Henry IV – Act III

David Patrick Kelly as Henry IV in *Henry IV* by Luigi Pirandello, directed by Karin Coonrod at the Loeb Drama Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in December 2001. Image reworked by PirandelloWeb.

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In Act III of *Henry IV*, Doctor Genoni's experiment turns the past into a frighteningly vivid presence. Frida takes the place of the young Matilda in the portrait, Henry is forced to confront the years he has lost, and the conflict with Belcredi drives the play toward its irreversible conclusion.

What began as a chosen mask becomes, by the end, a permanent necessity.

▶ **Summary** ▶ **Analysis**

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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.

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Henry reveals that he recovered his sanity years earlier and deliberately chose to continue living inside his role.

Act III
Current page. The Doctor's experiment brings the past back to life through Frida, while the confrontation with Belcredi ends in violence and makes Henry's mask permanent.

Versions in other languages

▶ **In Italiano – Enrico IV, Atto Terzo**
The original Italian text of the third 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 III

The throne room so dark that the wall at the bottom is hardly seen. The canvasses of the two portraits have been taken away; and, within their frames, Frida, dressed as the "Marchioness of Tuscany" and Charles Di Nolli, as "Henry IV," have taken the exact positions of the portraits. For a moment, after the raising of curtain, the stage is empty. Then the door on the left opens; and Henry IV, holding the lamp by the ring on top of it, enters. He looks back to speak to the four young men who, with John, are presumedly in the adjoining hall, as at the end of the second act.

Henry IV: No: stay where you are, stay where you are. I shall manage all right by myself. Good night!

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Closes the door and walks, very sad and tired, across the hall towards the second door on the right, which leads into his apartments.

Frida *(as soon as she sees that he has just passed the throne, whispers from the niche like one who is on the point of fainting away with fright)*: Henry…

Henry IV *(stopping at the voice, as if someone had stabbed him traitorously in the back, turns a terror-stricken face towards the wall at the bottom of the room; raising an arm instinctively, as if to defend himself and ward off a blow)*: Who is calling me?

(It is not a question, but an exclamation vibrating with terror, which does not expect a reply from the darkness and the terrible silence of the hall, which suddenly fills him with the suspicion that he is really mad.)

Frida (at his shudder of terror, is herself not less frightened at the part she is playing, and repeats a little more loudly): Henry!…

(But, although she wishes to act the part as they have given it to her, she stretches her head a little out of the frame towards the other frame.)

Henry IV gives a dreadful cry; lets the lamp fall from his hands to cover his head with his arms, and makes a movement as if to run away.

Frida *(jumping from the frame on to the stand and shouting like a mad woman)*: Henry!… Henry!… I'm afraid!… I'm terrified!…

And while Di Nolli jumps in turn on to the stand and thence to the floor and runs to Frida who, on the verge of fainting, continues to cry out, the Doctor, Donna Matilda, also dressed as "Matilda of Tuscany," Tito Belcredi, Landolph, Berthold and John enter the hall from the doors on the right and on the left. One of them turns on the light: a strange light coming from lamps hidden in the ceiling so that only the upper part of the stage is well lighted. The others without taking notice of Henry IV, who looks on astonished by the unexpected inrush, after the moment of terror which still causes him to tremble, run anxiously to support and comfort the still shaking Frida, who is moaning in the arms of her fiancé. All are speaking at the same time.

Di Nolli: No, no, Frida… Here I am… I am beside you!

Doctor *(coming with the others)*: Enough! Enough! There's nothing more to be done!…

Donna Matilda: He is cured, Frida. Look! He is cured! Don't you see?

Di Nolli *(astonished)*: Cured?

Belcredi: It was only for fun! Be calm!

Frida: No! I am afraid! I am afraid!

Donna Matilda: Afraid of what? Look at him! He was never mad at all!…

Di Nolli: That isn't true! What are you saying? Cured?

Doctor: It appears so. I should say so…

Belcredi: Yes, yes! They have told us so (pointing to the four young men):

Donna Matilda: Yes, for a long time! He has confided in them, told them the truth!

