Henry IV – Characters, Act I

Mark L. Montgomery as Henry IV and Patrice Egleston as the Marchioness Matilda Spina in *Pirandello's Henry IV* by Tom Stoppard, produced by the Remy Bumppo Theatre Company at Theater Wit, Chicago, in October 2016, directed by Nick Sandys. Image reworked by PirandelloWeb.

Saggistica consigliata

Prodotto disponibile su Amazon

Giulio Ferroni: Storia della letteratura italiana (Vol. 1)

Un riferimento per approfondire la storia della letteratura italiana e il suo contesto culturale.

Link affiliato Amazon

In Act I of *Henry IV*, Pirandello introduces the artificial medieval court created around the protagonist and immediately turns the stage into a world of masks and performance. The arrival of Matilda Spina, Belcredi, Frida, Di Nolli and Doctor Genoni brings the buried past into the present

and prepares the first unsettling encounter with the man who has lived for years as the medieval Emperor Henry IV.

▶ Summary ▶ Analysis

◀ Introduction

Act II ▶

Henry IV – Full text

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

Characters, Act I
Current page. The artificial medieval court, the arrival of the visitors and their first encounter with Henry IV reveal a world in which madness, theatre and reality are already inseparable.

▶ **Act II**
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 Primo**
The original Italian text of the first act, with summary and analysis.

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

Characters

“HENRY IV”

THE MARCHIONESS MATILDA SPINA

FRIDA, her daughter

THE YOUNG MARQUIS CHARLES DI NOLLI

BARON TITO BELCREDI

DOCTOR DIONYSIUS GENONI

THE FOUR PRIVATE COUNSELLORS

(The names in brackets are nicknames):

Harold (Frank)

Landolph (Lolo)

Ordulph (Momo)

Berthold (Fino)

Segui PirandelloWeb su Facebook

Partecipa al Gruppo Facebook di PirandelloWeb
Commenta gli articoli, confrontati con altri lettori e scopri curiosità, approfondimenti e discussioni dedicate a Luigi Pirandello e alla sua opera.

Visita il Gruppo Facebook

JOHN, the old waiter

THE TWO VALETS IN COSTUME

A solitary villa in Italy, Our Own Times, in a Small Italian Town, the Capital of a Province.

English translation:

Edward Storer, 1922.

Henry IV

Drama in three acts – 1922

Act I

Salon in the villa, furnished and decorated so as to look exactly like the throne room of Henry IV in the royal residence at Goslar. Among the antique decorations there are two modern life-size portraits in oil painting. They are placed against the back wall, and mounted in a wooden stand that runs the whole length of the wall. (It is wide and protrudes, so that it is like a large bench): One of the paintings is on the right; the other on the left of the throne, which is in the middle of the wall and divides the stand. The Imperial chair and Baldachin. The two portraits represent a lady and a gentleman, both young, dressed up in carnival costumes: one as "Henry IV," the other as the "Marchioness Matilda of Tuscany." Exits to Right and Left.

When the curtain goes up, the two valets jump down, as if surprised, from the stand on which they have been lying, and go and take their positions, as rigid as statues, on either side below the throne with their halberds in their hands. Soon after, from the second exit, right, enter Harold, Landolph, Ordulph and Berthold, young men employed by the Marquis Charles Di Nolli to play the part of "Secret Counsellors" at the court of "Henry IV". They are, therefore, dressed like German knights of the XIth century. Berthold, nicknamed Fino, is just entering on his duties for the first time. His companions are telling him what he has to do and amusing themselves at his expense. The scene is to be played rapidly and vivaciously.

Landolph (*to Berthold as if explaining*): And this is the throne room.

Harold: At Goslar.

Ordulph: Or at the castle in the Hartz, if you prefer.

Harold: Or at Wurms.

Landolph: According as to what's doing, it jumps about with us, now here, now there.

Ordulph: In Saxony.

Harold: In Lombardy.

Landolph: On the Rhine.

One of the valets (*without moving, just opening his lips*): I say…

Harold (*turning round*): What is it?

First valet (*like a statue*): Is he coming in or not? (*He alludes to Henry IV*)

Ordulph: No, no, he's asleep. You needn't worry.

Second valet (*releasing his pose, taking a long breath and going to lie down again on the stand*): You might have told us at once.

First valet (*going over to Harold*): Have you got a match, please?

Landolph: What? You can't smoke a pipe here, you know.

First valet (*while Harold offers him a light*): No; a cigarette.

Lights his cigarette and lies down again on the stand.

Berthold (*who has been looking on in amazement, walking round the room, regarding the costumes of the others*): I say… this room… these costumes… Which Henry IV is it? I don't quite get it. Is he Henry IV of France or not?

At this Landolph, Harold, and Ordulph, burst out laughing.

Landolph (*still laughing; and pointing to Berth old as if inviting the others to make fun of him*): Henry of France he says: ha! ha!

Ordulph: He thought it was the king of France!

Harold: Henry IV of Germany, my boy: the Salian dynasty!

Ordulph: The great and tragic Emperor!

Landolph: He of Canossa. Every day we carry on here the terrible war between Church and State, by Jove.

Ordulph: The Empire against the Papacy!

Harold: Antipopes against the Pope!

Landolph: Kings against antikings!

Ordulph: War on the Saxons!

Harold: And all the rebels Princes!

Landolph: Against the Emporer's own sons!

Berthold (*covering his head with his hands to protect himself against this avalanche of information*): I understand! I understand! Naturally, I didn't get the idea at first. I'm right then: these aren't costumes of the XVIth century?

Harold: XVIth century be hanged!

Ordulph: We're somewhere between a thousand and eleven hundred.

Landolph: Work it out for yourself: if we are before Canossa on the 25th of January, 1071…

Berthold (*more confused than ever*): Oh my God! What a mess I've made of it!

Ordulph: Well, just slightly, if you supposed you were at the French court.

Berthold: All that historical stuff I've swatted up!

Landolph: My dear boy, it's four hundred years earlier.

Berthold (*getting angry*): Good Heavens! You ought to have told me it was Germany and not France. I can't tell you how many books I've read in the last fifteen days.

Harold: But I say, surely you knew that poor Tito was Adalbert of Bremen, here?

Berthold: Not a damned bit!

Landolph: Well, don't you see how it is? When Tito died, the Marquis Di Nolli…

Berthold: Oh, it was he, was it? He might have told me.

Harold: Perhaps he thought you knew.

Landolph: He didn't want to engage anyone else in substitution. He thought the remaining three of us would do. But he began to cry out: "With Adalbert driven away… ": because, you see, he didn't imagine poor Tito was dead; but that, as Bishop Adalbert, the rival bishops of Cologne and Mayence had driven him off…

Berthold (*taking his head in his hand*): But I don't know a word of what you're talking about.

Ordulph: So much the worse for you, my boy!

Harold: But the trouble is that not even we know who you are.

Berthold: What? Not even you? You don't know who I'm supposed to be?

Ordulph: Hum! "Berthold."

Berthold: But which Berthold? And why Berthold

Landolph (*solemnly imitating Henry IV*): "They've driven Adalbert away from me. Well then, I want Berthold! I want Berthold !" That's what he said.

Harold: We three looked one another in the eyes: who's got to be Berthold?

Ordulph: And so here you are, "Berthold," my dear fellow!

Landolph: I'm afraid you will make a bit of a mess of it.

Berthold (*indignant, getting ready to go*): Ah, no! Thanks very much, but I'm off! I'm out of this!

