Henry IV – Act II

Rex Harrison as Henry IV in *Henry IV* by Luigi Pirandello, staged at Her Majesty’s Theatre in London on 13 February 1974. Image reworked and colorized by PirandelloWeb.

Saggistica consigliata

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In Act II of *Henry IV*, the fragile balance between madness and performance begins to collapse. Matilda is convinced that Henry has recognised her, Doctor Genoni prepares a psychological shock intended to restore him to the present, and Frida becomes the living image of her

mother's youth. The act then reveals the central truth of the drama: Henry recovered his sanity years earlier and consciously chose to remain inside his role.

▶ Summary ▶ Analysis

◀ Act I

Act III ▶

Henry IV – Full text

▶ Introduction, Analysis, Summary
Introduction to the drama, characters, plot and critical analysis of Pirandello's *Henry IV*.

▶ Characters, Act I
The artificial medieval court, the arrival of the visitors and their first encounter with Henry IV.

Act II
Current page. Matilda believes Henry has recognised her, Doctor Genoni prepares his experiment with Frida, and Henry reveals that he recovered his sanity years earlier and deliberately chose to continue living inside his role.

▶ Act III
The Doctor's experiment brings the past back to life and leads to the fatal confrontation with Belcredi.

Versions in other languages

▶ In Italiano – Enrico IV, Atto Secondo
The original Italian text of the second act, with summary and analysis.

▶ En Español – Enrique IV
Spanish version of Pirandello's drama and its complete text in three acts.

English translation:
Edward Storer, 1922.

Henry IV

Drama in three acts – 1922

Act II

Another room of the villa, adjoining the throne room. Its furniture is antique and severe. Principal exit at rear in the background. To the left, two windows looking on the garden. To the right, a door opening into the throne room. Late afternoon of the same day. Donna Matilda, the doctor and Belcredi are on the stage engaged in conversation; but Donna Matilda stands to one side, evidently annoyed at what the other two are saying; although she cannot help listening, because, in her agitated state, everything interests her in spite of herself. The talk of the other two attracts her attention, because she instinctively feels the need for calm at the moment):

Belcredi: It may be as you say, doctor, but that was my impression.

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Doctor: I won’t contradict you; but, believe me, it is only… an impression.

Belcredi: Pardon me, but he even said so, and quite clearly

(*turning to the Marchioness*): Didn't he, Marchioness?

Donna Matilda (*turning round*): What did he say?…

(*Then not agreeing*): Oh yes… but not for the reason you think!

Doctor: He was alluding to the costumes we had slipped on… Your cloak (*indicating the Marchioness*), our Benedictine habits… But all this is childish!

Donna Matilda (*turning quickly, indignant*): Childish? What do you mean, doctor?

Doctor: From one point of view, it is – I beg you to let me say so, Marchioness! Yet, on the other hand, it is much more complicated than you can imagine.

Donna Matilda: To me, on the contrary, it is perfectly clear!

Doctor (*with a smile of pity of the competent person towards those who do not understand*): We must take into account the peculiar psychology of madmen; which, you must know, enables us to be certain that they observe things and can, for instance, easily detect people who are disguised; can in fact recognize the disguise and yet believe in it; just as children do, for whom disguise is both play and reality. That is why I used the word childish. But the thing is extremely complicated, inasmuch as he must be perfectly aware of being an image to himself and for himself – that image there, in fact (alluding to the portrait in the throne room, and pointing to the left)!

Belcredi: That's what he said!

Doctor: Very well then – An image before which other images, ours, have

appeared: understand? Now he, in his acute and perfectly lucid delirium, was able to detect at once a difference between his image and ours: that is, he saw that ours were make-believes. So he suspected us; because all madmen are armed with a special diffidence. But that's all there is to it! Our make-believe, built up all round his, did not seem pitiful to him. While his seemed all the more tragic to us, in that he, as if in defiance – understand? – and induced by his suspicion, wanted to show us up merely as a joke. That was also partly the case with him, in coming before us with painted cheeks and hair, and saying he had done it on purpose for a jest.

Donna Matilda (*impatiently*): No, it's not that, doctor. It's not like that! It's not like that!

Doctor: Why isn't it, may I ask?

Donna Matilda (*with decision but trembling*): I am perfectly certain he recognized me!

Doctor: It's not possible… it's not possible!

Belcredi (*at the same time*): Of course not!

Donna Matilda (*more than ever determined, almost convulsively*): I tell you, he recognized me! When he came close up to speak to me – looking in my eyes, right into my eyes – he recognized me!

Belcredi: But he was talking of your daughter!

Donna Matilda: That's not true! He was talking of me! Of me!

Belcredi: Yes, perhaps, when he said…

Donna Matilda (*letting herself go*): About my dyed hair! But didn't you notice that he added at once: "or the memory of your dark hair, if you were dark"? He remembered perfectly well that I was dark – then!

Belcredi: Nonsense! nonsense!

Donna Matilda (*not listening to him, turning to the doctor*): My hair, doctor, is really dark – like my daughter's! That's why he spoke of her.

Belcredi: But he doesn't even know your daughter! He's never seen her!

Donna Matilda: Exactly! Oh, you never understand anything! By my daughter, stupid, he meant me – as I was then!

Belcredi: Oh, this is catching! This is catching, this madness!

Donna Matilda (*softly, with contempt*): Fool!

Belcredi: Excuse me, were you ever his wife? Your daughter is his wife – in his delirium: Bertha of Susa.