Di Nolli *(now in ore indignant than astonished)*: But what does it mean? If, up to a short time ago…

Belcredi: Hum! He was acting, to take you in and also us, who in good faith…

Di Nolli: Is it possible? To deceive his sister, also, right up to the time of her death?

Henry IV *(Remains apart, peering at one and now at the other under the accusation and the mockery of what all believe to be a cruel joke of his, which is now revealed. He has shown by the flashing of his eyes that he is meditating a revenge, which his violent contempt prevents him from defining clearly, as yet. Stung to the quick and with a clear idea of accepting the fiction they have insidiously worked up as true, he bursts forth at this point) :* Go on, I say! Go on!

Di Nolli *(astonished at the cry):* Go on! What do you mean?

Henry IV: It isn't your sister only that is dead!

Di Nolli: My sister? Yours, I say, whom you compelled up to the last moment, to present herself here as your mother Agnes!

Henry IV: And was she not your mother?

Di Nolli: My mother? Certainly my mother!

Henry IV: But your mother is dead for me, old and far away! You have just got down now from there (pointing to the frame from which he jumped down): And how do you know whether I have not wept her long in secret, dressed even as I am?

Donna Matilda *(dismayed, looking at the others)*: What does he say?

(Much impressed, observing him): Quietly! quietly, for Heaven's sake!

Henry IV: What do I say? I ask all of you if Agnes was not the mother of Henry IV?

(Turns to Frida as if she were really the Marchioness of Tuscany): You, Marchioness, it seems to me, ought to know.

Frida *(still frightened, draws closer to Di Nolli*): No, no, I don't know. Not I!

Doctor: It's the madness returning… . Quiet now, everybody!

Belcredi *(indignant)*: Madness indeed, doctor! He's acting again!…

Henry IV *(suddenly)*: I? You have emptied those two frames over there, and he stands before my eyes as Henry IV.. .

Belcredi: We've had enough of this joke now.

Henry IV: Who said joke?

Doctor *(loudly to Belcredi*): Don't excite him, for the love of God!

Belcredi *(without lending an ear to him, but speaking louder)*: But they have said so *(pointing again to the four young men)*, they, they!

Henry IV *(turning round and looking at them)*: You? Did you say it was all a joke?

Landolph *(timid and embarrassed*): No… really we said that you were cured.

Belcredi: Look here! Enough of this!

(To Donna Matilda): Doesn't it seem to you that the sight of him *(pointing to Di Nolli)*, Marchioness and that of your daughter dressed so, is becoming an intolerable puerility?

Donna Matilda: Oh, be quiet! What does the dress matter, if he is cured?

Henry IV: Cured, yes! I am cured!

(To Belcredi): Ah! but not to let it end this way all at once, as you suppose!

(Attacks him): Do you know that for twenty years nobody has ever dared to appear before me here like you and that gentleman *(pointing to the doctor)*?

Belcredi: Of course I know it. As a matter of fact, I too appeared before you this morning dressed…

Henry IV: As a monk, yes!

Belcredi: And you took me for Peter Damiani! And I didn't even laugh, believing, in fact, that…

Henry IV: That I was mad! Does it make you laugh seeing her like that, now that I am cured? And yet you might have remembered that in my eyes her appearance now…

(interrupts himself with a gesture of contempt) Ah!

(Suddenly turns to the doctor) : You are a doctor, aren't you?

Doctor: Yes.

Henry IV: And you also took part in dressing her up as the Marchioness of Tuscany? To prepare a counter-joke for me here, eh?

Donna Matilda *(impetuously)*: No, no! What do you say? It was done for you! I did it for your sake.

Doctor *(quickly)*: To attempt, to try, not knowing…

Henry IV *(cutting him short)*: I understand. I say counter-joke, in his case *(indicates Belcredi)*, because he believes that I have been carrying on a jest…

Belcredi: But excuse me, what do you mean? You say yourself you are cured.

Henry IV: Let me speak!

