Artamène or the Great Cyrus: Scudéry Renames the Hero

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Madeleine de Scudéry, in her novel *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*, uses the naming of the hero, the depiction of contemporary figures as characters in this *roman à clef*, and an authorial pseudonym as strategies to provoke reader reaction and to depart from conventional practices of the time. Seen in the context of preciosity and seventeenth-century women's writings, Scudéry used names in *Artamène* to promote a redefinition of both the hero and contemporary literary practices.

In mid-seventeenth century France, Madeleine de Scudéry wrote an immensely popular ten-volume novel entitled *Artamène ou le grand Cyrus (Artamène or the great Cyrus*, 1649-54). Its hero, the Persian conqueror Cyrus the Great, was presented as a model for the perfect prince and for the perfect gentleman of contemporary France. The work leaned heavily on detailed research of historical sources: "You will see...that I follow nearly always Herodotus, Zenophon, Zonaras and Diodorus Siculus."[1] But the figure of the historical Cyrus was interpreted in contemporary terms to present an image pleasing and instructive to seventeenth-century aristocratic France and particularly to the precious society dominated by women to which Scudéry belonged.[2]

Ten years after the publication of *Artamène*, the critic Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux attacked the work as a degradation of the image of the great hero. Boileau's target was the first half of the title: the figure of Artamène, a name invented by Scudéry and the alias of Cyrus for approximately one third of the book. Boileau writes:

> instead of representing, as she ought to have done, in the person of Cyrus, a King promised by the Prophets, as he is expressed in the Bible, or as Herodotus paints him, the greatest Conqueror that had yet been seen, or finally such as he is depicted in Xenophon, who like her made a Novel out

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> of the life of this Prince; instead, I say, of making of him a model of every perfection, she made of him an Artamène. (444-5)

He later has a character in his dialogue exclaim: "Artamène, and where did he fish up that name? I don't remember ever having read it" (453). To use a name not canonized in history was clearly a serious fault in the eyes of the critic, and it is a central point around which Boileau bases his criticism. Boileau was surely not alone in his rejection of the transformed hero; in 1912 Ferdinand Brunetière wrote: "One finds there adventures and romanesque characters rigged out in historical trappings—or historical characters travestied as heroes of a novel" (227-8), and in a similar vein Alain Niderst wrote in 1983: "her Cyrus travestied as Artamène is absurd" (11). The use of an invented name is targeted as a serious flaw, and this is not a petty criticism. It reflects the importance of names to the structure and meaning of a novel and to its reception by readers; it supports Grimaud's assertion that "names and naming have historical, linguistic, social and psychological functions in cultures" (1989, 17). To understand the significance of Scudéry's choice of a dual naming and dual identity for the hero, a brief plot summary will be helpful.

Artamène recounts the youth of Cyrus the Great and his departure from Persia to seek his fortune. He assumes the name of Artamène to allow him freedom from his royal family. (A secondary reason, unknown to the hero but which motivates a friend to give him his new name, is the need to avoid his grandfather, who would gladly have the youth killed because he fears that he will someday seize power). Because of the status of the royal name, adopting a new identity means a radical change in social status, even a kind of social death, and it is significant that Artamène later finds himself at a ceremony celebrating the assumed death of Cyrus. As a friend recounts, when the hero became Artamène, "Cyrus ceased to be Cyrus" (2:20). At the celebration of his "death" Artamène sees the Median princess Mandane, and in the novel it is through his desire to serve her and later to rescue her from abductors that he undertakes all the great wars that win him his immense empire.

The formulation of the name *Artamène* is probably based on Scudéry's research into other Persian names; she may have found references to generals named Artabazus and Artaphernes or to the kings

named Artaxerxes. This gave her the beginning of *Arta-* which is used for several other characters in the novel. The ending *-mène* may have been chosen for its sound in French. In any event, I believe that this name was chosen to give local color—that is, to contribute to the sense of a foreign setting and historical period—rather than to carry any transparent symbolic meaning to the reader.