Donna Matilda: Exactly! Because I, no longer dark – as he remembered me – but fair, introduced myself as "Adelaide," the mother. My daughter doesn't exist for him: be's never seen her – you said so yourself! So how can he know whether she's fair or dark?

Belcredi: But he said dark, speaking generally, just as anyone who wants to recall, whether fair or dark, a memory of youth in the color of the hair! And you, as usual,

begin to imagine things! Doctor, you said I ought not to have come! It's she who ought not to have come!

Donna Matilda (*upset for a moment by Belcredi's remark, recovers herself. Then with a touch of anger, because doubtful*): No, no… he spoke of me… He spoke all the time to me, with me, of me…

Belcredi: That's not bad! He didn't leave me a moment's breathing space; and you say he was talking all the time to you? Unless you think he was alluding to you too, when he was talking to Peter Damiani!

Donna Matilda (*defiantly, almost exceeding the limits of courteous discussion*): Who knows? Can you tell me why, from the outset, he showed a strong dislike for you, for you alone?

(*From the tone of the question, the expected answer must almost explicitly be: "because he understands you are my lover." Belcredi feels this so well that he remains silent and can say nothing.*)

Doctor: The reason may also be found in the fact that only the visit of the Duchess Adelaide and the abbot of Cluny was announced to him. Finding a third person present, who had not been announced, at once his suspicions…

Belcredi: Yes, exactly! His suspicion made him see an enemy in me: Peter Damiani! But she's got it into her head, that he recognized her…

Donna Matilda: There's no doubt about it! I could see it from his eyes, doctor. You know, there's a way of looking that leaves no doubt whatever… Perhaps it was only for an instant, but I am sure!

Doctor: It is not impossible: a lucid moment…

Donna Matilda: Yes, perhaps… And then his speech seemed to me full of regret for his and my youth – for the horrible thing that happened to him, that has held him in that disguise from which he has never been able to free himself, and from which he longs to be free – he said so himself!

Belcredi: Yes, so as to be able to make love to your daughter, or you, as you believe – having been touched by your pity.

Donna Matilda: Which is very great, I would ask you to believe.

Belcredi: As one can see, Marchioness; so much so that a miracle-worker might expect a miracle from it!

Doctor: Will you let me speak? I don't work miracles, because I am a doctor and not a miracle-worker. I listened very intently to all he said; and I repeat that that certain analogical elasticity, common to all symptomatised delirium, is evidently with him much… what shall I say? – much relaxed! The elements, that is, of his delirium no longer hold together. It seems to me he has lost the equilibrium of his second personality and sudden recollections drag him – and this is very comforting – not from a state of incipient apathy, but rather from a morbid inclination to reflective melancholy, which shows a… a very considerable cerebral activity. Very comforting, I repeat! Now if, by this violent trick we've planned…

Donna Matilda (*turning to the window, in the tone of a sick person complaining*): But how is it that the motor has not returned? It's three hours and a half since…

Doctor: What do you say?

Donna Matilda: The motor, doctor! It’s more than three hours and a half…

Doctor (*taking out his watch and looking at it*): Yes, more than four hours, by this!

Donna Matilda: It could have reached here an hour ago at least! But, as usual…

Belcredi: Perhaps they can’t find the dress…

Donna Matilda: But I explained exactly where it was! (impatiently): And Frida… where is Frida?

Belcredi (*looking out of the window*): Perhaps she is in the garden with Charles…

Doctor: He’ll talk her out of her fright.

Belcredi: She’s not afraid, doctor; don’t you believe it: the thing bores her rather…

Donna Matilda: Just don’t ask anything of her! I know what she’s like.

Doctor: Let’s wait patiently. Anyhow, it will soon be over, and it has to be in the evening… It will only be the matter of a moment! If we can succeed in rousing him, as I was saying, and in breaking at one go the threads – already slack – which still bind him to this fiction of his, giving him back what he himself asks for – you remember, he said: “one cannot always be twenty-six years old, madam!” if we can give him freedom from this torment, which even he feels is a torment, then if he is able to recover at one bound the sensation of the distance of time…

Belcredi (*quickly*): He’ll be cured!

(*then emphatically with irony*): We’ll pull him out of it all!

Doctor: Yes, we may hope to set him going again, like a watch which has stopped at a certain hour… just as if we had our watches in our hands and were waiting for that other watch to go again. – A shake – so – – and let's hope it'll tell the time again after its long stop.

At this point the Marquis Charles Di Nolli enters from the principal entrance.

Donna Matilda: Oh, Charles!… And Frida? Where is she?

Di Nolli: She'll be here in a moment.

Doctor: Has the motor arrived?

Di Nolli: Yes.

Donna Matilda: Yes? Has the dress come?

Di Nolli: It's been here some time.

Doctor: Good! Good!

Donna Matilda (*trembling*): Where is she? Where's Frida?

Di Nolli (*shrugging his shoulders and smiling sadly, like one lending himself unwillingly to an untimely joke*): You'll see, you'll see!…

(*pointing towards the hall*): Here she is!…

(*Berthold appears at the threshold of the hall, and announces with solemnity.*)

Berthold: Her Highness the Countess Matilda of Canossa!

Frida enters, magnificent and beautiful, arrayed in the robes of her mother as "Countess Matilda of Tuscany," so that she is a living copy of the portrait in the throne room.

Frida (*passing Berthold, who is bowing, says to him with disdai*n): Of Tuscany, of Tuscany!

Canossa is just one of my castles!

