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Cyrano

I have been taking comparative literature courses for several years. Writing and reading are two sides of the same coin that enrich my life in so many ways. But in a recent class when the instructor announced that our next author would be Emily Bronte, I groaned. I have nothing against Emily, or her sisters, but the whole English Romantic literary canon is my least favorite.

In response to my audile protest, a fellow classmate said, "But Paul, if you *really* want to understand women, you must read the Brontes." I know what you're thinking. You're thinking at that point I said something dumb like, "Understand women? Why would I *really* want to understand women?" But you'd be wrong. What I did say was that I would have to give some thought to which author women should read to *really* understand men.

A few days later it came to me after watching the latest film adaptation of Edmond Rostand's "Cyrano De Bergerac," featuring the (truly) incomparable Peter Dinklage, in the Amazon production "Cyrano." The play lays bare the essentials of understanding men: we fight, we love, we suffer, we fight some more, we love some more, we suffer some more, we die.

And in between the fighting and suffering, like Cyrano, we spill our guts out to those uniquely incomprehensible beings that we will never *really* understand, women. And the eloquence in verse with which Cyrano does so has rarely been equaled in literature (nod to Shakespeare fans).

The play in book form is short, probably much of the reason it has not been recognized fully by critics in the years since it was published in 1897, but thankfully, musical, stage, and film adaptations since have done much to keep it in circulation. As a testament to its lasting appeal, it has been turned into major film adaptations over a dozen times. Of these, it is hard to beat the 1950 version featuring Jose Ferrer, the 1990 version featuring Gerard Depardieu, or the most recent 2021 version featuring Peter Dinklage. Each version turns largely on the unique strengths and appeal of its lead actor – Ferrer's versatility and energy, Depardieu's vulnerability, Dinklage's sympathetic poignancy. I would be hard pressed to pick a favorite among them.

Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac was a 17th century Parisian novelist, playwright, romantic, swordsman, and the inspiration for Rostand's play. Little is known of the fullness of his life, but most historians agree that he lived a libertine existence, despite his military training. He seems to represent that most common trait in men, a duality of never being completely good or completely bad, often veering close to both extremes without tumbling over the edge of either.

Literary criticism teaches us that a tragedy is not when the protagonist loses, but rather, what makes a story a tragedy is that he *almost* wins. Cyrano is such a literary character,

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the protean male pursuing that which is just out of his reach and sacrificing all in the effort.

As men, we immediately identify with that all-or-nothing approach to life that often leads to stitches, a suspended sentence, rehab, or worse, counseling. But behind every bad boy move is a speed dial line that leads directly to Cyrano's soul and his undiluted sense of nobility in search of truth and beauty and love, but not necessarily in that order, *really*.

Paul Basil