Scudéry doubles the historical figure of the conqueror with the fictional image of a lover, and, although she takes pains to inspire the reader's admiration for the military exploits of Cyrus, the passion and fidelity of Artamène are presented as equally admirable. The title presents them as equal terms in an equation: "Artamène or Cyrus" suggests that Artamène equals Cyrus. My attribution of distinct roles to the two names (Cyrus as conqueror, Artamène as lover) is a conscious imitation of a stylistic device used repeatedly in the novel. The hero frequently speaks of himself in the third person, objectifying certain aspects of his being, displacing the judgment of society onto his names, perhaps in order to affirm and protect the integrity of his private sense of self. Thus when he fears rejection by the princess, it is not because of his personal lack of charm or attractiveness, but because either of his public personae would be unacceptable to one of her rank: Artamène is a simple soldier and Cyrus has been foretold as an enemy of her father. He fears: "as Artamène, perhaps she would be contented to drive me away with some compassion, but as Cyrus she could punish me with hate and anger" (2:20).

For the hero, his names symbolize the image that others hold of him; they are not complete reflections of reality and may in fact stand in the way of his true desires. Again, speaking of his relationship with the heroine, Artamène says:

> this Artamène...that the princess favors, is not truly he whom I want him to be; he seems to love nothing but war and to search only for glory, and he whom I want her to know and favor only loves Mandane and only searches for her affection. (2:19-20)

Thus the hero, by definition a creation of fame and reputation,[3] ironically sees himself limited, even betrayed, by the expectations associated with his name. That he is, in fact, both conqueror and lover, Cyrus and Artamène, provides much of the tension of the character and helps establish the rhythm of the novel, which alternates between war scenes and love stories.[4]

The revelation of Artamène's true identities (both his social being as the royal Cyrus and his emotional existence as the lover of Mandane) is a crucial moment in the novel. It occurs textually in the first volume, page 97, although the reader has of course been aware of the identity of the two characters from reading the title. The motif of revelation is repeated numerous times, however, in part because of the complex structure of the narrative, which, by using a vast number of characters and multiple flashbacks, presents the hero's identity at different times to different audiences.[5] Indeed, part of the interest of the novel was meant to come, I believe, from the dramatic irony of the reader's having privileged knowledge of the hero's identity and empathy for the inner man who is restricted by both his public names.

The use of multiple names extends to other characters as well, such as the king of Assyria, who bears that title in warfare, but who falls in love with Mandane while using an assumed name. Similarly, Cléandre is an adopted name of Artamas. This doubling of the central hero's onomastic history is only one example of the multiple refractions of the seemingly unique historical hero into a variety of images. Artamène/ Cyrus is also physically doubled by a hero, Spitridate, who resembles him so closely that Spitridate's mother and sister are deceived (2:92). Thus the binary logic of lover/warrior breaks up into a baroque play of multiple possible representations.

The ability to know assuredly who each character is at any given time is further compromised by plot twists that lead to the reports of a character's death (Cyrus is reported dead at least three times). Thus the most fundamental fact of existence is uncertain, sometimes for the reader, more often for fellow characters. To add a final level of complexity, the names of characters, all meant to enhance the sense of local color by imitating Greek or Persian patterns, are frequently very similar, and although this poses no problems to the characters, it is a challenge for modern, perhaps especially Western readers. For example, one must distinguish between Cléobuline, Cléarque, Cléandre, Cléodore, Cléomir, Cléonice and Cléocrite. We can only speculate whether seventeenth-century French readers would have found this equally difficult. They were accustomed to works with large casts of characters (such as *L'Astrée* by Honoré d'Urfé and *Polexandre* by de Gomberville) and it was a kind of game in salon society for individuals to choose ancient names to replace their own (thus the marquise de Rambouillet

was known as Arthénice). Also, members of the educated classes were accustomed to distinguishing the multiple names of aristocrats (such as Louis II de Bourbon, duc d'Enghien and later prince de Condé).

For the modern reader, the many characters (over one hundred) may seem to blur, at least in their names, and I believe that their similarities may be intentional, a kind of family likeness consciously cultivated.[6] The physical resemblance between Cyrus and Spitridate mirrors a moral equality between the two men, as the narrator observes: Spitridate is "a man not unworthy of resembling him [Cyrus]" (6:813). Scudéry's underscoring of the resemblances in her protagonists suggests that the correspondences are not a result of a lack of invention on her part, but rather a desire to turn the reader's focus from the admiration of a unique historical figure to the contemplation of a society, a generation composed of gentlemen and ladies of taste and honor. This generation embodies elements of the contempoary French aristocratic ideal, especially as found in the precious society in which Scudéry played an important role. The large number of these characters and their relative unity of values, aspirations and behavior suggest that they are the dominant force in society, a force worthy of power and one which should be respected by the king and imitated by any right-thinking reader.