Harold (*restraining him with the other two, amid laughter*): Steady now! Don't get excited!

Landolph: Cheer up, my dear fellow! We don't any of us know who we are really. He's Harold; he's Ordulph; I'm Landolph! That's the way he calls us. We've got used to it. But who are we? Names of the period! Yours, too, is a name of the period: Berthold! Only one of us, poor Tito, had got a really decent part, as you can read in history: that of the Bishop of Bremen. He was just like a real bishop. Tito did it awfully well, poor chap!

Harold: Look at the study he put into it!

Landolph: Why, he even ordered his Majesty about, opposed his views, guided and counselled him. We're "secret counsellors" – in a manner of speaking only; because it is written in history that Henry IV was hated by the upper aristocracy for surrounding himself at court with young men of the bourgeoise.

Ordulph: Us, that is.

Landolph: Yes, small devoted vassals, a bit dissolute and very gay…

Berthold: So I've got to be gay as well?

Harold: I should say so! Same as we are!

Ordulph: And it isn't too easy, you know.

Landolph: It's a pity; because the way we're got up, we could do a fine historical reconstruction. There's any amount of material in the story of Henry IV. But, as a matter of fact, we do nothing. We've have the form without the content. We're worse than the real secret counsellors of Henry IV; because certainly no one had given them a part to play – at any rate, they didn't feel they had a part to play. It was their life. They looked after their own interests at the expense of others, sold investitures and – what not! We stop here in this magnificent court – for what? – Just doing nothing. We're like so many puppets hung on the wall, waiting for some one to come and move us or make us talk.

Harold: Ah no, old sport, not quite that! We've got to give the proper answer, you know. There's trouble if he asks you something and you don't chip in with the cue.

Landolph: Yes, that's true.

Berthold: Don't rub it in too hard! How the devil am I to give him the proper answer, if I've swatted up Henry IV of France, and now he turns out to be Henry IV of Germany?

The other three laugh.

Harold: You'd better start and prepare yourself at once.

Ordulph: We'll help you out.

Harold: We've got any amount of books on the subject. A brief run through the main points will do to begin with.

Ordulph: At any rate, you must have got some sort of general idea.

Harold: Look here!

(*Turns him around and shows him the portrait of the March ioness Matilda on the wall*): Who's that?

Berthold (*looking at it*): That? Well, the thing seems to me somewhat out of place, anyway: two modern paintings in the midst of all this respectable antiquity!

Harold: You're right! They weren't there in the beginning. There are two niches there behind the pictures. They were going to put up two statues in the style of the period. Then the places were covered with those canvasses there.

Landolph (*interrupting and continuing*): They would certainly be out of place if they really were paintings!

Berthold: What are they, if they aren't paintings?

Landolph: Go and touch them! Pictures all right… but for him!

(*Makes a mysterious gesture to the right, alluding to Henry IV*): . . who never touches them!…

Berthold: No? What are they for him?

Landolph: Well, I'm only supposing, you know; but I imagine I'm about right. They're images such as… well – such as a mirror might throw back. Do you understand? That one there represents himself, as he is in this throne room, which is all in the style of the period. What's there to marvel at? If we put you before a

mirror, won't you see yourself, alive, but dressed up in ancient costume? Well, it's as if there were two mirrors there, which cast back living images in the midst of a world which, as you will see, when you have lived with us, comes to life too.

Berthold: I say, look here… I've no particular desire to go mad here.

Harold: Go mad, be hanged! You'll have a fine time!

Berthold: Tell me this: how have you all managed to become so learned?

Landolph: My dear fellow, you can't go back over 800 years of history without picking up a bit of experience.

Harold: Come on! Come on! You'll see how quickly you get into it!

Ordulph: You'll learn wisdom, too, at this school.

Berthold: Well, for Heaven's sake, help me a bit! Give me the main lines, anyway.

Harold: Leave it to us. We'll do it all between us.

Landolph: We'll put your wires on you and fix you up like a first class marionette. Come along!

They take him by the arm to lead him away.

Berthold (*stopping and looking at the portrait on the wall*): Wait a minute! You haven't told me who that is. The Emperor's wife?

Harold: No! The Emperor's wife is Bertha of Susa, the sister of Amadeus II of Savoy.

Ordulph: And the Emperor, who wants to be young with us, can't stand her, and wants to put her away.

Landolph: That is his most ferocious enemy: Matilda, Marchioness of Tuscany.

Berthold: Ab, I've got it: the one who gave hospitality to the Pope!

Landolph: Exactly: at Canossa!

Ordulph: Pope Gregory VII.!

Harold: Our *bête noir!* Come on! come on!

All four move toward the right to go out, when, from the left, the old servant John enters in evening dress.

John (*quickly, anxiously*): Hss! Hss! Frank! Lolo!

Harold (*turning round*): What is it?

Berthold (*marvelling at seeing a man in modern clothes enter the throne room*): Oh! I say, this is a bit too much, this chap here!

Landolph: A man of the XXth century, here! Oh, go away!

They run over to him, pretending to menace him and throw him out.

Ordulph (*heroically*): Messenger of Gregory VII, away!

Harold: Away! Away!

John (*annoyed, defending himself*): Oh, stop it! Stop it, I tell you!

Ordulph: No, you can’t set foot here!

Harold: Out with him!

Landolph (*to Berthold*): Magic, you know! He’s a demon conjured up by the Wizard of Rome! Out with your swords! *Makes as if to draw a sword*.

John (*shouting*): Stop it, will you? Don’t play the fool with me! The Marquis has arrived with some friends…

Landolph: Good! Good! Are there ladies too?

Ordulph: Old or young?

John: There are two gentlemen.

Harold: But the ladies, the ladies, who are they?

John: The Marchioness and her daughter.

Landolph (*surprised*): What do you say?

Ordulph: The Marchioness?

John: The Marchioness! The Marchioness!

Harold: Who are the gentlemen?

John: I don’t know.

Harold (*to Berthold*): They’re coming to bring us a message from the Pope, do you see?

Ordulph: All messengers of Gregory VII.! What fun!

John: Will you let me speak, or not?

Harold: Go on, then!

John: One of the two gentlemen is a doctor, I fancy.

Landolph: Oh, I see, one of the usual doctors.

Harold: Brayo Berthold, you’ll bring us luck!

Landolph: You wait and see how we’ll manage this doctor!

Berthold: It looks as if I were going to get into a nice mess right away.

John: If the gentlemen would allow me to speak… they want to come here into the throne room.

Landolph (*surprised*): What? She? The Marchioness here?

Harold: Then this is something quite different! No play-acting this time!

Landolph: We’ll have a real tragedy: that’s what!

Berthold (*curious*): Why? Why?

Ordulph (*pointing to the portrait*): She is that person there, don't you understand?

Landolph: The daughter is the fiancée of the Marquis. But what have they come for, I should like to know?

Ordulph: If he sees her, there'll be trouble.

Landolph: Perhaps he won't recognize her any more.

John: You must keep him there, if he should wake up…

Ordulph: Easier said than done, by Jove!

Harold: You know what he's like!

John: – even by force, if necessary! Those are my orders. Go on! Go on!

Harold: Yes, because who knows if he hasn't already wakened up?

Ordulph: Come on then!

Landolph (*going towards John with the others*): You'll tell us later what it all means.

John (*shouting after them*): Close the door there, and hide the key! That other door too.

Pointing to the other door on right.

