictly factual or entirely objective. But most of all the 'real' Cyrano suffered from the fictional Cyrano de Bergerac. One major source hereof is Theophile Gautier's famous *Les Grotesques* (1844) which contained ten pseudo-biographical sketches of romantic personalities in French literature chiefly of the 17th century, among them Cyrano de Bergerac. This 'biography' is filled with errors and yet obviously one of Edmond Rostand's chief sources, Rostand being the playwright who brought Cyrano to life in 1897 in his play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, after which the real Cyrano moved almost completely out of sight (see below 'The fictional Cyrano de Bergerac').

These circumstances make it rather difficult to reconstruct Cyrano's real life. Also because hard evidence about the life of the real Cyrano is scarce. One of the major source is the short biography by Cyrano's friend Henry Le Bret in his introduction to the publication of *The Voyage to the Moon* in 1657, two years after Cyrano's death. Being his friend it is no discredit to Le Bret that he painted a favorable picture of Cyrano: "he always passed for a man of singular rare wit". But it is not difficult to find other sources that paint a different picture, that of a 'madmen' (Voltaire!), an 'atheist' and more.

In 1622, the family moved out to the manor house on the estate of Mauvières near Chevreuse, to the south-west of Paris on the road to Chartres. The name Bergerac had attached to the lands in the late fourteenth century when they were awarded as a gift from King Charles V to Ramond de la Rivière de la Martigne for his bravery in regaining that city from the invading English. La Rivière was originally from Bergerac and so renamed the meadows to the west of this land in honor of his home town and of his achievement, so that the seigneure became known as de Mauvières et de Bergerac. Cyrano later adopted

this name 'de Bergerac', and to this day, despite his well-documented Parisian immigrant roots, the Gascon town of Bergerac in the south-west of France proudly proclaims Cyrano as its most famous native son. However, there is no record of Cyrano ever been to Bergerac.

Cyrano was sent away at the age of seven from home to be taught alongside other boys his age by the local country curate, a private school where he met his lifelong friend Henry le Bret. Cyrano complained repeatedly to his father about the tutor and was taken away from the parson and sent to the Collège de Beauvais in Paris. Its head-master, Jean Grangier, became the model for the hero in Cyrano's play *Le Pédant Joué* (*The Pedant Outwitted*; published 1654). In 1637 he left Beauvais and turned to a life of drinking, gambling and dueling. The next fact of life is perhaps the best-known fact of his career: Cyrano served as a member of the noble corps of cadets under the aristocratic commander Carbon de Cateljaloux from 1638 to 1640. It was at the point of his enrollment with Cateljaloux's men that Cyrano introduced the element of ambiguity about his origins that was to prove so enduring. Firstly, by his use of the name Cyrano de Bergerac, rather than the more accurate Savinien de Cyrano, and secondly, by his affiliation to an almost exclusively Gascon regiment.

When joining the corps of cadets Cyrano was already a brilliant swordsman and helped many friends in duels, as second. In those days men fought for the merest trifles, not so much for honor as for the love of fighting, of prestige and notoriety. Duels were at the time the most rapid means of becoming known. The defining moment in Cyrano's 'swordsman' career was his 'duel with a hundred men' as it became known, at the Porte de Nesle somewhere around 1642. There is no surviving documentary evidence recording the precise details of Cyrano's single-handed battle against a gang of hired thugs. But at the time the story blazed through the taverns and back streets of seventeenth-century Paris.

Once his period of training with the cadets in Paris was complete, Cyrano left for Mouzon and the front line of the war with Germany in 1639. He was shot in the chest but he survived. Cyrano's second military campaign saw him taking part in the siege of Arras in 1640. The recapture of Arras from the occupying Spanish forces was of critical importance for the king due to France's deepening involvement in the power struggles of the Thirty Years War. He was hit with a sword in the neck at the battle of Arras, from which wound he never fully recovered. He returned home and left the army.