But if the hero is not unique, is he a hero? Boileau certainly felt he was not, and accused Scudéry of turning a royal figure into a bourgeois. After all, Cyrus is Cyrus because, first of all, he was descended from Astyages, a king, while Artamène's greatness was an individual achievement, won through his personal qualities. Scudéry's narrator draws a clear line between hereditary status and success won through individual achievement: "[T]his Artamène, whose name has become so famous and so illustrious for his valor and his virtue, bears another which is not less considerable for the great prince who gave it to him with life" (1:97). Here Scudéry reverses the argument one would expect to hear in a society based on hereditary aristocracy, when she asserts that the inherited name is as worthy as that won by a man's efforts. An aristocrat would be expected to value the hereditary name above all else and need to be convinced of the worth of the earned reputation. If a name can be earned then hereditary power and prestige are threatened.

It could be argued that the threat was hardly real. Frequently novels of the period show a character of unknown and apparently humble birth, whose great personal qualities challenge the system based on lineage.[7]

But in the end they always prove to be long-lost sons or daughters of the aristocracy. Thus the challenge ends by confirming that hereditary privileges are indeed merited by the innate worth of the nobility and that the great name is justified.

While such stories may ultimately preserve the literary status quo, real-life challenges to traditional male aristocratic dominance were being posed by the precious women of seventeenth-century France who chose invented names for themselves, such as Arthénice and Sapho, based on Greek patterns and used familiarly instead of those patronymics which linked them to their father's families. In precious society, there was room for cultured women of the lower classes, and it has been suggested that such social leveling was at the root of the hostility and derision directed toward these women.[8] Boileau reviles Scudéry and her circle as "bourgeois" (488) and extends his animosity to their literature, labeling the protagonists they admired as "would-be Heroes" (486). His hostility to the use of ancient names to designate protagonists embodying modern values is underscored when he concludes the "Dialogue" by castigating these literary figures as "impertinent usurpers of their names" (489).

The intensity of Boileau's attack reveals the significance of Scudéry's redefinition of the hero. By including the private life as well as public role, Scudéry participates in the development of the French novel, a genre frequently chosen by contemporary women, who sought to expand or replace the dominant historical model, which had been focused on the public lives of famous men. In the preface to a collection of portraits published in 1659, the anonymous author writes:

> History is not extremely diverting when it shows us a captain always with a sword in his hand and who has no other occupation than to line up his armies for battle...these sorts of Histories...do not fully teach us about those of whom they speak. (*Recueil*, cited in Beasley 1987, 523)

Women writers produced memoirs and "secret histories" of various periods, stressing the private relations (primarily love) that shaped the great public events recounted in history books. Mme de Lafayette wrote *Histoire d'Henriette d'Angleterre* (1720), Mme d'Aulnoy wrote the (probably fictive) *Relation d'un voyage en Espagne* and *Mémoires de la cour d'Espagne* (1690), and Mme de Villedieu produced works such as *Les Amours des Grands Hommes* (1671) and *Les Désordres de l'amour*

(1675) that were true revisions of past accounts, again with an emphasis on love, desire and ambition as prime motivators behind historical events. Mme de Villedieu went even farther when, in her fictional *Mémoires d'Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*, she offered a non-aristocratic woman as her protagonist. DeJean calls this a "'feminization' of history by which women novelists used fiction to write themselves into history" (1983, 6). These works suggested that the domination of a famous name was reductive and simplistic, and that more could be learned from in-depth psychological study of even a humbler individual. Building on the techniques of Mlle de Scudéry, such writers developed skill in delicate psychological portraiture and were quick to use their skills to tell their own stories. By turning from the great event to private life, they opened the way for women and even the lower classes to find a place in literature, as they would do in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Thus the rejection of the ancient model meant more than generic innovation; it prepared a broader literary participation by underrepresented groups and gave voice to aspirations that were also to be expressed eventually in the social and political realms. Michael Ragussis has written that "the idea of naming can help us reformulate the traditions of the novel by making us reconsider the ways in which the central plots of fiction represent family, gender, nation, and race" (cited in Grimaud 1989, 32). Reading Scudéry, we can add "social class" to the list of issues represented by names and see that her naming strategies had significance beyond mere local color or conventional themes of disguise and recognition.

It is no wonder that Boileau objected to this rethinking of the hero. Often credited with codifying the classical ideal of seventeenth-century France in *L'Art Poétique* (1674), he urged fellow writers to "imitate the Ancients" and was naturally hostile toward a reworking of the image of the ancient hero, for it meant a challenge to the literary system he practiced. It also may have appeared as a challenge to the social system he supported; in 1677 he became historiographer to the king, with his chief duty being the exaltation of a dominant historical figure.