(To the doctor): Do you know, doctor, that for a moment you ran the risk of making me mad again? By God, to make the portraits speak; to make them jump alive out of their frames…

Doctor: But you saw that all of us ran in at once, as soon as they told us…

Henry IV: Certainly!

(Contemplates Frida and Di Nolli, and then looks at the Marchioness, and finally at his own costume): The combination is very beautiful… Two couples… Very good, very good, doctor! For a madman, not bad!…

(With a slight wave of his hand to Belcredi) : It seems to him now to be a carnival out of season, eh?

(Turns to look at him): We'll get rid now of this masquerade costume of mine, so that I may come away with you. What do you say?

Belcredi: With me? With us?

Henry IV: Where shall we go? To the Club? In dress coats and with white ties? Or

shall both of us go to the Marchioness' house?

Belcredi: Wherever you like! Do you want to remain here still, to continue – alone – what was nothing but the unfortunate joke of a day of carnival? It is really incredible, incredible how you have been able to do all this, freed from the disaster that befell you!

Henry IV: Yes, you see how it was! The fact is that falling from my horse and striking my head as I did, I was really mad for I know not how long…

Doctor: Ah! Did it last long?

Henry IV *(very quickly to the doctor)*: Yes, doctor, a long time! I think it must have been about twelve years.

(Then suddenly turning to speak to Belcredi): Thus I saw nothing, my dear fellow, of all that, after that day of carnival, happened for you but not for me: how things changed, how my friends deceived me, how my place was taken by another, and all the rest of it! And suppose my place had been taken in the heart of the woman I loved?… And how should I know who was dead or who had disappeared?… All this, you know, wasn't exactly a jest for me, as it seems to you…

Belcredi: No, no! I don't mean that if you please. I mean after…

Henry IV: Ah, yes? After? One day *(stops and addresses the doctor)* – A most interesting case, doctor! Study me well! Study me carefully (trembles while speaking)! All by itself, who knows how, one day the trouble here *(touches his forehead)* mended. Little by little, I open my eyes, and at first I don't know whether I am asleep or awake. Then I know I am awake. I touch this thing and that; I see

clearly again… Ah ! – then, as he says *(alludes to Belcredi)* away, away with this masquerade, this incubus! Let's open the windows, breathe life once again! Away! Away! Let's run out! *(Suddenly pulling himself up)*: But where? And to do what? To show myself to all, secretly, as Henry IV, not like this, but arm in arm with you, among my dear friends?

Belcredi: What are you saying?

Donna Matilda: Who could think it? It's not to be imagined. It was an accident.

Henry IV: They all said I was mad before.

(To Belcredi): And you know it! You were more ferocious than any one against those who tried to defend me.

Belcredi: Oh, that was only a joke!

Henry IV: Look at my hair! *(Shows him the hair on the nape of his neck)*:

Belcredi: But mine is grey too!

Henry IV: Yes, with this difference: that mine went grey here, as Henry IV, do you understand? And I never knew it! I perceived it all of a sudden, one day, when I opened my eyes; and I was terrified because I understood at once that not only had my hair gone grey, but that I was all grey, inside; that everything had fallen to pieces, that everything was finished; and I was going to arrive, hungry as a wolf, at a banquet which had already been cleared away…

Belcredi: Yes, but, what about the others?…

Henry IV *(quickly)*: Ah, yes, I know! They couldn't wait until I was cured, not even those, who, behind my back, pricked my saddled horse till it bled… .

Di Nolli *(agitated)*: What, what?

Henry IV: Yes, treacherously, to make it rear and cause me to fall.

Donna Matilda *(quickly, in horror)*: This is the first time I knew that.

Henry IV: That was also a joke, probably!

Donna Matilda: But who did it? Who was behind us, then?