Belcredi *(in admiration*): Look! Look! She seems another person…

Donna Matilda: One would say it were I! Look! – Why, Frida, look! She's exactly my portrait, alive!

Doctor: Yes, yes… Perfect! Perfect! The portrait, to the life.

Belcredi: Yes, there's no question about it. She is the portrait! Magnificent!

Frida: Don't make me laugh, or I shall burst! I say, mother, what a tiny waist you had? I had to squeeze so to get into this!

Donna Matilda (*arranging her dress a little*): Wait!… Keep still!… These pleats… is it really so tight?

Frida: I'm suffocating! I implore you, to be quick!…

Doctor: But we must wait till it's evening!

Frida: No, no, I can’t hold out till evening!

Donna Matilda: Why did you put it on so soon?

Frida: The moment I saw it, the temptation was irresistible…

Donna Matilda: At least you could have called me, or have had someone help you! It’s still all crumpled.

Frida: So I saw, mother; but they are old creases; they won’t come out.

Doctor: It doesn’t matter, Marchioness! The illusion is perfect.

(*Then coming nearer and asking her to come in front of her daughter, without hiding her*): If you please, stay there, there… at a certain distance… now a little more forward…

Belcredi: For the feeling of the distance of time…

Donna Matilda (*slightly turning to him*): Twenty years after! A disaster! A tragedy!

Belcredi: Now don’t let’s exaggerate!

Doctor (*embarrassed, trying to save the situation*): No, no! I meant the dress… so as to see… You know…

Belcredi (*laughing*): Oh, as for the dress, doctor, it isn’t a matter of twenty years! It’s eight hundred! An abyss! Do you really want to shove him across it (*pointing first to Frida and then to Marchioness*) from there to here? But you’ll have to pick him up in pieces with a basket! Just think now: for us it is a matter of twenty years,

a couple of dresses, and a masquerade. But, if, as you say, doctor, time has stopped for and around him: if he lives there (*pointing to Frida*) with her, eight hundred years ago… I repeat: the giddiness of the jump will be such, that finding himself suddenly among us… (*The doctor shakes his head in dissent*): You don't think so?

Doctor: No, because life, my dear baron, can take up its rhythms. This – our life – will at once become real also to him; and will pull him up directly, wresting from him suddenly the illusion, and showing him that the eight hundred years, as you say, are only twenty! It will be like one of those tricks, such as the leap into space, for instance, of the Masonic rite, which appears to be heaven knows how far, and is only a step down the stairs.

Belcredi: Ah! An idea! Yes! Look at Frida and the Marchioness, doctor! Which is more advanced in time? We old people, doctor! The young ones think they are more ahead; but it isn't true: we are more ahead, because time belongs to us more than to them.

Doctor: If the past didn't alienate us…

Belcredi: It doesn't matter at all! How does it alienate us?

They (*pointing to Frida and Di Nolli*) have still to do what we have accomplished, doctor: to grow old, doing the same foolish things, more or less, as we did… This is the illusion: that one comes forward through a door to life. It isn't so! As soon as one is born, one starts dying; therefore, he who started first is the most advanced of all. The youngest of us is father Adam! Look there (*pointing to Frida*) eight hundred years younger than all of us – the Countess Matilda of Tuscany.

He makes her a deep bow.

Di Nolli: I say, Tito, don’t start joking.

Belcredi: Oh, you think I am joking?…

Di Nolli: Of course, of course… all the time.

Belcredi: Impossible! I’ve even dressed up as a Benedictine…

Di Nolli: Yes, but for a serious purpose.

Belcredi: Well, exactly. If it has been serious for the others… for Frida, now, for instance.

(*Then turning to the doctor*): I swear, doctor, I don’t yet understand what you want to do.

Doctor (*annoyed*): You’ll see! Let me do as I wish… At present you see the Marchioness still dressed as…

Belcredi: Oh, she also… has to masquerade?

Doctor: Of course! of course! In another dress that’s in there ready to be used when it comes into his head he sees the Countess Matilda of Canossa before him.

Frida (*while talking quietly to Di Nolli notices the doctor’s mistake*): Of Tuscany, of Tuscany!

Doctor: It’s all the same!

Belcredi: Oh, I see! He’ll be faced by two of them…

Doctor: Two, precisely! And then…

Frida (*calling him aside*): Come here, doctor! Listen!

Doctor: Here I am!

Goes near the two young people and pretends to give some explanations to them.

Belcredi (*softly to Donna Matilda*): I say, this is getting rather strong, you know!

Donna Matilda (*looking him firmly in the face*): What?

Belcredi: Does it really interest you as much as all that – to make you willing to take part in… ? For a woman this is simply enormous!…

Donna Matilda: Yes, for an ordinary woman.

Belcredi: Oh, no, my dear, for all women, – in a question like this! It’s an abnegation.

Donna Matilda: I owe it to him.

Belcredi: Don’t lie! You know well enough it’s not hurting you!

Donna Matilda: Well then, where does the abnegation come in?

Belcredi: Just enough to prevent you losing caste in other people’s eyes – and just enough to offend me!…

Donna Matilda: But who is worrying about you now?

Di Nolli (*coming forward*): It’s all right. It’s all right. That’s what we’ll do!

(*Turning towards Berthold*): Here you, go and call one of those fellows!

Berthold: At once!

Exit.

Donna Matilda: But first of all we’ve got to pretend that we are going away.

Di Nolli: Exactly! I’ll see to that…

(*to Belcredi*) you don’t mind staying here?