While Scudéry clearly meant both aspects and both names of her hero to remain in the reader's mind, the reception and treatment of the work have not always been even-handed. In the printing itself, the heading of the verso page is an abbreviated title, "The Great Cyrus," not the shorter "Artamène." Engravings (which adorn a beginning page

in nine of the ten volumes of my 1656 edition) always bear a motto, and each refers to the name of the historic hero (for example: "for this name only the Muses should sing" and, accompanying a figure of Father Time: "I will spare this name, I who spare nothing"). Critics generally speak in shorthand of the novel as *Cyrus* or *Le grand Cyrus*, even those who attack the work for presenting a weak and sentimental hero in Artamène. Thus the historical name continues to dominate interpretation, suggesting that the ultimate value is still fidelity to a historical model.

For the seventeenth-century reader, yet another name was intertwined with Cyrus/Artamène. As sophisticated readers knew, the novel was a *roman à clef*, with a large number of characters based on prominent social figures and members of Scudéry's intimate circle. Thus, Cyrus was also the great contemporary warrior, Condé, who had defended France against the Spanish but was at the time of the novel's publication allied against the king in an aristocratic uprising called the Fronde. Again, the echo of a contemporary name pulls the reader away from the admiration of the ancient hero and the passive stance of a student of unexamined historical greatness. The name Condé throws the reader into the turmoil of civil conflict, with all of its complicated allegiances. Boileau does not speak of Condé (it would have been impolitic to recall such a period after Louis XIV had established his power), but he does object in general to the portrayal of contemporary figures in the novel:

> This very Sapho that you see here painted in her works many of her generous friends who...by aid of gallant words and elegant and precious ways of speaking (that she throws into their portraits) manage to pass for worthy Heroines of a Novel. (1966, 472)

The idea of "passing for worthy" reconfirms Boileau's aristocratic bias and his attitude of defending literature from unworthy upstarts. Even the simple identification of a female protagonist with a lady in contemporary society makes the statement that literature can deal with reality and current concerns, an approach that would eventually result in the psychological, social and even economic realism of the later novel.

Yet the model of history remained strong and influenced critical reception of Scudéry's work. As critics focused on the game of attributing names to characters in the novels, of establishing "keys,"[9] the novels began to be perceived as mere documents of French society in the

1650s, again prioritizing the historical over the fictional, the great name over the individual, and once more basing evaluations of the novels on the accuracy of Scudéry's depiction of historical models, rather than on her fictional creation. For at least one critic, the existence of a key came to give a sense of control and mastery over the text, for Mongrédien wrote: "Without the key which permits us to wrest its secret from this voluminous novel, it remains fastidious and perfectly unreadable" (154). This reduction of the text to a simple set of one-to-one correspondences (historical name attached to literary name), so that all "secrets" are known and exhausted, is the exact opposite of the dialogue and analysis that Scudéry's work so often models through its representation of conversations and its delicate rendering of emotional and psychological ambiguities.

A discussion of names in this novel would not be complete without touching on what may be the ultimate displacement of identity, the use of a pseudonym by the author of the work. Even at the time of publication, it was generally known that Madeleine de Scudéry was the author of the novel, but it was published under the name Monsieur de Scudéry, referring to her brother, Georges, also an author. Critics have suggested that it was feminine modesty that caused Madeleine to use her brother's name in a society in which aristocratic women avoided the attention connected with literary production and in which pseudonyms or anonymity were common practice. (In the novel, Scudéry's character, the poetess Sapho, publishes her works anonymously, shunning a public persona that would interfere with private happiness and tranquility: see 10:366-71).[10] But there may have been a motive beyond modesty that caused Scudéry to adopt a pseudonym. She deeply valued a woman's right to literary creativity and wrote in "Les Femmes Illustres ou les Harangues Héroiques" 'Illustrious Women or Heroic Harangues' (1642):

> Whatever praises that one might give you, it would be more glorious for you to have made verses for all the illustrious ones of your century, if you did them well, than it would be if they had all made verses for you.[11]

Thus Scudéry does not seem to believe that writing is inappropriate for women. Instead, she may have adopted her brother's name, not as a shield to hide her female identity, but rather as a signal to her informed readers to note the role that name, title and gender continued to play in their society; it was a concession to convention that only served to point out the falseness of the accepted practice. Her open use of a pseudonym,

then, conveyed more information about who was allowed to be a writer in that period than a simple name could do.[12] In any case, the use of the brother's name suggests again a sense of the name as code that encourages the informed reader to approach the act of reading as the deciphering of identities from beneath façades and perhaps to meditate on the role of façades in that society.

