**Cyrano’s Panache**

Panache is a word of French origin that carries the connotation of a flamboyant manner and reckless courage.

The literal translation is a plume (a feather), such as is worn on a hat or a helmet, but the reference is to King Henry IV of France. Pleasure-loving and cynical, but a brave military leader and the best-loved of the kings of France, he was famed for wearing a striking white plume in his helmet and for his war cry: "Follow my white plume!" (Fr. "Ralliez-vous à mon panache blanc!").

**Cyrano de Bergerac**

The epitome of panache and the reason for its establishment as a virtue are found in Rostand's depiction of Cyrano de Bergerac, in his play of that name. (Prior to Rostand, panache was not necessarily a good thing, and was seen by some as a suspect quality).

Panache is referred to explicitly at two points in the play, but is implicit throughout: For example, Cyrano's challenges to Montfleury, Valvert, and at one point, the whole audience, at the theatre (Act I) and his nonchalant surrender of a year's salary to pay for the damages; his duel with a hundred footpads at the Porte de Nesle (Act II), and his dismissal of the exploit when talking to Roxane ("I've been much braver since then"); his crossing the Spanish lines daily to deliver Roxane's letters (Act IV); and his leaving his death-bed in order to keep his appointment with her in Act V.

The explicit references bring in the double meaning: First, in Act IV, when sparring with De Guiche over the loss of his (de Guiche's) white sash; " I hardly think King Henry would have doffed his white panache in any danger" : and finally, Cyrano's last words " ... yet there is something still that will always be mine, and when I go to God's presence, there I'll doff it and sweep the heavenly pavement with a gesture — something I'll take unstained out of this world ... my panache ".

**Current use**

Panache is now used to describe someone who has a dashing confidence of style, or shows a certain flamboyance and courage, and is a familiar word now in English. Its meaning has also been extended to include anything capable of displaying such attributes.

**More on Panache from the American Shakespeare Company:**

• Over the years the word panache has filtered into the English language, but it began as a French word.

• The word panache dates back to 1553 when it was used to refer to a tuft or plume of feathers worn on helmets, it also implied exaggerated ornamentation.

• The first documented use of the word panache as we use it today to mean, “style, flair, display, and swagger,” was by Edmund Rostand in 1898 in Cyrano de Bergerac.

• Before Rostand originated this new use of the word panache in Cyrano de Bergerac, there was an Italian word that people throughout Europe had already been using to express a similar idea.

• In 16th century Italy, Castiglione wrote the Book of the Courtier in which he coined the word sprezzatura meaning, “natural grace,” “studied carelessness,” or “art without effort.”

• The concept of Sprezzatura permeated Italian culture, particularly in Italian love poetry. This poetry, and the idea of Sprezzatura became popular throughout Europe and England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

• The concept of Sprezzatura reached the peak of its popularity throughout Europe and England in the mid 17th century. Cyrano de Bergerac is set during this period, and the play reflects a culture in which people try to achieve flourish and style without any apparent effort.

• Rostand imbued his character Cyrano with the quick wit, easy grace, and effortless style associated with Sprezzatura, but Rostand used the French word, panache, to descibe these qualities. Rostand’s use of the word panache to describe Cyrano’s personal style and flair became immediately popular in France and eventually spread throughout Europe and beyond.

**Questions**

1. How does Cyrano display panache throughout the play? Does Cyrano’s well developed sense of panache have any relationship with his unusually large nose?

2. In the society that Rostand shows in Cyrano de Bergerac, the upper class and nobles were driven by a desire to appear effortlessly graceful, witty, and stylish (or to act with panache). Other than Cyrano, which characters in the play show panache? Which characters have no panache? Which characters attempt to show panache but fail?