John (*to the two valets*): Be off, you two! There (*pointing to exit right*)! Close the door after you, and hide the key!

The two valets go out by the first door on right. John moves over to the left to show in: Donna Matilda Spina, the young Marchioness Frida, Dr. Dionysius Genoni, the Baron Tito Belcredi and the young Marquis Charles Di Nolli, who, as master of the house, enters last.

Donna Matilda Spina is about 45, still handsome, although there are too patent signs of her attempts to remedy the ravages of time with make-up. Her head is thus rather like a Walkyrie. This facial make-up contrasts with her beautiful sad mouth. A widow for many years, she now has as her friend the Baron Tito Belcredi, whom neither she nor anyone else takes seriously – at least so it would appear.

What Tito Belcredi really is for her at bottom, he alone knows; and he is, therefore, entitled to laugh, if his friend feels the need of pretending not to know. He can always laugh at the jests which the beautiful Marchioness makes with the others at his expense. He is slim, prematurely gray, and younger than she is. His head is bird-like in shape. He would be a very vivacious person, if his ductile agility (which among other things makes him a redoubtable swordsman) were not enclosed in a sheath of Arab-like laziness, which is revealed in his strange, nasal drawn-out voice.

Frida, the daughter of the Marchioness is 19. She is sad; because her imperious and too beautiful mother puts her in the shade, and provokes facile gossip against her daughter as well as against herself. Fortunately for her, she is engaged to the Marquis Charles Di Nolli.

Chrles Di Nolli is a stiff young man, very indulgent towards others, but sure of himself for what he amounts to in the world. He is worried about all the

responsibilities which he believes weigh on him. He is dressed in deep mourning for the recent death of his mother.

Dr. Dionisyus Genoni has a bold rubicund Satyr-like face, prominent eyes, a pointed beard (which is silvery and shiny) and elegant manners. He is nearly bald. All enter in a state of perturbation, almost as if afraid, and all (except Di Nolli) looking curiously about the room. At first, they speak sotto voce.

Di Nolli (*to John*): Have you given the orders properly?

John: Yes, my Lord; don't be anxious about that.

Belcredi: Ah, magnificent! magnificent!

Doctor: How extremely interesting! Even in the surroundings his raving madness – is perfectly taken into account!

Donna Matilda (*glancing round for her portrait, discovers it, and goes up close to it*): Ah! Here it is!

(*Going back to admire it, while mixed emotions stir within her*): Yes… yes…

Calls her daughter Frida.

Frida: Ah, your portrait!

Donna Matilda: No, no… look again; it's you, not I, there!

Di Nolli: Yes, it's quite true. I told you so, I…

Donna Matilda: But I would never have believed it!

(*Shaking as if with a chill*): What a strange feeling it gives one!

(*Then looking at her daughter*): Frida, what's the matter?

(*She pulls her to her side, and slips an arm round her waist*): Come: don't you see yourself in me there?

Frida: Well, I really…

Donna Matilda: Don't you think so? Don't you, really?

(*Turning to Belcredi*): . . Look at it, Tito! Speak up, man!

Belcredi (*without looking*): Ah, no! I shan't look at it. For me, a priori, certainly not!

Donna Matilda: Stupid! You think you are paying me a compliment!

(*Turing to Doctor Genoni*): What do you say, Doctor? Do say something, please!

The Doctor makes a movement to go near to the picture.

Belcredi (*with his back turned, pretending to attract his attention secretely*)… Hss! No, doctor!

For the love of Heaven, have nothing to do with it!

Doctor (*getting bewildered and smiling*): And why shouldn't I?

Donna Matilda: Don’t listen to him! Come here! He’s insufferable!

Frida: He acts the fool by profession, didn’t you know that?

Belcredi (*to the Doctor, seeing him go over*): Look at your feet, doctor! Mind where you’re going!

Doctor: Why?

Belcredi: Be careful you don’t put your foot in it!

Doctor (*laughing feebly*): No, no. After all, it seems to me there’s no reason to be astonished at the fact that a daughter should resemble her mother!

Belcredi: Hullo! Hullo! He’s done it now; he’s said it.

Donna Matilda (*with exaggerated anger, advancing towards Belcredi*): What’s the matter? What has he said? What has he done?

Doctor (*candidly*): Well, isn’t it so?

Belcredi (*answering the Marchioness*): I said there was nothing to be astounded at – and you are astounded! And why so, then, if the thing is so simple and natural for you now?

Donna Matilda (*still more angry*): Fool! fool! It’s just because it is so natural! Just because it isn’t my daughter who is there.

(*Pointing to the canvass*): That is my portrait; and to find my daughter there instead of me fills me with astonishment, an astonishment which, I beg you to believe, is

sincere. I forbid you to cast doubts on it.

Frida (*slowly and wearily*): My God! It's always like this… rows over nothing…

Belcredi (*also slowly, looking dejected, in accents of apology*): I cast no doubt on anything! I noticed from the beginning that you haven't shared your mother's astonishment; or, if something did astonish you, it was because the likeness between you and the portrait seemed so strong.

Donna Matilda: Naturally! She cannot recognize herself in me as I was at her age; while I, there, can very well recognize myself in her as she is now!

Doctor: Quite right! Because a portrait is always there fixed in the twinkling of an eye: for the young lady something far away and without memories, while, for the Marchioness, it can bring back everything: movements, gestures, looks, smiles, a whole heap of things…

Donna Matilda: Exactly!

Doctor (*continuing, turning towards her*): Naturally enough, you can live all these old sensations again in your daughter.

Donna Matilda: He always spoils every innocent pleasure for me, every touch I have of spontaneous sentiment! He does it merely to annoy me.

Doctor (*frightened at the disturbance he has caused, adopts a professorial tone*): Likeness, dear Baron, is often the result of imponderable things. So one explains that…

Belcredi (*interrupting the discourse*): Somebody will soon be finding a likeness between you and me, my dear professor!

Di Nolli: Oh! let's finish with this, please!

(*Points to the two doors on the Right, as a warning that there is someone there who may be listening*): We've wasted too much time as it is!

Frida: As one might expect when he's present (*alludes to Belcredi*):

Di Nolli: Enough! The doctor is here; and we have come for a very serious purpose which you all know is important for me.

Doctor: Yes, that is so! But now, first of all, let's try to get some points down exactly. Excuse me, Marchioness will you tell me why your portrait is here? Did you present it to him then?

Donna Matilda: No, not at all. How could I have given it to him? I was just like Frida then – and not even engaged. I gave it to him three or four years after the accident. I gave it to him because his mother wished it so much (*points to Di Nolli*)…

Doctor: She was his sister (*alludes to Henry IV*)?

Di Nolli: Yes, doctor; and our coming here is a debt we pay to my mother who has been dead for more than a month. Instead of being here, she and I (*indicating Frida*) ought to be traveling together…

Doctor:… taking a cure of quite a different kind!

Di Nolli: – Hum! Mother died in the firm conviction that her adored brother was just

about to be cured.

Doctor: And can't you tell me, if you please, how she inferred this?

Di Nolli: The conviction would appear to have derived from certain strange remarks which he made, a little before mother died.

Doctor: Oh, remarks!… Ah!… It would be extremely useful for me to have those remarks, word for word, if possible.

Di Nolli: I can't remember them. I know that mother returned awfully upset from her last visit with him. On her death-bed, she made me promise that I would never neglect him, that I would have doctors see him, and examine him.