Belcredi (*ironically*): Oh, no, I don’t mind, I don’t mind!…

Di Nolli: We must look out not to make him suspicious again, you know.

Belcredi: Oh, Lord! He doesn’t amount to anything!

Doctor: He must believe absolutely that we’ve gone away.

Landolph followed by Berthold enters from the right.

Landolph: May I come in?

Di Nolli: Come in! Come in! I say – your name’s Lolo, isn’t it?

Landolph: Lolo, or Landolph, just as you like!

Di Nolli: Well, look here: the doctor and the Marchioness are leaving, at once.

Landolph: Very well. All we've got to say is that they have been able to obtain the permission for the reception from His Holiness. He's in there in his own apartments repenting of all he said – and in an awful state to have the pardon!

Would you mind coming a minute?… If you would, just for a minute… put on the dress again…

Doctor: Why, of course, with pleasure…

Landolph: Might I be allowed to make a suggestion? Why not add that the Marchioness of Tuscany has interceded with the Pope that he should be received?

Donna Matilda: You see, he has recognized me!

Landolph: Forgive me… I don't know my history very well. I am sure you gentlemen know it much better! But I thought it was believed that Henry IV had a secret passion for the Marchioness of Tuscany.

Donna Matilda (*at once*): Nothing of the kind! Nothing of the kind!

Landolph: That's what I thought! But he says he's loved her… he's always saying it… And now he fears that her indignation for this secret love of his will work him harm with the Pope.

Belcredi: We must let him understand that this aversion no longer exists.

Landolph: Exactly! Of course!

Donna Matilda (*to Belcredi*): History says – I don't know whether you know it or not – that the Pope gave way to the supplications of the Marchioness Matilda and the Abbot of Cluny. And I may say, my dear Belcredi, that I intended to take advantage of this fact – at the time of the pageant – to show him my feelings were not so hostile to him as he supposed.

Belcredi: You are most faithful to history, Marchioness…

Landolph: Well then, the Marchioness could spare herself a double disguise and present herself with Monsignor (*indicating the doctor*) as the Marchioness of Tuscany.

Doctor (*quickly, energetically*): No, no! That won't do at all. It would ruin everything. The impression from the confrontation must be a sudden one, give a shock! No, no, Marchioness, you will appear again as the Duchess Adelaide, the mother of the Empress. And then we'll go away. This is most necessary: that he should know we've gone away. Come on! Don't let's waste any more time! There's a lot to prepare.

Exeunt the doctor, Donna Matilda, and Landolph, right.

Frida: I am beginning to feel afraid again.

Di Nolli: Again, Frida?

Frida: It would have been better if I had seen him before.

Di Nolli: There's nothing to be frightened of, really.

Frida: He isn't furious, is he?

Di Nolli: Of course not! he's quite calm.

Belcredi (*with ironic sentimental affectation*): Melancholy! Didn't you hear that he loves you?

Frida: Thanks! That's just why I am afraid.

Belcredi: He won't do you any harm.

Di Nolli: It'll only last a minute…

Frida: Yes, but there in the dark with him…

Di Nolli: Only for a moment; and I will be near you, and all the others behind the door ready to run in. As soon as you see your mother, your part will be finished…

Belcredi: I'm afraid of a different thing: that we're wasting our time…

Di Nolli: Don't begin again! The remedy seems a sound one to me.

Frida: I think so too! I feel it! I'm all trembling!

Belcredi: But, mad people, my dear friends – though they don't know it, alas – have this felicity which we don't take into account…

Di Nolli (*interrupting, annoyed*): What felicity? Nonsense!

Belcredi (*forcefully*): They don't reason!

Di Nolli: What's reasoning got to do with it, anyway?

Belcredi: Don't you call it reasoning that he will have to do – according to us – -when he sees her (*indicates Frida*) and her mother? We've reasoned it all out, surely!

Di Nolli: Nothing of the kind: no reasoning at all We put before him a double image of his own fantasy, or fiction, as the doctor says.

Belcredi (*suddenly*): I say, I've never understood why they take degrees in medicine.

Di Nolli (*amazed*): Who?

Belcredi: The alienists!

Di Nolli: What ought they to take degrees in, then?

Frida: If they are alienists, in what else should they take degrees?

Belcredi: In law, of course! All a matter of talk! The more they talk, the more highly they are considered. "Analogous elasticity," "the sensation of distance in time !" And the first thing they tell you is that they don't work miracles – when a miracle's just what is wanted! But they know that the more they say they are not miracle-workers, the more folk believe in their seriousness!

Berthold (*who has been looking through the keyhole of the door on right*): There they are! There they are! They're coming in here.

Di Nolli: Are they?

Berthold: He wants to come with them… Yes!… He's coming too!

Di Nolli: Let's get away, then! Let's get away, at once!

(*To Berthold*) : You stop here!

Without answering him, Di Nolli, Frida, and Belcredi go out by the main exit, leaving Berth old surprised. The door on the right opens, and Landolph enters first, bowing. Then Donna Matilda comes in, with mantle and ducal crown as in the first act; also the doctor as the abbot of Cluny. Henry IV is among them in royal dress. Ordulph and Harold enter last of all.

Henry IV (*following up what he has been saying in the other room*): And now I will ask you a question: how can I be astute, if you think me obstinate?

Doctor: No, no, not obstinate!

Henry IV (*smiling, pleased*): Then you think me really astute?

Doctor: No, no, neither obstinate, nor astute.