Joan DeJean has proposed that Scudéry's novels may well have been collective works, born of conversations and even collaborative writing with her circle of close friends (1991:73). In this interpretation, the name on the cover is even further removed from the historical figure of author, an even greater displacement of individual identities onto a public name. It is unlikely that we will ever know the truth of this hypothesis, although it is instructive of how far at least one branch of criticism has moved from the focus on a historical figure and a narrow interest in individual biography to a focus on the process of composition and of reception.

The name on the title page is not the name of the author. A dual name in the title suggests at least an alternate image to the ancient hero. And a widely-known key gives yet other contemporary names to characters. All of these uses of names structure the reading of this novel, inviting active involvement in deciphering, interpreting and evaluating its values. Joan DeJean may or may not be right about the collaborative nature of its composition, but clearly the work itself models and encourages the dialogue of multiple points of view, centering on many issues, not least of which is how to name a hero.

Notes

This essay is a revised version of a paper read at the 1995 Northeast Modern Language Association.

1. *Artamène*, vol. 1, p. 3. All subsequent citations will be noted parenthetically in the text and given as volume and page number (1:3). All translations are my own.

2. Préciosité as a social and literary phonomenon in France began around 1620 with the establishment of the salon of the marquise de Rambouillet and continued at least until 1665, although its influence can be detected until much later in the century. Its leaders were women, for although there were male *précieux*, the values and style of the movement appealed primarily to women. The goals of preciosity included aesthetic and moral reform: its members wished to purify language and manner, to practice and appreciate the arts, to assert women's rights to education and women's importance in society, and, in some groups, to advocate radical social

changes, such as divorce, trial marriages, and celibacy. *Précieuses* often adopted Greek or Roman names, in part to stress their independence from French patriarchal society which focused on their status as wives or daughters: De Pure speaks of the *précieuse* as a women who "is neither the daughter of her father nor of her mother" (1656, 1:63). The influence of *préciosité* appears in *Artamène ou le grand Cyrus* in the image of the hero as a refined man, deferential to women; in the focus on love stories where women play significant roles; in the portrayal of contemporary members of the movement as characters in the novel; and in the use of the actual ancient names which these individuals had adopted.

3. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* includes fame as an intrinsic element in the definition of a hero: "a man of courage and nobility **famed** for his military achievements; a man **admired** for his achievements and noble qualities and considered a **model** or ideal."

4. DeJean sees a change in emphasis in the novel from war to love, beginning in volume seven (1991, 46-7). I disagree, for love and war remain present throughout the volumes, as is observed by Mueller, 223-4, note 63.

5. The identity of Cyrus is revealed to a group of princes on 1:97; to Mandane on 2:144; to her father on 2:762; to his troops on 3:7.

6. Grimaud cites the use of similar names as a way to establish links between characters (1989, 27).

7. Bannister (1983, 28).

8. In *Le Paradis des Femmes*, Carolyn C. Lougee (1976) analyzed contemporary criticism of salon life and wrote: "According to antifeminists, the salons and the women who led them perpetrated the disastrous extension to large numbers of lower-ranking individuals of behavior appropriate only to a few personages of eminent rank" (98). Her own analysis of the family and marital status of 171 salon women led her to conclude that "persons from a variety of backgrounds, diverse legal status, and opposed occupational groups mixed. When contemporaries wrote, with praise or blame, that women in the salons were 'mixing the orders,' they apparently accurately perceived the phenomenon of social fusion occuring there" (136).

9. The search for keys to the novels continues, as is demonstrated by the recent article, "Sur les clefs de Clélie" by Alain Niderst (1994).

10. Scudéry spelled Sapho with one "p"; in her study, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937*, Joan DeJean traces the various spellings of the name and depictions of the figure of the poetess in French literature.

11. Cited in Greenberg, 42.

12. In her article, "The World of Prose and Female Self-Inscription," Greenberg writes: "given what we know about the history of the text, our reading of that sign splits it into two parts: 'de Scudéry' remains an historical sign, while 'Monsieur' becomes a textual signifier. Even as it states masculinity, it signifies a woman, Madeleine" (1983, 40). Greenberg argues that this was a strategy to inscribe women into the world of prose.

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