Doctor: Um! Um! Let me see! let me see! Sometimes very small reasons determine… and this portrait here then?…

Donna Matilda: For Heaven's sake, doctor, don't attach excessive importance to this. It made an impression on me because I had not seen it for so many years!

Doctor: If you please, quietly, quietly…

Di Nolli: – Well, yes, it must be about fifteen years ago.

Donna Matilda: More, more: eighteen!

Doctor: Forgive me, but you don't quite know what I'm trying to get at. I attach a very great importance to these two portraits… They were painted, naturally, prior to the famous – and most regrettable pageant, weren't they?

Donna Matilda: Of course!

Doctor: That is… when he was quite in his right mind – that's what I've been trying to say. Was it his suggestion that they should be painted?

Donna Matilda: Lots of the people who took part in the pageant had theirs done as a souvenir…

Belcredi: I had mine done – as "Charles of Anjou !"

Donna Matilda:… as soon as the costumes were ready.

Belcredi: As a matter of fact, it was proposed that the whole lot of us should be hung together in a gallery of the villa where the pageant took place. But in the end, everybody wanted to keep his own portrait.

Donna Matilda: And I gave him this portrait of me without very much regret… since his mother… (*indicates Di Nolli*).

Doctor: You don't remember if it was he who asked for it?

Donna Matilda: Ah, that I don't remember… Maybe it was his sister, wanting to help out…

Doctor: One other thing: was it his idea, this pageant?

Belcredi (*at once*): No, no, it was mine!

Doctor: If you please…

Donna Matilda: Don’t listen to him! It was poor Belassi’s idea.

Belcredi: Belassi! What had he got to do with it?

Donna Matilda: Count Belassi, who died, poor fellow, two or three months after…

Belcredi: But if Belassi wasn’t there when…

Di Nolli: Excuse me, doctor; but is it really necessary to establish whose the original idea was?

Doctor: It would help me, certainly!

Belcredi: I tell you the idea was mine! There’s nothing to be proud of in it, seeing what the result’s been. Look here, doctor, it was like this. One evening, in the first days of November, I was looking at an illustrated German review in the club. I was merely glancing at the pictures, because I can’t read German. There was a picture of the Kaiser, at some University town where he had been a student… I don’t remember which.

Doctor: Bonn, Bonn!

Belcredi: – You are right: Bonn! He was on horseback, dressed up in one of those ancient German student guild-costumes, followed by a procession of noble students, also in costume. The picture gave me the idea. Already some one at the club had spoken of a pageant for the forthcoming carnival. So I had the notion that each of us should choose for this Tower of Babel pageant to represent some character: a king, an emperor, a prince, with his queen, empress, or lady, alongside of him – and all on horseback. The suggestion was at once accepted.

Donna Matilda: I had my invitation from Belassi.

Belcredi: Well, he wasn't speaking the truth! That's all I can say, if he told you the idea was his. He wasn't even at the club the evening I made the suggestion, just as he (*meaning Henry IV*) wasn't there either.

Doctor: So he chose the character of Henry IV?

Donna Matilda: Because I… thinking of my name, and not giving the choice any importance, said I would be the Marchioness Matilda of Tuscany.

Doctor: I… don't understand the relation between the two.

Donna Matilda: – Neither did I, to begin with, when he said that in that case he would be at my feet like Henry IV at Canossa.

I had heard of Canossa of course; but to tell the truth, I'd forgotten most of the story; and I remember I received a curious impression when I had to get up my part, and found that I was the faithful and zealous friend of Pope Gregory VII in deadly enmity with the Emperor of Germany. Then I understood why, since I had chosen to represent his implacable enemy, he wanted to be near me in the pageant as Henry IV.

Doctor: Ah, perhaps because…

Belcredi: – Good Heavens, doctor, because he was then paying furious court to her (*indicates the Marchioness*)! And she, naturally…

Donna Matilda: Naturally? Not naturally at all…

Belcredi (*pointing to her*): She couldn't stand him…

Donna Matilda: – No, that isn't true! I didn't dislike him. Not at all! But for me, when a man begins to want to be taken seriously, well…

Belcredi (*continuing for her*): He gives you the clearest proof of his stupidity.

Donna Matilda: No dear; not in this case; because he was never a fool like you.

Belcredi: Anyway, I've never asked you to take me seriously.

Donna Matilda: Yes, I know. But with him one couldn't joke (*changing her tone and speaking to the Doctor*): One of the many misfortunes which happen to us women, Doctor, is to see before us every now and again a pair of eyes glaring at us with a contained intense promise of eternal devotion.

(*Bursts out laughing*): There is nothing quite so funny. If men could only see themselves with that eternal fidelity look in their faces! I've always thought it comic; then more even than now. But I want to make a confession – I can do so after twenty years or more. When I laughed at him then, it was partly out of fear. One might have almost believed a promise from those eyes of his. But it would have been very dangerous.

Doctor (*with lively interest*): Ah! ah! This is most interesting! Very dangerous, you say?

Donna Matilda: Yes, because he was very different from the others. And then, I am… well… what shall I say?… a little impatient of all that is pondered, or tedious. But I was too young then, and a woman. I had the bit between my teeth. It would

have required more courage than I felt I possessed. So I laughed at him too – with remorse, to spite myself, indeed; since I saw that my own laugh mingled with those of all the others – the other fools – who made fun of him.

Belcredi: My own case, more or less!

Donna Matilda: You make people laugh at you, my dear, with your trick of always humiliating yourself. It was quite a different affair with him. There's a vast difference. And you – you know – people laugh in your face!

Belcredi: Well, that's better than behind one's back!

Doctor: Let's get to the facts. He was then already somewhat exalted, if I understand rightly.

Belcredi: Yes, but in a curious fashion, doctor.

Doctor: How?

Belcredi: Well, cold-bloodedly so to speak.

Donna Matilda: Not at all! It was like this, doctor! He was a bit strange, certainly; but only because he was fond of life: eccentric, there!

Belcredi: I don't say he simulated exaltation. On the contrary, he was often genuinely exalted. But I could swear, doctor, that he saw himself at once in his own exaltation. Moreover, I'm certain it made him suffer. Sometimes he had the most comical fits of rage against himself.

Doctor: Yes?

Donna Matilda: That is true.

Belcredi (*to Donna Matilda*): And why?

(*To the doctor*): Evidently, because that immediate lucidity that comes from acting, assuming a part, at once put him out of key with his own feelings, which seemed to him not exactly false, but like something he was obliged to valorize there and then as – what shall I say – as an act of intelligence, to make up for that sincere cordial warmth he felt lacking. So he improvised, exaggerated, let himself go, so as to distract and forget himself. He appeared inconstant, fatuous, and – yes – even ridiculous, sometimes.

Doctor: And may we say unsociable?

Belcredi: No, not at all. He was famous for getting up things: tableaux vivants, dances, theatrical performances for charity: all for the fun of the thing, of course. He was a jolly good actor, you know!

Di Nolli: Madness has made a superb actor of him.

Belcredi: – Why, so he was even in the old days. When the accident happened, after the horse fell…

Doctor: Hit the back of his head, didn’t he?

Donna Matilda: Oh, it was horrible! He was beside me! I saw him between the horse’s hoofs! It was rearing!

Belcredi: None of us thought it was anything serious at first. There was a stop in

the pageant, a bit of disorder. People wanted to know what had happened. But they'd already taken him off to the villa.

Donna Matilda: There wasn't the least sign of a wound, not a drop of blood.

Belcredi: We thought he had merely fainted.