Henry IV (*with benevolent irony*): Monsignor, if obstinacy is not a vice which can go with astuteness, I hoped that in denying me the former, you would at least allow me a little of the latter. I can assure you I have great need of it. But if you want to keep it all for yourself…

Doctor: I? I? Do I seem astute to you?

Henry IV: No. Monsignor! What do you say? Not in the least! Perhaps in this case, I may seem a little obstinate to you.

(*Cutting short to speak to Donna Matilda*): With your permission: a word in confidence to the Duchess.

(*Leads her aside and asks her very earnestly*): Is your daughter really dear to you?

Donna Matilda (*dismayed*): Why, yes, certainly…

Henry IV: Do you wish me to compensate her with all my love, with all my devotion, for the grave wrongs I have done her – though you must not believe all the stories my enemies tell about my dissoluteness!

Donna Matilda: No, no, I don’t believe them. I never have believed such stories.

Henry IV: Well, then are you willing?

Donna Matilda (*confused*): What?

Henry IV: That I return to love your daughter again?

(*Looks at her and adds, in a mysterious tone of warning*): You mustn’t be a friend of the Marchioness of Tuscany!

Donna Matilda: I tell you again that she has begged and tried not less than ourselves to obtain your pardon…

Henry IV (*softly, but excitedly*): Don’t tell me that! Don’t say that to me! Don’t you see the effect it has on me, my Lady?

Donna Matilda (*looks at him; then very softly as if in confidence*): You love her still?

Henry IV (*puzzled*): Still? Still, you say? You know, then? But nobody knows! Nobody must know!

Donna Matilda: But perhaps she knows, if she has begged so hard for you!

Henry IV (*looks at her and says*): And you love your daughter?

(*Brief pause. He turns to the doctor with laughing accents*): Ah, Monsignor, it's strange how little I think of my wife! It may be a sin, but I swear to you that I hardly feel her at all in my heart. What is stranger is that her own mother scarcely feels her in her heart. Confess, my Lady, that she amounts to very little for you.

(*Turning to Doctor*) : She talks to me of that other woman, insistently, insistently, I don't know why!…

Landolph (*humbly*): Maybe, Majesty, it is to disabuse you of some ideas you have had about the Marchioness of Tuscany.

(*Then, dismayed at having allowed himself this observation, adds*) : I mean just now, of course…

Henry IV: You too maintain that she has been friendly to me?

Landolph: Yes, at the moment, Majesty.

Donna Matilda: Exactly! Exactly!…

Henry IV: I understand. That is to say, you don't believe I love her. I see! I see! Nobody's ever believed it, nobody's ever thought it. Better so, then! But enough, enough!

(T*urns to the doctor with changed expression*): Monsignor, you see? The reasons the Pope has had for revoking the excommunication have got nothing at all to do with the reasons for which he excommunicated me originally. Tell Pope Gregory we shall meet again at Brixen. And you, Madame, should you chance to meet your daughter in the courtyard of the castle of your friend the Marchioness, ask her to visit me. We shall see if I succeed in keeping her close beside me as wife and Empress.

Many women have presented themselves here already assuring me that they were she. But they all, even while they told me they came from Susa – I don't know why – began to laugh! And then in the bedroom… Well a man is a man, and a woman is a woman. Undressed, we don't bother much about who we are. And one's dress is like a phantom that hovers always near one.

Oh, Monsignor, phantoms in general are nothing more than trifling disorders of the spirit: images we cannot contain within the bounds of sleep. They reveal themselves even when we are awake, and they frighten us. I… ah… I am always afraid when, at night time, I see disordered images before me. Sometimes I am even afraid of my own blood pulsing loudly in my arteries in the silence of night, like the sound of a distant step in a lonely corridor!… But, forgive me! I have kept you standing too long already. I thank you, my Lady, I thank you, Monsignor.

(*Donna Matilda and the Doctor go off bowing. As soon as they have gone, Henry IV suddenly changes his ton*e): Buffoons, buffoons! One can play any tune on them! And that other fellow… Pietro Damiani!… Caught him out perfectly! He's afraid to appear before me again.

(*Moves up and down excitedly while saying this; then sees Berthold, and points him out to the other three valets*): Oh, look at this imbecile watching me with his mouth

wide open!

(*Shakes him*): Don’t you understand? Don’t you see, idiot, how I treat them, how I play the fool with them, make them appear before me just as I wish? Miserable, frightened clowns that they are! And you (*addressing the valets*) are amazed that I tear off their ridiculous masks now, just as if it wasn’t I who had made them mask themselves to satisfy this taste of mine for playing the madman!

Landolph – **Harold** – **Ordulph** (*bewildered, looking at one another*): What? What does he say? What?

Henry IV (*answers them imperiously*): Enough! enough! Let’s stop it. I’m tired of it.

(*Then as if the thought left him no peace*): By God! The impudence! To come here along with her lover!… And pretending to do it out of pity! So as not to infuriate a poor devil already out of the world, out of time, out of life! If it hadn’t been supposed to be done out of pity, one can well imagine that fellow wouldn’t have allowed it. Those people expect others to behave as they wish all the time. And, of course, there’s nothing arrogant in that! Oh, no! Oh, no! It’s merely their way of thinking, of feeling, of seeing. Everybody has his own way of thinking; you fellows, too. Yours is that of a flock of sheep – miserable, feeble, uncertain… But those others take advantage of this and make you accept their way of thinking; or, at least, they suppose they do; Because, after all, what do they succeed in imposing on you? Words, words which anyone can interpret in his own manner! That’s the way public opinion is formed! And it’s a bad look out for a man who finds himself labelled one day with one of these words which everyone repeats; for example “madman,” or “imbecile.” Don’t you think is rather hard for a man to keep quiet, when he knows that there is a fellow going about trying to persuade everybody that he is as he sees him, trying to fix him in other people’s opinion as a “madman” –

according to him? Now I am talking seriously! Before I hurt my head, falling from my horse…

(*Stops suddenly, noticing the dismay of the four young men*): What's the matter with you?