After leaving the army Cyrano enrolled himself as a student at the Collège de Lisieux in late 1640 or early 1641. He had never completed his original degree at the Collège de Beauvais and he did not last long at this new institution either. He further resumed his studies while working under the materialist philosopher and scientist Pierre Gassendi, where he probably met other intellectuals like Molière and Chapelle. At the same time he also entered into two contracts, with Pierre Moussard for regular fencing lessons, and a similar contract with David Dupron for dancing lessons.

There is very little known of the last ten years of Cyrano's life. He seems to have settled quietly in Paris and lived a fairly simple life. In August 1650, he was staying with Monsieur Barat in the main street of the Faubourg Saint-Jacques. During the winter of 1651, he was in a different parish, Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs,

in the inauspiciously named Cemetery Street. The spring of 1653 found him still in the same parish, but in a different street, the rather more appealing sounding Fountain Street. He had a private income from his family, possibly the inheritance of his father who died in January 1648, that was not large enough to allow him any great extravagances, but enough money to live off and so he was able to devote all his time to studying the subjects that interested him. He does not seem to have actively pursued commercial publication at this stage and so he also had total freedom to write about whatever he chose. Having abandoned his military career for the intellectual life, Cyrano seems to have quickly discovered that his boundless imagination and dark wit were best suited to satire.

The period up to Cyrano's death is filled with unclear events. There is some evidence that Cyrano was imprisoned in a prison or asylum during a short period of time, based on the 'madness' of his ideas and writing. Henry Le Bret, friend and first biographer, accused Cyrano's brother, Abel, for this but there is no hard evidence. Friends vowed for Cyrano and got him out. At the beginning of *Voyage to the Sun* there are clear references to this period with passages of the imprisonment and escape of the protagonist. Later Cyrano was abandoned from the house of his patron, d'Arpajon. Cyrano's disgrace and expulsion from the house of d'Arpajon seems to have been the direct result of a dramatic incident that took place in early 1654, right at the point when his works had finally made it into print. Until the discovery of the uncensored version of Le Bret's biography, d'Arpajon's decision to kick the dying Cyrano out of his house was difficult to account for. According to some sources, Cyrano had suffered a blow to the head, because a piece of plank dropped on his head, that had left him seriously ill, and it was in this condition that he was suddenly sent away from the duke's household in disgrace. There is also reference to a 'disease' (probably venereal; there goes your romantic hero...) as the cause of death. In Le Bret's biography he describes Cyrano's injury as a gunshot wound as a result of an ambush by ten men who were sent to surround and stop the carriage Cyrano was traveling in, one of them took the opportunity to fire the fatal bullet at close range - this is clearly testament to the great swordsman's fearsome reputation. The moment when the attack on the carriage happened it must have become unpleasantly clear to d'Arpajon that supporting Cyrano was a risky undertaking with consequences far beyond those of literary scandal. Who ordered the attack will probably never be known, although Cyrano had enough enemies, especially religious (Jesuits).

In June 1654 Cyrano was received into the house of M. Des Bois Clairs, with whom he remained for fourteen months until a few days before his death. He then moved to a house at Sannois, a small village just outside Paris on the fringes of his beloved valley of Chevreuse, belonging to this cousin Pierre de Cyrano. Cyrano breathed his last on 28 July 1655, at the age of thirty-six. He was buried at the local church.

### **The writings of Cyrano de Bergerac**

Cyrano de Bergerac wrote letters, plays and poetry and his stylistic range covered satire, tragedy and comedy. His writing career encompassed a range of styles and over a period of a decade he was to produce two plays (a tragedy in verse and a comedy in prose), some verse (of which the surviving examples are

mainly those written in praise of his writer friends and published in their works), various letters and a two-volume science fiction novel, *The States and Empires of the Moon and Sun*.

Cyrano chose to sign his first published work, a short introductory piece for his friend Charles Coyneau d'Assoucy's poetic work *The Judgement of Paris* (1646-47), of which it is believed that around 1640 he became the lover, until 1653 when they became engaged in a bitter rivalry. Cyrano did not sign with his family name but with a pen name that he had chosen for himself for its combination of a Gascon surname and a truly heroic forename: 'Hercule de Bergerac'. Although this was Cyrano's first printed work it is extremely unlikely that it was his first composition. By 1648 he had already begun to establish a reputation for himself due to the circulation of his works in manuscript form.