Donna Matilda: But two hours afterwards…

Belcredi: He reappeared in the drawing-room of the villa… that is what I wanted to say…

Donna Matilda: My God! What a face he had. I saw the whole thing at once!

Belcredi: No, no! that isn't true. Nobody saw it, doctor, believe me!

Donna Matilda: Doubtless, because you were all like mad folk.

Belcredi: Everybody was pretending to act his part for a joke. It was a regular Babel.

Donna Matilda: And you can imagine, doctor, what terror struck into us when we understood that he, on the contrary, was playing his part in deadly earnest…

Doctor: Oh, he was there too, was he?

Belcredi: Of course! He came straight into the midst of us. We thought he'd quite recovered, and was pretending, fooling, like all the rest of us… only doing it rather better; because, as I say, he knew how to act.

Donna Matilda: Some of them began to hit him with their whips and fans and sticks.

Belcredi: And then – as a king, he was armed, of course – he drew out his sword and menaced two or three of us… It was a terrible moment, I can assure you!

Donna Matilda: I shall never forget that scene – all our masked faces hideous and terrified gazing at him, at that terrible mask of his face, which was no longer a mask, but madness, madness personified.

Belcredi: He was Henry IV, Henry IV in person, in a moment of fury.

Donna Matilda: He'd got into it all the detail and minute preparation of a month's careful study. And it all burned and blazed there in the terrible obsession which lit his face.

Doctor: Yes, that is quite natural, of course. The momentary obsession of a dilettante became fixed, owing to the fall and the damage to the brain.

Belcredi (*to Frida and Di Nolli*): You see the kind of jokes life can play on us.

To Di Nolli): You were four or five years old.

(*To Frida*) Your mother imagines you've taken her place there in that portrait; when, at the time, she had not the remotest idea that she would bring you into the world. My hair is already grey; and he – look at him – (*points to portrait*) – ha! A smack on the head, and he never moves again: Henry IV for ever!

Doctor (*seeking to draw the attention of the others, looking learned and imposing*):

– Well, well, then it comes, we may say, to this…

Suddenly the first exit to right, the one nearest footlights, opens, and Berthold enters all excited.

Berthold (*rushing in*): I say! I say!

Stops for a moment, arrested by the astonishment which his appearance has caused in the others.

Frida (*running away terrified*): Oh dear! oh dear! it’s he, it’s…

Donna Matilda (*covering her face with her hands so as not to see*): Is it, is it he?

Di Nolli: No, no, what are you talking about? Be calm!

Doctor: Who is it then?

Belcredi: One of our masqueraders.

Di Nolli: He is one of the four youths we keep here to help him out in his madness…

Berthold: I beg your pardon, Marquis…

Di Nolli: Pardon be damned! I gave orders that the doors were to be closed, and that nobody should be allowed to enter.

Berthold: Yes, sir, but I can’t stand it any longer, and I ask you to let me go away this very minute.

Di Nolli: Oh, you're the new valet, are you? You were supposed to begin this morning, weren't you?

Berthold: Yes, sir, and I can't stand it, I can't bear it.

Donna Matilda (*to Di Nolli excitedly*): What? Then he's not so calm as you said?

Berthold (*quickly*): – No, no, my lady, it isn't he; it's my companions. You say "help him out with his madness," Marquis; but they don't do anything of the kind. They're the real madmen. I come here for the first time, and instead of helping me…

Landolph and Harold come in from the same door, but hesitate on the threshold.

Landolph: Excuse me?

Harold: May I come in, my Lord?

Di Nolli: Come in! What's the matter? What are you all doing?

Frida: Oh God! I'm frightened! I'm going to run away.

Makes towards exit at Left.

Di Nolli (*restraining her at once*): No, no, Frida!

Landolph: My Lord, this fool here… (*indicates Berthold*).

Berthold (*protesting*): Ah, no thanks, my friends, no thanks! I'm not stopping here! I'm off!

Landolph: What do you mean – you're not stopping here?

Harold: He's ruined everything, my Lord, running away in here!

Landolph: He's made him quite mad. We can't keep him in there any longer. He's given orders that he's to be arrested; and he wants to "judge" him at once from the throne: What is to be done?

Di Nolli: Shut the door, man! Shut the door! Go and close that door!

Landolph goes over to close it.

Harold: Ordulph, alone, won't be able to keep him there.

Landolph: – My Lord, perhaps if we could announce the visitors at once, it would turn his thoughts. Have the gentlemen thought under what pretext they will present themselves to him?

Di Nolli: – It's all been arranged! (*To the Doctor*) If you, doctor, think it well to see him at once… .

Frida: I'm not coming! I'm not coming! I'll keep out of this. You too, mother, for Heaven's sake, come away with me!

Doctor: – I say… I suppose he's not armed, is he?

Di Nolli: – Nonsense! Of course not.

(*To Frida*): Frida, you know this is childish of you. You wanted to come!

Frida: I didn’t at all. It was mother’s idea.

Donna Matilda: And I’m quite ready to see him. What are we going to do?

Belcredi: Must we absolutely dress up in some fashion or other?

Landolph: – Absolutely essential, indispensable, sir. Alas! as you see... (*shows his costume*), there’d be awful trouble if he saw you gentlemen in modern dress.

Harold: He would think it was some diabolical masquerade.

Di Nolli: As these men seem to be in costume to you, so we appear to be in costume to him, in these modern clothes of ours.

Landolph: It wouldn’t matter so much if he wouldn’t suppose it to be the work of his mortal enemy.

Belcredi: Pope Gregory VII?

Landolph: Precisely. He calls him “a pagan.”

Belcredi: The Pope a pagan? Not bad that!

Landolph: – Yes, sir, – and a man who calls up the dead! He accuses him of all the diabolical arts. He’s terribly afraid of him.

Doctor: Persecution mania!

Harold: He’d be simply furious.

Di Nolli (*to Belcredi*): But there's no need for you to be there, you know. It's sufficient for the doctor to see him.

Doctor: – What do you mean?... I? Alone?

Di Nolli: – But they are there (*indicates the three young men*)...

Doctor: I don't mean that... I mean if the Marchioness...

Donna Matilda: Of course. I mean to see him too, naturally. I want to see him again.

Frida: Oh, why, mother, why? Do come away with me, I implore you!

Donna Matilda (*imperiously*): Let me do as I wish! I came here for this purpose!

(*To Landolph*) : I shall be "Adelaide," the mother.

Landolph: Excellent! The mother of the Empress Bertha. Good! It will be enough if her Ladyship wears the ducal crown and puts on a mantle that will hide her other clothes entirely.

(*To Harold*): Off you go, Harold!

Harold: Wait a moment! And this gentleman here (*alludes to the Doctor*)?...

Doctor: – Ah yes... we decided I was to be... the Bishop of Cluny, Hugh of Cluny!

Harold: The gentleman means the Abbot. Very good! Hugh of Cluny.

Landolph: – He’s often been here before!

Doctor (*amazed*): – What? Been here before?

Landolph: – Don’t be alarmed! I mean that it’s an easily prepared disguise…

Harold: We’ve made use of it on other occasions, you see!

Doctor: But…

Landolph: Oh no, there’s no risk of his remembering. He pays more attention to the dress than to the person.

Donna Matilda: That’s fortunate for me too then.

Di Nolli: Frida, you and I’ll get along. Come on Tito!

Belcredi: Ah no. If she (*indicates the Marchioness*) stops here, so do I!

Donna Matilda: But I don’t need you at all.

