LONDON 1659 · COMPLETE IN MODERN ENGLISH

The World in the Moon

Cyrano de Bergerac's Comical Voyage



CYRANO DE BERGERAC · 1659

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The World in the Moon

Cyrano de Bergerac's Comical Voyage (1659)

Cyrano de Bergerac's tale of how he travels to the Moon with vials of dew and a machine driven by fireworks, meets the Moon-people, the Spirit of Socrates and the little Spaniard Gonsales, and comes back to Earth. Complete in modern English from the English edition of 1659

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Modern English text, notes and commentary © 2026 SIA "Blusa Entertainment".

Source: Cyrano de Bergerac, *Selenarchia, or, The Government of the World in the Moon: A Comical History*, done into English by Thomas St Serf (London, 1659). Rendered into modern English from images of the pages of this edition; frontispiece and musical notes from the same edition.

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PREFACE

The poet who flew to the Moon. On an evening of full moon, not far from Paris, a group of friends argue about what the Moon really is. One says it is a loophole in the sky, another that it is the iron on which Diana smooths Apollo's collars. The narrator insists, quite seriously, that the Moon is a world like ours, and that from up there our Earth looks like a moon. To prove it he ties bottles full of dew all around himself, since the sun draws dew upwards, and rises into the air. His first attempt ends in Canada; his second, in a machine driven by fireworks, ends on the Moon. There he finds the Garden of Eden, meets a prophet he knows from the Bible, and falls among giant Moon-people who walk on all fours and take him for a comical little animal. He is shown at fairs, shut up in the Queen's menagerie with another "little animal" — a small Spaniard who came to the Moon carried by birds — and put on trial for insisting that his own Earth is the real world and theirs only a moon. His companion and protector is the Spirit of Socrates, who comes from the Sun. The story ends with his return to Earth, in Italy, where the village dogs bark at him because he still smells of the Moon.

Who the real Cyrano de Bergerac was. Most readers know Cyrano as the hero of Edmond Rostand's play (1897), the man with the long nose who writes love poems in another man's name. The real Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–1655) was a Parisian who studied at the Paris colleges, served as a young man in a company of Gascon guards, and was wounded at the sieges of Mouzon and Arras (1639–1640). His contemporaries knew him as a daring duellist, a sharp satirist and a free-thinker. He wrote letters, poems, a comedy, *The Pedant Tricked*, and a tragedy, *The Death of Agrippina*, which caused a scandal in 1654 as impious. According to a tradition begun by his friend Henry Le Bret, Cyrano attended the lessons of the philosopher Pierre Gassendi, who revived the ancient

theory of atoms and was close to the views of Copernicus and Galileo. Cyrano died in 1655, only thirty-six years old.

A book published after its author's death. Cyrano wrote his voyage to the Moon around 1650, but it circulated only in manuscript. In 1657, two years after his death, Le Bret published it as *A Comical History, containing the States and Empires of the Moon*. The friend was cautious: he struck out or softened the most dangerous passages about religion and the soul, and in a few places the printed text keeps only dashes. A fuller text is known from manuscripts found later. A sequel, *The States and Empires of the Sun*, appeared unfinished in 1662.

The English translation of 1659. As early as 1659 an English translation appeared in London under a Greek title, *Selenarchia*, "the government of the Moon". The translator was a Scot, Thomas St Serf (or Sydserf), a bishop's son and a soldier, later a playwright. He dedicated the book to the officers of the two Scottish regiments serving the King of France — in the years when Scotland had been occupied by Cromwell's army. St Serf translated from the cut edition of 1657, so his English text has the same dashes and gaps. He worked quickly, and in places his English differs from the French original; these places are explained in the footnotes.