Henry IV: It doesn't matter who it was. All those that went on feasting and were ready to leave me their scrapings, Marchioness, of miserable pity, or some dirty remnant of remorse in the filthy plate! Thanks! (Turning quickly to the doctor) : Now doctor, the case must be absolutely new in the history of madness; I preferred to remain mad – since I found everything ready and at my disposal for this new exquisite fantasy. I would live it – this madness of mine – with the most lucid consciousness; and thus revenge myself on the brutality of a stone which had dinted my head. The solitude – this solitude – squalid and empty as it appeared to me when I opened my eyes again – I determined to deck it out with all the colours and splendors of that far off day of carnival, when you (looks at Donna Matilda and points Frida out to her) when you, Marchioness, triumphed. So I would oblige all those who were around me to follow, by God, at my orders that famous pageant which had been – for you and not for me-the jest of a day. I would make it become-for ever – no more a joke but a reality, the reality of a real madness: here, all in masquerade, with throne room, and these my four secret counsellors: secret and, of course, traitors.

(He turns quickly towards them): I should like to know what you have gained by revealing the fact that I was cured! If I am cured, there's no longer any need of you, and you will be discharged! To give anyone one's confidence… that is really the act of a madman. But now I accuse you in my turn (turning to the others)! Do you know? They thought (alludes to the valets) they could make fun of me too with you.

Bursts out laughing.

The others laugh, but shamefacedly, except Donna Matilda.

Belcredi *(to Di Nolli)*: Well, imagine that… That's not bad…

Di Nolli *(to the four young men)*: You?

Henry IV: We must pardon them.

This dress *(plucking his dress)* which is for me the evident, involuntary caricature of that other continuous, everlasting masquerade, of which we are the involuntary puppets *(indicates Belcredi)*, when, without knowing it, we mask ourselves with that which we appear to be… ah, that dress of theirs, this masquerade of theirs, of course, we must forgive it them, since they do not yet see it is identical with themselves…

(Turning again to Belcredi) : You know, it is quite easy to get accustomed to it. One walks about as a tragic character, just as if it were nothing…

(Imitates the tragic manner) in a room like this… Look here, doctor! I remember a priest, certainly Irish, a nice-looking priest, who was sleeping in the sun one November day, with his arm on the corner of the bench of a public garden. He was

lost in the golden delight of the mild sunny air which must have seemed for him almost summery. One may be sure that in that moment he did not know any more that he was a priest, or even where he was. He was dreaming… A little boy passed with a flower in his hand. He touched the priest with it here on the neck. I saw him open his laughing eyes, while all his mouth smiled with the beauty of his dream. He was forgetful of everything… But all at once, he pulled himself together, and stretched out his priest's cassock; and there came back to his eyes the same seriousness which you have seen in mine; because the Irish priests defend the seriousness of their Catholic faith with the same zeal with which I defend the secret rights of hereditary monarchy! I am cured, gentlemen: because I can act the mad man to perfection, here; and I do it very quietly, I'm only sorry for you that have to live your madness so agitatedly, without knowing it or seeing it.

Belcredi: It comes to this, then, that it is we who are mad. That's what it is!

Henry IV *(containing his irritation)*: But if you weren't mad, both you and she *(indicating the Marchioness)* would you have come here to see me?

Belcredi: To tell the truth, I came here believing that you were the madman.

Henry IV *(suddenly indicating the Marchioness)*: And she?

Belcredi: Ah, as for her… I can't say. I see she is all fascinated by your words, by this conscious madness of yours.

(Turns to her): Dressed as you are *(speaking to her)*, you could even remain here to live it out, Marchioness.

Donna Matilda: You are insolent!

Henry IV *(conciliatingly)*: No, Marchioness, what he means to say is that the miracle would be complete, according to him, with you here, who – as the Marchioness of Tuscany, you well know, – could not be my friend, save, as at Canossa, to give me a little pity…

Belcredi: Or even more than a little! She said so herself!

Henry IV *(to the Marchioness, continuing)*: And even, shall we say, a little remorse!…

Belcredi: Yes, that too she has admitted.

Donna Matilda *(angry)*: Now look here…

Henry IV *(quickly, to placate her)*: Don't bother about him! Don't mind him! Let him go on infuriating me – though the doctor's told him not to.