Belcredi: You may not need me, but I should like to see him again myself. Mayn’t I?

Landolph: Well, perhaps it would be better if there were three.

Harold: How is the gentleman to be dressed then?

Belcredi: Oh, try and find some easy costume for me.

Landolph (*to Harold*): Hum! Yes… he’d better be from Cluny too.

Belcredi: What do you mean – from Cluny?

Landolph: A Benedictine's habit of the Abbey of Cluny. He can be in attendance on Monsignor.

(*To Harold*): Off you go!

(*To Berthold*): And you too get away and keep out of sight all today. No, wait a bit!

(*To Berthold*): You bring here the costumes he will give you.

(*To Harold*): You go at once and announce the visit of the "Duchess Adelaide" and "Monsignor Hugh of Cluny." Do you understand?

(*Harold and Berthold go off by the first door on the Right*)

Di Nolli: We'll retire now. (*Goes off with Frida, left*):

Doctor: Shall I be a persona grata to him, as Hugh of Cluny?

Landolph: Oh, rather! Don't worry about that! Monsignor has always been received here with great respect. You too, my Lady, he will be glad to see. He never forgets that it was owing to the intercession of you two that he was admitted to the Castle of Canossa and the presence of Gregory VII, who didn't want to receive him.

Belcredi: And what do I do?

Landolph: You stand a little apart, respectfully: that's all.

Donna Matilda (*irritated, nervous*): You would do well to go away, you know.

Belcredi (*slowly, spitefully*): How upset you seem!…

Donna Matilda (*proudly*): I am as I am. Leave me alone!

Berthold comes in with the costumes.

Landolph (*seeing him enter*): Ah, the costumes: here they are. This mantle is for the Marchioness…

Donna Matilda: Wait a minute! I'll take off my hat.

Does so and gives it to Berthold.

Landolph: Put it down there!

(*Then to the Marchioness, while he offers to put the ducal crown on her head*): Allow me!

Donna Matilda: Dear, dear! Isn't there a mirror here?

Landolph: Yes, there's one there (*points to the door on the Left*). If the Marchioness would rather put it on herself…

Donna Matilda: Yes, yes, that will be better. Give it to me!

Takes up her hat and goes off with Berthold, who carries the cloak and the crown.

Belcredi: Well, I must say, I never thought I should be a Benedictine monk! By the way, this business must cost an awful lot of money.

The Doctor: Like any other fantasy, naturally!

Belcredi: Well, there's a fortune to go upon.

Landolph: We have got there a whole wardrobe of costumes of the period, copied to perfection from old models. This is my special job. I get them from the best theatrical costumers. They cost lots of money.

Donna Matilda re-enters, wearing mantle and crown.

Belcredi (*at once, in admiration*): Oh magnificent! Oh, truly regal!

Donna Matilda (*looking at Belcredi and bursting out into laughter*): Oh no, no! Take it off! You're impossible. You look like an ostrich dressed up as a monk.

Belcredi: Well, how about the doctor?

The Doctor: I don't think I look so bad, do I?

Donna Matilda: No; the doctor's all right… but you are too funny for words.

The Doctor: Do you have many receptions here then

Landolph: It depends. He often gives orders that such and such a person appear before him. Then we have to find someone who will take the part. Women too…

Donna Matilda (*hurt, but trying to hide the fact*): Ah, women too?

Landolph: Oh, yes; many at first.

Belcredi (*laughing*): Oh, that's great! In costume, like the Marchioness?

Landolph: Oh well, you know, women of the kind that lend themselves to…

Belcredi: Ah, I see! (*Perfidiously to the Marchioness*) Look out, you know he's becoming dangerous for you.

The second door on the right opens, and Harold appears making first of all a discreet sign that all conversation should cease.

Harold: His Majesty, the Emperor!

The two valets enter first, and go and stand on either side of the throne. Then Henry IV comes in between Ordulph and Harold, who keep a little in the rear respectfully.

Henry IV is about 50 and very pale. The hair on the back of his head is already grey; over the temples and forehead it appears blond, owing to its having been tinted in an evident and puerile fashion. On his cheek bones he has two small, doll-like dabs of colour, that stand out prominently against the rest of his tragic pallor. He is wearing a penitent's sack over his regal habit, as at Canossa. His eyes have a fixed look which is dreadful to see, and this expression is in strained contrast with the sackcloth.

Ordulph carries the Imperial crown; Harold, the sceptre with the eagle, and the globe with the cross.

Henry IV (*bowing first to Donna Matilda and afterwards to the doctor*): My lady… Monsignor…

(*Then he looks at Belcredi and seems about to greet him too; when, suddenly, he turns to Landolph, who has approached him, and asks him sotto voce and with diffidence*): Is that Peter Damiani?

Landolph: No, Sire. He is a monk from Cluny who is accompanying the Abbot.

Henry IV (*looks again at Belcredi with increasing mistrust, and then noticing that he appears embarrassed and keeps glancing at Donna Matilda and the doctor, stands upright and cries out*): No, it's Peter Damiani! It's no use, father, your looking at the Duchess.

(*Then turning quickly to Donna Matilda and the doctor as though to ward off a danger*) : I swear it! I swear that my heart is changed towards your daughter. I confess that if he (*indicates Belcredi*) hadn't come to forbid it in the name of Pope Alexander, I'd have repudiated her. Yes, yes, there were people ready to favour the repudiation: the Bishop of Mayence would have done it for a matter of one hundred and twenty farms.

(*Looks at Landolph a little perplexed and adds*): But I mustn't speak ill of the bishops at this moment!

(*More humbly to Belcredi*) : I am grateful to you, believe me, I am grateful to you for the hindrance you put in my way ! – God knows, my life's been all made of humiliations: my mother, Adalbert, Tribur, Goslar! And now this sackcloth you see me wearing!

(*Changes tone suddenly and speaks like one who goes over his part in a parenthesis of astuteness*): It doesn't matter: clarity of ideas, perspicacity, firmness and patience under adversity that's the thing.

(*Then turning to all and speaking solemnly*): I know how to make amend for the mistakes I have made; and I can humiliate myself even before you, Peter Damiani.

(*Bows profoundly to him and remains curved. Then a suspicion is born in him which he is obliged to utter in menacing tones, almost against his will*): Was it not perhaps you who started that obscene rumour that my holy mother had illicit relations with the Bishop of Augusta?

Belcredi (*since Henry IV has his finger pointed at him*): No, no, it wasn't I…

Henry IV (*straightening up*): Not true, not true? Infamy!

(*Looks at him and then adds*): I didn't think you capable of it!

(*Goes to the doctor and plucks his sleeve, while winking at him knowingly*) : Always the same, Monsignor, those bishops, always the same!

Harold (*softly, whispering as if to help out the doctor*): Yes, yes, the rapacious bishops!

The Doctor (*to Harold, trying to keep it up*): Ah, yes, those fellows… ah yes…

Henry IV: Nothing satisfies them! I was a little boy, Monsignor… One passes the time, playing even, when, without knowing it, one is a king. – I was six years old; and they tore me away from my mother, and made use of me against her without my knowing anything about it… always profaning, always stealing, stealing!… One greedier than the other… Hanno worse than Stephen! Stephen worse than Hanno!

Landolph (*sotto voce, persuasively, to call his attention*): Majesty!

Henry IV (*turning round quickly*): Ah yes… this isn't the moment to speak ill of the bishops. But this infamy against my mother, Monsignor, is too much.