Rockets, atoms and talking books. Cyrano's story is comic, but behind every joke stand the great questions of his time. His hero defends Copernicus only a few years after Galileo was condemned for it in Rome in 1633. The Moon-people talk about an infinite universe in which every star is a sun with worlds of its own, about the void and atoms, about whether the soul can exist without the body. On his way to the Moon Cyrano is lifted by rows of fireworks that catch fire one after another — one of the earliest scenes in literature of a man rising into the sky by the force of rockets. The books of the Moon have neither pages nor letters: you wind them up like a watch and listen to them, a passage often cited as one of the earliest imaginings of the audiobook. Much in the book is deliberately absurd, and Cyrano knows it: he laughs at everyone — at the Jesuits and the followers of Aristotle, at proud mankind and at himself, long nose included.

Meeting Gonsales. On the Moon Cyrano meets "the little Spaniard", Domingo Gonsales — the hero of Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (London, 1638; our book No. 87), who flew to the Moon in an Engine drawn by wild birds. Cyrano had read Godwin's book in its French translation and here deliberately continues it: one book steps into another. The Moon-people take the two little Earthlings for rare animals and want to mate them.

Influence. Cyrano's voyage to the Moon became one of the milestones in the tradition of the fantastic voyage. The traveller who becomes a "little animal" in a strange world and mocks human vanity with fresh eyes appears again in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Voltaire's *Micromegas* (1752; our book No. 92), and scholars often name Cyrano among their forerunners.

Our edition. This is the complete text, sentence by sentence, rendered into modern English from the pages of the English edition of 1659; nothing has been left out or retold. The words and views of the period are kept as they stand in the original. The original has no chapters, so the section titles are ours. The censor's dashes are kept where they stand in the 1659 text, and two places where musical notes are printed instead of proper names (the nobles of the Moon speak in music) are shown as small images from the 1659 edition itself. At the beginning of the book is the frontispiece of that edition, and at the start of the parts there are modern colour illustrations. Footnotes at the foot of the page explain the people, places and allusions that a seventeenth-century reader understood at once, and at the end of the book each part has a commentary — "In plain words" and "What science says".



Cyrano, with vials of dew tied about him, rises towards the Moon (frontispiece of the 1659 English edition)

THE EPISTLE DEDICATORY

To the Right Honourable Lord George Douglas[1] and Lieutenant General Andrew Rutherford[2], and to all the noble officers in those two renowned regiments of Scots in the service of the Most Christian King of France[3].

Right Honourable and Noble Gentlemen,

I have looked around me, and I find that among all the noble persons who preserve honour and loyalty (in its splendour as well as its integrity), there are none so fit for my address as your noble selves. Were it otherwise, I would not step outside our own island, which, though it still has (blessed be God) many heroic and excellent souls, yet their liberty and fortunes are so clouded and besieged by the wickedness of our troubles that their thoughts are taken up with seeking protection rather than bestowing it. And (to lay my soul bare) I confess that I do not send this book to your Honours because I knew no one else to dedicate it to; rather, I undertook it first of all to testify to the world how happy the name of Scotland is (even now, when the waves seem almost to cover her) through the fame and flourishing state of your regiments. For though that nation is eclipsed at home[4], she shines bright in France.

Should I now try to marshal every particular, who would not pity me for falling short, seeing me attempt things almost impossible? I confess I was vain enough to entertain some such thoughts, and I was beginning with the great name of Douglas; but I found myself plunged into such a gulf of honourable deeds that my whole life would not suffice for the history of that glorious family; because in all places and on

1. George Douglas (c. 1635–1692), later Earl of Dumbarton; from 1655 he commanded a Scottish regiment in the service of the King of France.
2. Andrew Rutherford (d. 1664), a Scottish soldier in French service, later Earl of Teviot; he was killed at Tangier while its governor.
3. "Most Christian King" was the official title of the kings of France. Scottish regiments in French service were a legacy of the old alliance of the two nations against England.
4. From 1651 to 1660 Scotland was occupied by Cromwell's army and joined to the English republic.

all occasions where the work is magnificent, they are "Jamais Arrière."[5]

I then turned to the noble Rutherford; but his vast intellect (with the weight of his conquests over the Austrian powers at Arras, Montmédy, Gravelines[6] and other places) so overwhelmed me that (without more nerve than wit) I could attempt nothing further. And so I sat down with this safe resolution: that it would be little short of madness to grasp at anything at all when I saw that the principal figures had grown beyond comprehension. You are so many, and there are so few noble families in Scotland to which you are not allied, that to speak of you all would be to take on the whole nation. The achievements of the Scots in the French wars can be read in all their histories; and were it possible to erase them, you would write them down again with your own personal deeds. And (which is the great comfort of now-drooping Scotland) your two regiments are the nurseries of all the future and succeeding honour that belongs to our country.