(Turns to Belcredi): But do you suppose I am going to trouble myself any more about what happened between us – the share you had in my misfortune with her *(indicates the Marchioness to him and, pointing Belcredi out to her)*: the part he has now in your life? This is my life! Quite a different thing from your life! Your life, the life in which you have grown old – I have not lived that life.

(To Donna Matilda): Was this what you wanted to show me with this sacrifice of yours, dressing yourself up like this, according to the Doctor's idea? Excellently done, doctor! Oh, an excellent idea: – "As we were then, eh? and as we are now?" But I am not a madman according to your way of thinking, doctor. I know very well that that man there *(indicates Di Nolli)* cannot be me; because I am Henry IV, and have been, these twenty years, cast in this eternal masquerade. She has lived these

years *(indicates the Marchioness)*! She has enjoyed them and has become – look at her ! – a woman I can no longer recognize. It is so that I knew her *(points to Frida and draws near her)*! This is the Marchioness I know, always this one!… You seem a lot of children to be so easily frightened by me…

(To Frida): And you're frightened too, little girl, aren't you, by the jest that they made you take part in – though they didn't understand it wouldn't be the jest they meant it to be, for me? Oh miracle of miracles! Prodigy of prodigies! The dream alive in you! More than alive in you! It was an image that wavered there and they've made you come to life! Oh, mine! You're mine, mine, mine, in my own right!

(He holds her in his arms, laughing like a madman, while all stand still terrified. Then as they advance to tear Frida from his arms, he becomes furious, terrible and cries imperiously to his valets): Hold them! Hold them! I order you to hold them!

The four young men amazed, yet fascinated, move to execute his orders, automatically, and seize Di Nolli, the doctor, and Belcredi.

Belcredi *(freeing himself)*: Leave her alone! Leave her alone! You're no madman!

Henry IV *(In a flash draws the sword from the side of Landolph, who is close to him)*: I'm not mad, eh! Take that, you!…

Drives sword into him.

A cry of horror goes up. All rush over to assist Belcredi, crying out together.

Di Nolli: Has he wounded you?

Berthold: Yes, yes, seriously!

Doctor: I told you so!

Frida: Oh God, oh God!

Di Nolli: Frida, come here!

Donna Matilda: He’s mad, mad!

Di Nolli: Hold him!

Belcredi *(while they take him away by the left exit, he protests as he is borne out)*: No, no, you’re not mad! You’re not mad. He’s not mad!

They go out by the left amid cries and excitement. After a moment, one hears a still sharper, more piercing cry from Donna Matilda, and then, silence.

Henry IV *(who has remained on the stage between Landolph, Harold and Ordulph, with his eyes almost starting out of his head, terrified by the life of his own masquerade which has driven him to crime)*: Ah now… yes now… inevitably *(calls his valets around him as if to protect him)* here together… here together… for ever… for ever.

Curtain

Summary

The throne room is almost completely dark. The canvases of the two portraits have been removed, and Frida and Charles Di Nolli have taken their places inside the

frames, dressed exactly as the young Matilda of Tuscany and Henry IV appeared in the paintings. Doctor Genoni’s experiment is ready.

Henry enters the room alone, carrying a lamp. When Frida whispers his name from the darkness, he is seized by genuine terror. For a moment he fears that his madness has returned and that the portrait itself has come alive.

Frida, frightened by the effect of the scene, cries out. The others rush in, and the experiment collapses almost immediately. Matilda, Belcredi and the Doctor openly reveal that Henry has long been sane.

Di Nolli is shocked to learn that Henry has been acting for years. He cannot understand how such a deception could have been maintained even toward Henry’s own sister.

Henry refuses to allow the situation to be dismissed as a harmless joke. He insists that his twelve years of madness and the life he lost during them were entirely real, even if the role he later continued to play became deliberate.

He describes the moment when his sanity returned. The world had moved on without him: people had aged, relationships had changed, some had died and others had taken his place. He compares himself to a starving man arriving at a banquet after everything has already been cleared away.