(*Imitates their amazed looks*): What? Am I, or am I not, mad? Oh, yes! I'm mad all right!

(*He becomes terrible*): Well, then, by God, down on your knees, down on your knees!

(*Makes them go down on their knees one by one*): I order you to go down on your knees before me! And touch the ground three times with your foreheads! Down, down! That's the way you've got to be before madmen!

(*Then annoyed with their facile humiliation*): Get up, sheep! You obeyed me, didn't you?

You might have put the straight jacket on me!… Crush a man with the weight of a word – it's nothing – a fly! all our life is crushed by the weight of words: the weight of the dead. Look at me here: can you really suppose that Henry IV is still alive?

All the same, I speak, and order you live men about! Do you think it's a joke that the dead continue to live? – Yes, here it's a joke! But get out into the live world ! – Ah, you say: what a beautiful sunrise – for us! All time is before us! – Dawn! We will do what we like with this day – . Ah, yes! To Hell with tradition, the old conventions! Well, go on! You will do nothing but repeat the old, old words, while you imagine you are living!

(*Goes up to Berthold who has now become quite stupid*): You don't understand a word of this, do you? What's your name?

Berthold: I?… What?… Berthold…

Henry IV: Poor Berthold! What's your name here?

Berthold: I… I… my name in Fino.

Henry IV (*feeling the warning and critical glances of the others, turns to them to reduce them to silence*): Fino?

Berthold: Fino Pagliuca, sire.

Henry IV (*turning to Landolph*): I've heard you call each other by your nick-names often enough! Your name is Lolo, isn't it?

Landolph: Yes, sire…

(*then with a sense of immense joy*): Oh, Lord! Oh Lord! Then he is not mad…

Henry IV (*brusquely*): What?

Landolph (*hesitating*): No… I said…

Henry IV: Not mad, eh? We're having a joke on those that think I am mad!

(*To Harold*) – I say, boy, your name's Franco…

(*To Ordulph*) And yours…

Ordulph: Momo.

Henry IV: Momo, Momo… A nice name that!

Landolph: So he isn't…

Henry IV: What are you talking about? Of course not! Let's have a jolly, good laugh!… (*Laughs*): Ah!

Landolph – **Harold** – **Ordulph** (*looking at each other half happy and half dismayed*): Then he's cured!… he's all right!…

Henry IV: Silence! Silence!…

(*To Berthold*): Why don't you laugh? Are you offended? I didn't mean it especially for you. It's convenient for everybody to insist that certain people are mad, so they can be shut up. Do you know why? Because it's impossible to hear them speak! What shall I say of these people who've just gone away? That one is a whore, another a libertine, another a swindler… don't you think so? You can't believe a word he says… don't you think so? – By the way, they all listen to me terrified. And why are they terrified, if what I say isn't true? Of course, you can't believe what madmen say – yet, at the same time, they stand there with their eyes wide open with terror ! – Why? Tell me, tell me, why ? – You see I'm quite calm now!

Berthold: But, perhaps, they think that…

Henry IV: No, no, my dear fellow! Look me well in the eyes!… I don't say that it's true – nothing is true, Berthold! But… look me in the eyes!

Berthold: Well…

Henry IV: You see? You see?… You have terror in your own eyes now because I seem mad to you! There's the proof of it (*laughs*)!

Landolph (*coming forward in the name of the others, exasperated*): What proof?

Henry IV: Your being so dismayed because now I seem again mad to you. You have thought me mad up to now, haven't you? You feel that this dismay of yours can become terror too – something to dash away the ground from under your feet and deprive you of the air you breathe! Do you know what it means to find yourselves face to face with a madman – with one who shakes the foundations of all you have built up in yourselves, your logic, the logic of all your constructions? Madmen, lucky folk! construct without logic, or rather with a logic that flies like a feather. Voluble! Voluble! Today like this and tomorrow – who knows? You say: "This cannot be"; but for them everything can be. You say: "This isn't true!" And why? Because it doesn't seem true to you, or you, or you… (*indicates the three of them in succession*)… and to a hundred thousand others! One must see what seems true to these hundred thousand others who are not supposed to be mad! What a magnificent spectacle they afford, when they reason! What flowers of logic they scatter! I know that when I was a child, I thought the moon in the pond was real. How many things I thought real! I believed everything I was told – and I was happy! Because it's a terrible thing if you don't hold on to that which seems true to you today – to that which will seem true to you tomorrow, even if it is the opposite of that which seemed true to you yesterday. I would never wish you to think, as I have done, on this horrible thing which really drives one mad: that if you were beside another and looking into his eyes – as I one day looked into somebody's eyes – you might as well be a beggar before a door never to be opened to you; for he who does enter there will never be

you, but someone unknown to you with his own different and impenetrable world…

(*Long pause. Darkness gathers in the room, increasing the sense of strangeness and consternation in which the four young men are involved. Henry IV remains aloof, pondering on the misery which is not only his, but everybody's. Then he pulls himself up, and says in an ordinary tone*): It's getting dark here…

Ordulph: Shall I go for a lamp?