Cyrano's first success as a professional writer was a comedy entitled *Le Pédant Joué* (*The Pedant Outwitted*). It was written in 1645 but it is unclear whether this play was ever performed during Cyrano's lifetime, and was only published in 1654. Molière plagiarized this play in his *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (1671). In 1646/47 Cyrano began work on a classical tragedy in five acts. He entitled the play *La Mort d'Agrippine* (*The Death of Agrippina*) and in it he explored ideas about power and corruption and expressed ideas that were a direct challenge to the Catholic hegemony. It was also published in 1654, played in 1653 and 1654 and revived for one performance on the 10th November 1872.

It was in the period leading up to his untimely death that Cyrano's literary career began to take off. In 1653, he had finally accepted the assistance of a noble patron, the Duc d'Arpajon, and was preparing his work for print publication. Two volumes duly went before the censor for official approval in late 1653, and in early 1654 Cyrano's *Oeuvres Diverses* (*Diverse Works*) were published in two quartos by the bookseller Charles de Sercy. They contained, *The Death of Agrippina*, *The Pedant Outwitted* and *The Letters*, and a specially commissioned portrait engraving of the author by his friend Zachary Heince. *The Death of Agrippina* was a great success thanks to rumors about its scandalous atheistic content lending it sinful notoriety.



Portrait of Cyrano by his friend the engraver Zachary Heince (c. 1653)

His most enduring and influential works are his fictional accounts of fantastical *Voyages to the Moon and the Sun: The States and Empires of the Moon and Sun*, also known as *Voyage to the Moon* and *The States and Empires of the Sun*. The latter being unfinished at his death. Both were published posthumously, in 1657 and 1662 respectively. The third volume in this 'series', a voyage to the stars, has been lost. This work served as an important inspiration to other illustrious writers: Molière, Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells all owe a debt to Cyrano. Although Cyrano's literary heritage has been obscured for a long time.

Cyrano's work was popular, there were at least twelve reprints of the complete works, of which the first appeared in 1676, and numerous editions of individual works, but there are very few surviving copies. No edition of his work appeared in Paris between 1699 and 1855, and only making a comeback in the second half of the 19th century culminating in the play by Rostand. There is some circumstantial evidence that a vendetta was pursued against Cyrano, also after his death, to destroy his work. Also all editions up to the end of the 19th century were censored: most of the passages omitted in the printed editions are philosophical or satirical arguments of sarcasms directed against the Church and religion and were omitted in the 17th century for obvious reasons.

In 1894, the academic Pierre Brun had already published a complete edition of the works of Cyrano de Bergerac, accompanied by an account of his life. Brun's biography had been painstakingly pieced together from various sources that he had managed to unearth from the obscurity of parish records and the dark depths of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The aim of Brun's six years of dedicated research was to establish a clear, factual picture of the real Cyrano, unclouded by the exaggerations and rumor that his extraordinary career had always attracted. Ironically, Brun's new edition of Cyrano's life and works may very well have been a key element in drawing the playwright Rostand's attention to the subject. Sadly, for the unassuming academic, his work was quickly overshadowed by Rostand's popular success.

It was not until 1997, when Jacques Prévot published an edition of the Complete Works based on precious manuscript sources, that Cyrano's fractured texts were finally fully reconstituted, uncensored and entire.

### **The fictional Cyrano de Bergerac**

Today, the name Cyrano de Bergerac is known to most of us as that of a fictional character with a enormous nose, the hero of a five-act tragicomedy in verse by Edmond Rostand. The play *Cyrano de Bergerac* premiered in Paris on 28 December 1897 and was an immediate success. The final ovation lasted over an hour and after the first forty curtain calls the stage manager gave in and simply left the curtain raised. Partly due to the leading man: Benoit-Constant Coquelin, who would play the title role over four hundred times in the course of the initial fourteen-month-long sell-out run of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Coquelin also played the role in London and in the United States and was the first actor to play Cyrano on film.