(*Looks at the Marchioness and grows tender*): And I can't even weep for her, Lady… I appeal to you who have a mother's heart! She came here to see me from her convent a month ago… They had told me she was dead!

(*Sustained pause full of feeling. Then smiling sadly*) : I can't weep for her; because if you are here now, and I am like this (*shows the sackcloth he is wearing*), it means I am twenty-six years old!

Harold: And that she is therefore alive, Majesty!…

Ordulph: Still in her convent!

Henry IV (*looking at them*): Ah yes! And I can postpone my grief to another time.

(*Shows the Marchioness almost with coquetery the tint he has given to his hair*): Look! I am still fair…

(*Then slowly as if in confidence*): For you… there's no need! But little exterior details do help! A matter of time, Monsignor, do you understand me?

(*Turns to the Marchioness and notices her hair*): Ah, but I see that you too, Duchess… Italian, eh (*as much as to say "false"; but without any indignation, indeed rather with malicious admiration*)? Heaven forbid that I should show disgust or surprise! Nobody cares to recognize that obscure and fatal power which sets limits to our will. But I say, if one is born and one dies… Did you want to be born, Monsignor? I didn't! And in both cases, independently of our wills, so many things

happen we would wish didn't happen, and to which we resign ourselves as best we can!…

Doctor (*merely to make a remark, while studying Henry IV carefully*): Alas! Yes, alas!

Henry IV: It's like this: When we are not resigned, out come our desires. A woman wants to be a man… an old man would be young again. Desires, ridiculous fixed ideas of course – But reflect! Monsignor, those other desires are not less ridiculous: I mean, those desires where the will is kept within the limits of the possible. Not one of us can lie or pretend. We're all fixed in good faith in a certain concept of ourselves. However, Monsignor, while you keep yourself in order, holding on with both your hands to your holy habit, there slips down from your sleeves, there peels off from you like… like a serpent… something you don't notice: life, Monsignor!

(*Turns to the Marchioness*): Has it never happened to you, my Lady, to find a different self in yourself? Have you always been the same? My God! One day… how was it, how was it you were able to commit this or that action?

(*Fixes her so intently in the eyes as almost to make her blanch*) : Yes, that particular action, that very one: we understand each other! But don't be afraid: I shall reveal it to none. And you, Peter Damiani, how could you be a friend of that man?…

Landolph: Majesty!

Henry IV (*at once*): No, I won't name him!

(*Turning to Belcredi*): What did you think of him? But we all of us cling tight to our conceptions of ourselves, just as he who is growing old dyes his hair. What does it

matter that this dyed hair of mine isn't a reality for you, if it is, to some extent, for me? – you, you, my Lady, certainly don't dye your hair to deceive the others, nor even yourself; but only to cheat your own image a little before the looking-glass. I do it for a joke! You do it seriously! But I assure you that you too, Madam, are in masquerade, though it be in all seriousness; and I am not speaking of the venerable crown on your brows or the ducal mantle. I am speaking only of the memory you wish to fix in yourself of your fair complexion one day when it pleased you – or of your dark complexion, if you were dark: the fading image of your youth! For you, Peter Damiani, on the contrary, the memory of what you have been, of what you have done, seems to you a recognition of past realities that remain within you like a dream. I'm in the same case too: with so many inexplicable memories – like dreams! Ah!… There's nothing to marvel at in it, Peter Damiani! Tomorrow it will be the same thing with our life of today!

(*Suddenly getting excited and taking hold of his sackcloth*): This sackcloth here…

(*Beginning to take it off with a gesture of almost ferocious joy while the three valets run over to him, frightened, as if to prevent his doing so*)! Ah, my God!

(*Draws back and throws off sackcloth*): Tomorrow, at Bressanone, twenty-seven German and Lombard bishops will sign with me the act of deposition of Gregory VII! No Pope at all! Just a false monk!

Ordulph (*with the other three*): Majesty! Majesty! In God's name!…

Harold (*inviting him to put on the sackcloth again*): Listen to what he says, Majesty!

Landolph: Monsignor is here with the Duchess to intercede in your favor.

(*Makes secret signs to the Doctor to say something at once*).

Doctor (*foolishly*): Ah yes… yes… we are here to intercede…

Henry IV (*repeating at once, almost terrified, allowing the three to put on the sackcloth again, and pulling it down over him with his own hands*): Pardon… yes… yes… pardon, Monsignor: forgive me, my Lady… I swear to you I feel the whole weight of the anathema.

(*Bends himself, takes his face between his hands, as though waiting for something to crush him. Then changing tone, but without moving, says softly to Landolph, Harold and Ordulph*): But I don't know why I cannot be humble before that man there! (*indicates Belcredi*)

Landolph (*sottovoce*): But why, Majesty, do you insist on believing he is Peter Damiani, when he isn't, at all?

Henry IV (*looking at him timorously*): He isn't Peter Damiani?

Harold: No, no, he is a poor monk, Majesty.

Henry IV (*sadly with a touch of exasperation*): Ah! None of us can estimate what we do when we do it from instinct… You perhaps, Madam, can understand me better than the others, since you are a woman and a Duchess. This is a solemn and decisive moment. I could, you know, accept the assistance of the Lombard bishops, arrest the Pope, lock him up here in the castle, run to Rome and elect an anti-Pope; offer alliance to Robert Guiscard – and Gregory VII. would be lost! I resist the temptation; and, believe me, I am wise in doing so. I feel the atmosphere of our times and the majesty of one who knows how to be what he ought to be! a Pope! Do

you feel inclined to laugh at me, seeing me like this? You would be foolish to do so; for you don't understand the political wisdom which makes this penitent's sack advisable. The parts may be changed tomorrow. What would you do then? Would you laugh to see the Pope a prisoner? No! It would come to the same thing: I dressed as a penitent, today; he, as prisoner tomorrow! But woe to him who doesn't know how to wear his mask, be he king or Pope ! – Perhaps he is a bit too cruel! No! Yes, yes, maybe ! – You remember, my Lady, how your daughter Bertha, for whom, I repeat, my feelings have changed (*turns to Belcredi and shouts to his face as if he were being contradicted by him*) – yes, changed on account of the affection and devotion she showed me in that terrible moment… (*then once again to the Marchioness*)… you remember how she came with me, my Lady, followed me like a beggar and passed two nights out in the open, in the snow? You are her mother! Doesn't this touch your mother's heart? Doesn't this urge you to pity, so that you will beg His Holiness for pardon, beg him to receive us?

Donna Matilda (*trembling, with feeble voice*): Yes, yes, at once…

Doctor: It shall be done!

Henry IV: And one thing more!

(*Draws them in to listen to him*): It isn't enough that he should receive me! You know he can do everything – everything I tell you! He can even call up the dead.

(*Touches his chest*): Behold me! Do you see me? There is no magic art unknown to him. Well, Monsignor, my Lady, my torment is really this: that whether here or there (*pointing to his portrait almost in fear*) I can't free myself from this magic. I am a penitent now, you see; and I swear to you I shall remain so until he receives me. But you two, when the excommunication is taken off, must ask the Pope to do this thing

he can so easily do: to take me away from that (*indicating the portrait again*); and let me live wholly and freely my miserable life. A man can't always be twenty-six, my Lady. I ask this of you for your daughter's sake too; that I may love her as she deserves to be loved, well disposed as I am now, all tender towards her for her pity. There: it's all there! I am in your hands! (*Bows*): My Lady! Monsignor!