As for myself and my book (I call it mine, though I am only its translator), I chose this one as much for its subject matter as for its author. I see the world here below so shuffled about that I thought it safest to present you with the government of a world above, drawn by the hand of Monsieur Bergerac, who was not only of your profession but also of your army[7].

My chief aim (next to my particular devotion to your Honours) is to remind the world that the lilies of France never flourish more securely than when they are guarded by the Scots thistle; for whose prosperity (especially in your noble persons) no man alive is a more devoted votary than

your Honours' most humble admirer and most obedient servant,

THOMAS ST SERF.

5. Margin: The motto of the Douglases. French for "never behind."
6. Arras (relieved 1654), Montmédy (taken 1657) and Gravelines (taken 1658): battles and sieges of France's war against Spain in Flanders; the "Austrian" powers are the Habsburg forces.
7. As a young man Cyrano served in the Gascon guards and was badly wounded at the sieges of Mouzon (1639) and Arras (1640).

PART I

THE VIALS OF DEW



Illustration in the manner of 17th-century painting and engraving

The Moon was full, the sky was cloudless, and it was nine o'clock at night, when, on our way back from Clamart near Paris (where the son of Monsieur Cuigy, who is lord of the place, had nobly entertained some of my friends and me)[8], the various opinions that the saffron circle gave rise to kept us well entertained on the road. Fixing our eyes on that great star, some took it for a loophole in Heaven; others swore it was a French smoothing iron on which Diana pressed Apollo's collars; and there were some who would rather have it be the Sun, who, having stripped off his glorious rays, was peeping through a hole to spy on

8. Clamart: a village south-west of Paris. Cuigy was a friend and fellow soldier of Cyrano.

what the world was doing in his supposed absence. And I said, "I, who am happy to mingle my enthusiasms with yours, believe (without amusing myself with those sharp conceits with which you tickle time into a quicker pace) that the Moon is a world like this one, and that ours in turn is taken by it for its Moon."

Some of the company greeted me with loud laughter.

"Maybe," said I, "there is someone in the Moon right now who is jeered at just as much for believing that this globe is a world."

But it was useless to cite the many grave authors who had been of the same opinion[9]; it only shook their splenetic lungs all the more effectively into louder merriment.

Meanwhile this opinion (because of its boldness) went half against my stomach; but, strengthened by contradiction, it sank so deeply into my imagination (for the rest of the way) that I conceived a thousand definitions of the Moon and could not easily be delivered of them; so that, striving to support this odd fancy with almost serious arguments, I came within a little of being quite confirmed in my opinion, when, by miracle or accident, Providence, Fortune, or what one may call a vision, a fiction, a chimera, or folly if you please, I was conveniently furnished with an occasion for this discourse. For on coming home I went into my study, where I found on the table a book that had opened without my help, written by Cardan[10]; and though I had no intention of reading it, my eyes were drawn, as if by force, to a story of that philosopher, who relates that, studying one night by candlelight, he saw two tall old men come in through the doors, though they were bolted; after many questions he put to them, they answered at last that they were inhabitants of the Moon, and then vanished. I was so surprised, first, to find a book that had come there of its own accord, and secondly, at the moment and the page at which I found it open, that I took this

9. An inhabited Moon was imagined already by Plutarch in his dialogue "On the Face in the Moon"; in the 17th century Kepler and others wrote about it.

10. Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576), Italian physician, mathematician and astrologer. In his book "De subtilitate" he tells how, in 1491, seven men who called themselves beings of the air appeared to his father.