Jean-Benoît Constant Coquelin was the first stage Cyrano. Rostand's play was dedicated to him.

The play *Cyrano de Bergerac* tells the tale of a fearless, ferocious Cyrano that falls madly in love with his beautiful cousin Roxane. To come close to her, he allows Baron Christian de Neuville to speak for him. Since Christian is so entranced by Roxane's beauty and wit he cannot find the courage to speak to her himself and is happy to accept Cyrano's offer to write his love letters for him, and even allows Cyrano to make a moving speech on his behalf from the shadows beneath Roxane's balcony, pleading for a kiss. Roxane marries Baron Christian de Neuville, who is sent to Arras, a besieged city. Cyrano continues to write love letters of which Christian is not aware. Roxane visits Christian at the battlefield and reassures him of her love, referring to the letters she received from the battlefield. Christian is killed by enemy fire before he can force Cyrano to admit the deception and ask Roxane to choose between them. Fourteen years later, a wounded and dying Cyrano visits Roxane in the convent, she has shut herself away from to mourn the loss of her beloved husband. He finally admits to Roxane that he was the one who wrote the letters.

Rostand won the prestigious *Croix de la Legion d'honneur* with his play. With the story of *Cyrano de Bergerac* Rostand followed in the success of Alexandre Dumas' novel on the three musketeers in the 1840's. Rostand didn't create the legend of Cyrano he merely added new fuel to a fire that had already been burning fitfully for over two hundred and fifty years. Everything picturesque which fancy and rumor had

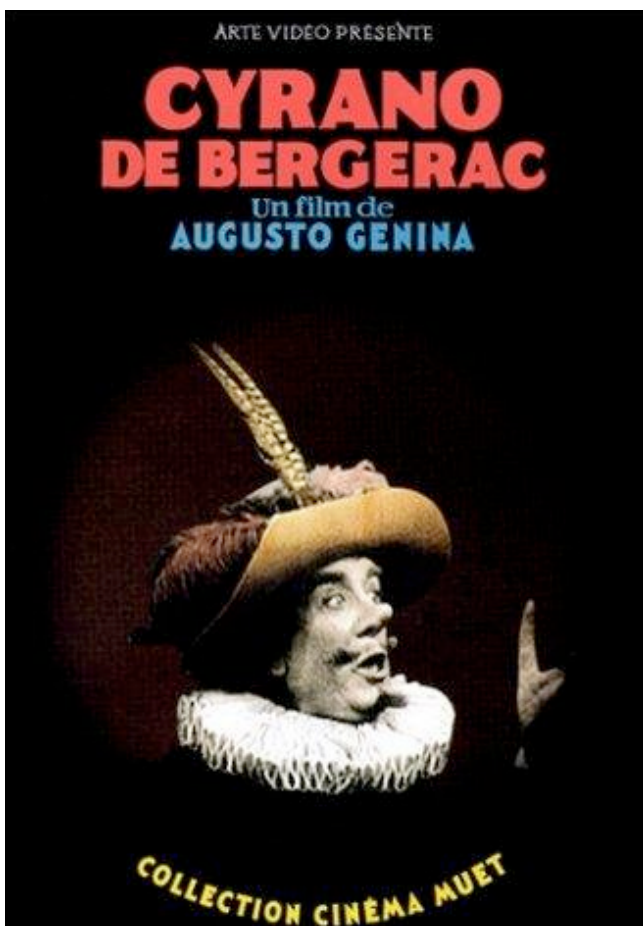
attached to the name of Cyrano during the centuries was taken up by Rostand and exaggerated and idealized almost to infinity. Strangely, Rostand apparently shared the illusion with many that his character was like the 'real' Cyrano. A french savant, M. Emile Mange, wrote a pamphlet pointing out some of Rostand's worst errors, and Rostand replied with a letter, claiming that his play was historically correct. Also Pierre Brun's academic study of Cyrano de Bergerac was known to Rostand.