Henry IV (*Ironically*): The lamp, yes the lamp!… Do you suppose I don't know that as soon as I turn my back with my oil lamp to go to bed, you turn on the electric light for yourselves, here, and even there, in the throne room? I pretend not to see it!

Ordulph: Well, then, shall I turn it on now?

Henry IV: No, it would blind me! I want my lamp!

Ordulph: It's ready here behind the door.

Goes to the main exit, opens the door, goes out for a moment, and returns with an ancient lamp which is held by a ring at the top.

Henry IV: Ah, a little light! Sit there around the table, no, not like that; in an elegant, easy, manner!…

(*To Harold*): Yes, you, like that (*poses him*)!

(*Then to Berthold*): You, so!… and I, here (*sits opposite them*)! We could do with a little decorative moonlight. It's very useful for us, the moonlight. I feel a real

necessity for it, and pass a lot of time looking up at the moon from my window. Who would think, to look at her that she knows that eight hundred years have passed, and that I, seated at the window, cannot really be Henry IV gazing at the moon like any poor devil? But, look, look! See what a magnificent night scene we have here: the emperor surrounded by his faithful counsellors!… How do you like it?

Landolph (*softly to Harold, so as not to break the en chantment*): And to think it wasn't true!…

Henry IV: True? What wasn't true?

Landolph (*timidly as if to excuse himself*): No… I mean… I was saying this morning to him (*indicates Berthold*) – he has just entered on service here – I was, saying: what a pity that dressed like this and with so many beautiful costumes in the wardrobe… and with a room like that (*indicates the throne room*)…

Henry IV: Well? what's the pity?

Landolph: Well… that we didn't know…

Henry IV: That it was all done in jest, this comedy?

Landolph: Because we thought that…

Harold (*coming to his assistance*): Yes… that it was done seriously!

Henry IV: What do you say? Doesn't it seem serious to you?

Landolph: But if you say that…

Henry IV: I say that – you are fools! You ought to have known how to create a fantasy for yourselves, not to act it for me, or anyone coming to see me; but naturally, simply, day by day, before nobody, feeling yourselves alive in the history of the eleventh century, here at the court of your emperor, Henry IV! You Ordulph (*taking him by the arm*), alive in the castle of Goslar, waking up in the morning, getting out of bed, and entering straightway into the dream, clothing yourself in the dream that would be no more a dream, because you would have lived it, felt it all alive in you. You would have drunk it in with the air you breathed; yet knowing all the time that it was a dream, so you could better enjoy the privilege afforded you of having to do nothing else but live this dream, this far off and yet actual dream! And to think that at a distance of eight centuries from this remote age of ours, so coloured and so sepulchral, the men of the twentieth century are torturing themselves in ceaseless anxiety to know how their fates and fortunes will work out! Whereas you are already in history with me…

Landolph: Yes, yes, very good!

Henry IV:… Everything determined, everything settled!

Ordulph: Yes, yes!

Henry IV: And sad as is my lot, hideous as some of the events are, bitter the struggles and troublous the time – still all history! All history that cannot change, understand? All fixed for ever! And you could have admired at your ease how every effect followed obediently its cause with perfect logic, how every event took place precisely and coherently in each minute particular!

The pleasure, the pleasure of history, in fact, which is so great, was yours.

Landolph: Beautiful, beautiful!

Henry IV: Beautiful, but it's finished! Now that you know, I could not do it any more!

(*Takes his lamp to go to bed*): Neither could you, if up to now you haven't understood the reason of it! I am sick of it now.

(*Almost to himself with violent contained rage*): By God, I'll make her sorry she came here! Dressed herself up as a mother-in-law for me… ! And he as an abbot… ! And they bring a doctor with them to study me… ! Who knows if they don't hope to cure me?… Clowns… ! I'd like to smack one of them at least in the face: yes, that one – a famous swordsman, they say!… He'll kill me… Well, we'll see, we'll see!…

(*A knock at the door*): Who is it?

The voice of John: Deo Gratias!

Harold (*very pleased at the chance for another joke*): Oh, it's John, it's old John, who comes every night to play the monk.

Ordulph (*rubbing his hands*): Yes, yes! Let's make him do it!

Henry IV (*at once, severely*): Fool, why? Just to play a joke on a poor old man who does it for love of me?

Landolph (*to Ordulph*): It has to be as if it were true.

Henry IV: Exactly, as if true! Because, only so, truth is not a jest.

(*Opens the door and admits John dressed as a humble friar with a roll of parchment under his arm*): Come in, come in, father!

(*Then assuming a tone of tragic gravity and deep resentment*): All the documents of my life and reign favorable to me were destroyed deliberately by my enemies. One only has escaped destruction, this, my life, written by a humble monk who is devoted to me. And you would laugh at him!

(*Turns affectionately to John, and invites him to sit down at the table*): Sit down, father, sit down! Have the lamp near you (puts the lamp near him)! Write! Write!

John (*opens the parchment and prepares to write from dictation*): I am ready, your Majesty!

Henry IV (*dictating*): “The decree of peace proclaimed at Mayence helped the poor and humble, while it damaged the weak and the powerful

(*Curtain begins to fall*): It brought wealth to the former, hunger and misery to the latter…

Curtain

Summary

Act II takes place later the same day in another room of the villa, adjoining the throne room. Matilda, Doctor Genoni and Belcredi discuss Henry’s behaviour during their first meeting.