Henry also reveals that his fall from the horse may not have been accidental. Someone, he says, had deliberately caused the animal to rear. Yet he no longer cares about identifying the culprit; what matters is the irreversible loss that followed.

After recovering, Henry chose to remain inside his medieval identity. The villa became the stage on which he could transform the temporary masquerade of the original pageant into a permanent reality and force everyone around him to participate in it.

He now claims to be sane precisely because he knows he is acting. In his view, the supposedly normal people around him are also trapped in roles, but unlike him they do not recognise their own masks.

The confrontation turns once more toward Matilda and the lost past. Henry refuses to identify the mature woman before him with the young woman preserved in the portrait. For him, Matilda's true image remains fixed in youth.

Frida, dressed as her mother once was, suddenly seems to embody that lost image. Henry moves toward her and attempts to claim her as if the past had returned to life.

Belcredi intervenes and openly challenges him, declaring that he is not mad. Henry seizes Landolph's sword and stabs Belcredi.

The act ends with the decisive reversal of the entire play. Until this moment Henry had chosen to continue playing the madman. After the attack on Belcredi, however, that role becomes his only protection. He must now remain Henry IV "by force."

Analysis

Act III brings the central themes of *Henry IV* to their most extreme consequences. The theatrical fiction that has structured the entire drama suddenly produces a real and irreversible act of violence.

The portraits come to life

Doctor Genoni's experiment depends on the two portraits that have dominated the play from the beginning. By removing the canvases and placing living people inside the frames, the Doctor attempts to collapse the distance between past and present.

Frida becomes not merely a young woman in costume but the living embodiment of Matilda's preserved image. The past appears to step physically out of the frame.

Henry's genuine terror

Henry's first reaction to Frida is crucial. Although he knows himself to be sane, the illusion is so powerful that he momentarily fears his madness has returned.

The man who has controlled the theatrical fiction for years suddenly becomes its victim. The others' performance destabilises the performer who believed himself to be its master.

The banquet already cleared away

Henry's account of his recovery reveals the deepest source of his tragedy. Regaining sanity did not restore the years he had lost.

His image of arriving hungry at a banquet that has already been cleared away expresses the cruelty of his situation: life has been consumed by others while he was absent from it.

The chosen madness

Henry's continued madness was therefore not simply deception. It was a conscious

strategy for surviving a present that no longer seemed to belong to him.

By remaining Henry IV, he could preserve a fixed form and compel everyone who entered the villa to accept the rules of his private world.

The masks of the sane

Henry's most radical claim is that he is not fundamentally different from the others. He knows he is playing a role; they also play roles, but believe those roles to be their true identities.

The difference between sanity and madness therefore becomes unstable. Consciousness of the mask may make Henry, paradoxically, more lucid than those who call him insane.

Frida and the impossible recovery of the past

Frida's resemblance to the young Matilda turns Henry's lost youth into something apparently tangible. She seems to offer the impossible possibility of recovering what time has destroyed.

But Frida is not the past. She is a living person in the present, and Henry's attempt to seize that image exposes the impossibility of turning memory back into life.

Belcredi as the rival who continued to live

Belcredi embodies everything Henry lost during his years of madness. He remained inside ordinary time, continued to live and became the man closest to Matilda.

His insistence on exposing Henry's performance destroys the protected boundary between the role and the man behind it.

The sword and the collapse of fiction

The sword belongs to the theatrical world of costumes and historical impersonation. But when Henry uses it against Belcredi, the result is real.

This is the decisive moment in which theatrical representation produces an irreversible consequence outside representation. The game can no longer simply end by removing the costumes.

"By force"

The final reversal is devastating. Henry had previously remained inside his role by choice. After attacking Belcredi, he can no longer safely step outside it.

The mask that once protected him from life becomes a prison. What had been voluntary performance turns into necessity, and the character of Henry IV becomes the only identity through which the protagonist can continue to exist.

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◀ **Act II**

▶ **Pirandello in English**

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