This phenomenal success of Rostand's fictionalized version of Cyrano's life has been so overwhelming that today it is for many a surprise to learn that Cyrano de Bergerac really existed. Rostand's play further propagated that the great swordsman was a Gascon nobleman from the Périgord region in the south-west of France, which he wasn't (see above). Furthermore he gave the character a nose that seems hard to ignore. The historical Cyrano does not seem to have been plagued by any such morbid dissatisfaction with his own appearance. A portrait painted a year for his death reveals that the real Cyrano was not hideous and that, although he did have a fairly long beaky nose, he definitely didn't have a complex about it. It was Cyrano himself that is the originator of some of the jokes that are projected on the real Cyrano. In one of his plays we can read: "As for his nose, well it's just asking for us to have a dig. This wonderful nose arrives everywhere a quarter of an hour before its master; ten reasonably fat cobblers could take shelter from the rain underneath it to do their work."

The story of (the fictional) Cyrano has appeared in many poems, novels, plays, films, as an opera and even as a ballet. There is even a website called [e-Cyrano.com](http://e-Cyrano.com) that offers the service to (re-)write your dating profile. Probably the most funny incarnation of Cyrano being Cyranose the Bergerac in Sesame Street (see videoclip at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2u\\_GoRsuEQ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2u_GoRsuEQ8)). A selected compilation of Cyrano's appearances:

- A first film version of the story appeared in 1900 with Jean-Benoît Constant Coquelin in the leading role performing the duel scene from *Cyrano de Bergerac* with sound recording on phonograph cylinder.
- A film by Augusto Genina in 1923/1925 starring Pierre Magnier and Linda Moglie.
- A film version in English in 1950 with José Ferrer in the title role, a performance for which he won the Academy Award for Best Actor. He reprised his role in the 1960 French film *Cyrano et d'Artagnan*, directed by Abel Gance, opposite Jean-Pierre Cassel as D'Artagnan.
- In 1959 a Japanese film version appeared entitled *Aru kengo no shogai*, released in the English-speaking world as *Samurai Saga*, which was directed by Hiroshi Inagaki and starred Toshiro Mifune.
- A french film version in 1990 with Gerard Depardieu in the leading role, written in rhymed couplets by Anthony Burgess and directed by Jean Paul Rappeneau.
- The romantic comedy *Roxanne* (1987) starring Steve Martin and Daryl Hannah, which is a modern retelling of the verse with Steve Martin as a chief firemen with a large nose.
- In 1936, Franco Alfano composed his opera, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, to a libretto based on the play.

- David DiChiera rewrote the play as another opera entitled *Cyrano*, which was produced first by Michigan Opera Theater and then by the Opera Company of Philadelphia in February 2008.
- In 1973, a musical adaptation by Anthony Burgess, called *Cyrano* and starring Christopher Plummer (who won a Tony Award for his performance), appeared in Boston and then on Broadway.
- *Cyrano: The Musical* was a musical based on Edmond Rostand's play, produced by Joop van den Ende, starring Bill van Dijk which premiered in 1992 at the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam. It also ran for 137 performances at Broadway in 1993-1994.
- David Bintley, Director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, created a ballet of the story in 2007.
- Geraldine McCaughrean rewrote the play as a novel entitled *Cyrano*, which was longlisted for the Carnegie Award in 2007.
- There is also a 'feministic' rewrite of the story in the novel *Attentat* (1997) by Amelie Nothomb.
- The Swordmaster in Alain Ayrole's and Jean-Luc Masbou's French comic book *De cape et de crocs* portrays a colorful gentleman living on the Moon, at ease either with a sword or with a sonnet, and using both to silence those foolish enough to mock his prominent nose!



Videocover of Augusto Genina's film



**Sources, Links & Further Reading**

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrano\\_de\\_Bergerac\\_\(fictional\\_character\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrano_de_Bergerac_(fictional_character))

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