Matilda is convinced that Henry recognised her. She interprets his remarks about

youth, hair and memory as direct references to the woman she once was. Belcredi rejects this interpretation, while the Doctor attempts to explain Henry’s behaviour through the psychology of madness.

Doctor Genoni argues that Henry is aware of himself as an image and is capable of recognising that the visitors’ disguises are artificial. In his view, Henry’s delirium is still coherent but has become less rigid, suggesting that the links holding his second personality together may be weakening.

The Doctor therefore believes that a carefully designed shock might restore Henry to ordinary reality. His plan depends on recreating the past so vividly that Henry will suddenly become aware of the distance between the time in which he believes himself to live and the present.

Frida then appears dressed in the costume once worn by her mother as Matilda of Tuscany. Her resemblance to the portrait is extraordinary: she seems to be the painted image brought to life.

The Doctor sees this resemblance as the key to his experiment. By confronting Henry with Frida as the living image of the young Matilda, he hopes to make him feel the passage of time and break the psychological structure of his madness.

Belcredi, however, doubts that the experiment can be so simple. He points out that for Henry the distance is not merely twenty years but centuries: if Henry truly inhabits the medieval world, the leap back into the present may be psychologically overwhelming.

The most decisive moment of the act comes later, when Henry is left alone with his four counsellors. He suddenly drops the role and reveals that he is no longer mad.

Henry explains that after twelve years of genuine madness he recovered his sanity. But when he became lucid again, he discovered that the world had moved on without him. The people around him had aged, relationships had changed and the years he had lost could never be recovered.

Faced with this irreparable loss, he deliberately chose to continue pretending to be mad. Remaining Henry IV gave him a fixed identity and allowed him to withdraw from a reality in which he no longer felt he had a place.

His madness therefore becomes a conscious performance. Henry knows that he is acting, but he also believes that the supposedly sane people around him are themselves trapped in roles and conventions they fail to recognise as masks.

Analysis

Act II is the dramatic and philosophical centre of *Henry IV*. The uncertainty created in Act I is resolved in one sense but deepened in another: Henry is no longer mad, yet he has consciously chosen to continue living as if he were.

Matilda’s certainty

Matilda’s insistence that Henry recognised her is important because it begins to expose the weakness in the medical interpretation offered by Doctor Genoni. She senses that Henry’s words were too precise and too personally directed to be explained simply as delirium.

Her reaction also reveals her own emotional involvement. She is not merely observing a patient; she is confronting a man whose lost youth is inseparable from her own past.

The Doctor’s experiment

Doctor Genoni approaches Henry as if his mind were a mechanism that has stopped functioning correctly. His image of a stopped watch expresses this idea clearly: the Doctor believes that the right shock can restart Henry’s sense of time.

Pirandello, however, prepares the audience to see the limits of this explanation. Henry’s condition cannot be reduced to a clinical mechanism, because his continued role is no longer simply the result of illness.

Frida as the living portrait

Frida’s appearance in Matilda’s old costume is one of the central visual images of the play. She becomes the living double of the portrait hanging in the throne room.

The transformation makes visible the tension between fixed image and living time. Matilda has aged, but Frida now occupies the same youthful form preserved in the portrait. For Henry, the past appears capable of returning in bodily form.

The revelation of sanity

Henry’s confession to the counsellors overturns everything the audience has previously assumed. The apparent madman is fully aware of the theatrical structure around him.

He has not merely accepted the world constructed for him; he has taken control of it. The villa becomes a stage on which he is simultaneously actor, character and director.

The tragedy of lost time

The deepest reason for Henry's decision is not madness but time. When he recovered his sanity, he discovered that twelve years of his life had vanished beyond recovery.

The others had continued to live, love and change. Henry returned to consciousness as a stranger to his own life. Remaining inside the fixed identity of Henry IV becomes a way of refusing a present that no longer belongs to him.

Madness as freedom

By continuing to appear mad, Henry gains a paradoxical freedom. Because society considers him irrational, he can speak and behave outside ordinary social rules.

He can expose the masks of others precisely because they believe he is trapped inside one of his own.

Life and form

The opposition between life and form becomes explicit in this act. Life changes continuously, while form attempts to fix identity in a stable image.

Henry chooses the form of the medieval emperor because it protects him from the painful instability of ordinary life. Yet that protection also separates him from the possibility of living fully.

The superiority and isolation of Henry

Henry appears intellectually superior to the other characters because he knows that

he is playing a role. In his view, the others are also actors, but they do not realise it.

This awareness gives him power, but it also deepens his solitude. To observe life from outside, he must renounce participation in it.

A chosen mask

At the end of Act II, Henry still seems to control the mask he has chosen. He can move between the identity of the emperor and the lucid modern man behind it.

But Pirandello has already prepared the tragedy of the final act: a role freely chosen can become a role from which escape is no longer possible.

Henry IV – Full text

▶ Introduction, Analysis, Summary
Introduction to the drama, characters, plot and critical analysis of Pirandello's *Henry IV*.

▶ Characters, Act I
The artificial medieval court, the arrival of the visitors and their first encounter with Henry IV.

Act II
Current page. Matilda believes Henry has recognised her, Doctor Genoni prepares his experiment with Frida, and Henry reveals that he recovered his sanity years earlier and deliberately chose to continue living inside his role.

▶ Act III
The Doctor's experiment brings the past back to life and leads to the fatal confrontation with Belcredi.

◀ Act I

Act III ▶

▶ Pirandello in English

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