He goes off, bowing grandly, through the door by which he entered, leaving everyone stupefied, and the Marchioness so profoundly touched, that no sooner has he gone than she breaks out into sobs and sits down almost fainting.

Curtain

Summary

The action opens in the throne room of a secluded villa, furnished to reproduce the medieval court of the German Emperor Henry IV. Among the historical decorations stand two conspicuously modern portraits: one of the protagonist dressed as Henry IV and the other of the young Matilda Spina dressed as Matilda of Tuscany.

Four young men employed by the Marquis Charles Di Nolli serve as Henry's private counsellors. They live in costume and take the names Harold, Landolph, Ordulph and Berthold. The newly arrived Berthold immediately exposes the absurdity of the situation: he has prepared himself to serve Henry IV of France, only to discover that the man he must humour believes himself to be the medieval German emperor.

His companions explain the strange rules of the household. They must know enough medieval history to respond correctly whenever Henry addresses them, yet their existence is essentially theatrical. They possess the appearance of eleventh-century courtiers without the reality that once gave those roles meaning.

The portraits on the wall deepen this confusion between image and reality. To Henry they do not function simply as paintings: they preserve living images of himself and Matilda at the age they were when the masquerade that changed his life took place.

The old servant John announces the arrival of a group of visitors: the Marchioness Matilda Spina, her daughter Frida, the young Marquis Charles Di Nolli, Baron Tito Belcredi and Doctor Dionysius Genoni. Their purpose is to examine Henry's condition and consider whether anything can be done to cure him.

Matilda is immediately disturbed by the portrait of herself as a young woman. Her daughter Frida now closely resembles the image, making the passage of time painfully visible. The portrait has remained unchanged while Matilda herself has aged.

The visitors reconstruct the event that caused Henry's madness. Years earlier they had taken part in a historical pageant on horseback. The unnamed protagonist appeared as Henry IV, while Matilda represented Matilda of Tuscany. After falling from his horse and striking his head, he recovered consciousness believing that he really was the medieval emperor.

Doctor Genoni attempts to understand the illness scientifically. The others describe the protagonist's character before the accident, his attraction to Matilda and the rivalry with Belcredi. What had begun as a social masquerade became, after the fall, an identity from which Henry could no longer escape.

Before meeting him, the visitors themselves must enter his fiction. Matilda assumes the role of Adelaide, Doctor Genoni becomes Hugh of Cluny and Belcredi appears as a monk. The supposedly sane visitors therefore become actors inside the world

constructed for the supposed madman.

Henry finally enters. His appearance itself reveals the struggle against time: although he is now a middle-aged man, his face and hair are artificially altered so that he can continue to resemble the young emperor he believes himself to be.

During the encounter, his historical language repeatedly seems to contain personal meanings directed at Matilda and Belcredi. His remarks about age, memory, appearances and the fixed images people create of themselves disturb the visitors because they seem far more lucid than the speech of an ordinary madman.

By the end of the act Matilda is convinced that Henry has somehow recognised her. The encounter leaves unresolved the central question on which the drama now turns: where does his madness end, and where does conscious performance begin?

Analysis

Act I of *Henry IV* introduces the drama through a gradual descent into a world in which theatrical representation has become everyday reality. Before Henry himself appears, everything on stage already bears the mark of his identity: the room, the costumes, the servants, the portraits and the behaviour required of everyone around him.

A court that is already a theatre

The villa functions simultaneously as a home, a theatre and a prison. The four counsellors know perfectly well that they are modern men paid to impersonate medieval figures, and this awareness makes them different from the historical courtiers whose clothes they wear.

Landolph captures the paradox when he observes that they have the form without the content. The historical counsellors simply lived their lives; these modern men are conscious of performing theirs. Pirandello thus establishes the opposition between life and form before Henry even enters the stage.

Berthold and the spectator’s point of view

Berthold is essential to the opening because he is unfamiliar with the rules. His confusion allows the audience to discover the strange household with him.

His mistake about Henry IV of France also exposes the arbitrariness of the performance. Historical accuracy matters only because the actors must preserve a coherent reality for Henry. Their knowledge is therefore not scholarship for its own sake but part of an endless theatrical improvisation.

The portraits and frozen time

The two portraits are among the most important objects in the drama. They preserve Henry and Matilda as young people and therefore hold a moment of the past permanently still.

Frida’s resemblance to the young Matilda makes the passage of time visible. Matilda has grown older; her daughter has reached the age represented in the portrait. Henry, however, continues to inhabit the image of himself fixed on the wall.

From masquerade to identity

The original pageant was a temporary game in which everyone assumed a historical identity. The fall from the horse transformed that temporary mask into Henry’s

reality.

This is one of Pirandello’s central reversals: a costume normally worn for a few hours becomes a permanent form of existence. The character can no longer simply remove the mask when the performance is over.

Matilda, Belcredi and the lost past

The emotional conflict behind the philosophical drama becomes increasingly clear through Matilda and Belcredi. Henry once loved Matilda, while Belcredi was his rival. During the years in which Henry remained cut off from ordinary life, the relationship between Matilda and Belcredi continued to develop.

For them, time moved forward. For Henry, it apparently stopped. This difference between lived time and frozen time becomes one of the tragedy’s deepest wounds.

The Doctor and the limits of diagnosis

Doctor Genoni approaches Henry as a clinical problem. He tries to reconstruct the psychological conditions that existed before the accident and to explain how the shock of the fall fixed the historical identity in the patient’s mind.

Pirandello immediately complicates this explanation. Once Henry appears, the precision and ambiguity of his language suggest a consciousness that cannot easily be contained within a medical diagnosis.

The sane become actors

One of the strongest theatrical reversals occurs when Matilda, Belcredi and the

Doctor must put on costumes before they can meet Henry. The supposedly sane characters are forced to become performers in order to enter the reality of the supposed madman.

Henry therefore controls the stage before he has spoken a word. Everyone who enters his world must accept a role and play according to its rules.

Henry’s appearance

Henry’s body contradicts the role he performs. He has aged, while the historical figure in which he is fixed must remain young. The artificial treatment of his face and hair makes this contradiction visible.

The attempt to preserve the appearance of youth cannot stop biological time. The body continues to change beneath the mask, turning Henry himself into a living conflict between life and form.

Everyone becomes fixed in a form

Henry’s language gradually expands beyond his personal condition. He suggests that every human being becomes fixed in an image of himself and expects others to recognise that image as real.

His madness therefore begins to function as a philosophical lens. The distinction between Henry and the people who call themselves sane becomes less secure: he is visibly imprisoned in a role, but the others may also be imprisoned in identities they simply fail to recognise as roles.

An intentionally ambiguous ending

Act I refuses to resolve the question of Henry's sanity. His words belong to the medieval role he appears to inhabit, yet they also strike directly at the private lives and insecurities of the visitors.

Matilda leaves the encounter convinced that he recognised her. Pirandello therefore ends the act by turning the audience's original certainty into doubt: Henry may be mad, but his apparent madness seems capable of seeing the others with disturbing clarity.

Henry IV – Full text

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

Characters, Act I
Current page. The artificial medieval court, the arrival of the visitors and their first encounter with Henry IV reveal a world in which madness, theatre and reality are already inseparable.

▶ Act II
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.

◀ Introduction

Act II ▶

▶ Pirandello in English

If you would like to contribute, send your material, indicating whether and how you would like to be credited, to

collabora@pirandelloweb.com

Discover ShakespeareItalia too

Visite uniche: 2.226