

Translations

Cyrano de Bergerac was originally written in Rostand's native language (French), and has been translated over the years by numerous scholars and poets. Some of the most famous translations include: Bryan Hooker's easily accessible translation, Christopher Fry's iambic pentameter, the slightly more elevated language of Gladys Thomas' translation, and a superlative translation by Lowell Blair.

Although each text tells the same story of love, loss and regret, the rhyme, rhythm, meter, and overall wording of the play is drastically different. Translators have a lot to think about; they have to strike a balance between meaning, keeping the same intended rhyme scheme, rhythm, and meter, while also keeping the reader (or audience) interested. Each author is going to value one of these components more than the others, hence the varied translations. The only way to get the author's true intent, emotion, rhyme, rhythm, and meter is to read his original text.

Activity

On the following page you will find four versions of the first stanza of Cyrano's speech to Valvert and the crowd at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Act One.

1. Break the students into four groups, and assign them each one of the four stanzas.
2. Have students read their translation as group and answer the following questions:
 - Does the language feel elevated to you? Accessible? Modern?
 - What is your initial opinion of Cyrano? Is he pompous? Intelligent? Witty? A Smart-ass?
 - What does his language or choice of words tell you about the character?
 - How does the rhythm work to emphasize these character traits?
3. Ask each group to give a dramatic reading of their stanza. Each person must have at least one line of the stanza.
 - Did the groups perform a similar or a different characterization of Cyrano each time?
 - What were some of the similarities of their characterizations? Some of the differences?
4. Hand out a copy of all four translations to each of the students.
5. Have them read each translation to themselves. Give them a few minutes to study and compare each text.
 - Look at the rhyme, rhythm and meter of each of the translations. What similarities and differences are there?
 - Does one translation seem to be more fluid or poetic than the others?
 - Does one translation create a better mental image in your head?
 - Does one translation seem more easily accessible to a student?
 - Which translation do you prefer and why?

Reflection

Were you surprised at how different each translation was? Which translation did you particularly like and why? What are some things a poet and author must keep in mind when translating a piece of work?

Four Translations

Cyrano

[*Closing his eyes a moment*].

Wait! Let me pick my rhymes...There, let's begin.

[*He fights in time with the words.*]

I swiftly toss away my hat,

And then, more slowly, I untie

My trailing cloak to follow that.

Then from the scabbard on my thigh

I draw my sword and raise it high –

And now the blade begins to flit

And flash like swallows in the sky,

And at the Coda's end I hit!¹

Cyrano

(*Closing his eyes for a moment*)

Wait, I'm thinking of how to begin....There, I have it.

(His actions match his words throughout the ballade.)

I take off my hat and discard it,

I slowly abandon my cloak,

I draw my sword out of its scabbard,

Preparing to put it to use.

For the moment, I stand here before you,

Elegant, calm, and serene,

But I warn you, my impudent scoundrel,

When I end the refrain, I draw blood.

(*They begin fencing.*)²

Cyrano

(shutting his eyes for a second):

Wait while I choose my rhymes...I have them now!

(He suits the action to each word):

I gaily doff my beaver low,

And, freeing hand and heel,

My heavy mantle off I throw,

And I draw my polished steel;

Graceful as Phoebus, round I wheel,

Alert as Scaramouch,

A word in your ear, Sir Spark, I steal—

At the envoi's end, I touch!

(They engage):³

CYRANO

(*Closes his eyes for an instant.*)

Stop...Let me choose my rimes...Now!

Here we go—

(*He suites the action to the word, throughout the following:*)

Lightly I toss my hat away,

Languidly over my arm let fall

The cloak that covers my bright array –

Then out swords, and to work withal!

A Launcelot, in his Lady's hall...

A Spartacus, at the Hippodrome!...

I dally awhile with you, dear jackal,

Then, as I end the refrain, thrust home!

(*The swords cross-the fight is on.*)⁴

¹ Fry, Christopher, trans. *Cyrano de Bergerac*. By Edmond Rostand. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998.

² Blair, Lowell, trans. *Cyrano de Bergerac*. By Edmond Rostand. New American Library, a division of Penguin Putnam, Inc: New York, 1972.

³ Thomas, Gladys and Mary F. Guillemard, trans. *Cyrano de Bergerac*. By Edmond Rostand.

⁴ Hooker, Bryan, trans. *Cyrano de Bergerac*. By Edmond Rostand. Bantam Dell: A Division of Random House: New York, 2004.