# 1922 – Henry IV – Drama in three acts

Claudia Cardinale e Marcello Mastroianni nel film *Henry IV* del 1984, diretto da Marco Bellocchio e tratto dall'opera di Luigi Pirandello. Immagine composita rielaborata da PirandelloWeb.

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**In *Henry IV*, Luigi Pirandello creates one of his most powerful dramas around madness, identity, time and the masks through which human beings attempt to give a fixed form to their lives. After years spent believing himself to be the medieval emperor Henry IV, the protagonist**

**recovers his sanity but deliberately chooses to remain inside the role, turning fiction into a refuge from a world that has continued without him.**

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## Henry IV – Work details

### WRITTEN
September–November 1921.

### FIRST PERFORMANCE
24 February 1922 – Teatro Manzoni, Milan, Ruggero Ruggeri's company.

### GENRE
Drama in three acts.

### ENGLISH TRANSLATION
**Edward Storer**, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1922.

## Versions in other languages

**▶ In Italiano – Enrico IV**
The original Italian version, with introduction, complete text, summary, analysis, audio and related material.

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

## Henry IV – Full text

**Introduction, Characters, Summary and Analysis**
Current page. Introduction to the drama, characters, plot, and detailed summary and analysis of the three acts.

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

**▶ Act II**
Henry reveals that he recovered his sanity years earlier and deliberately chose to continue playing his role.

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

## Introduction

The theme of living fully is also at the center of the tragedy *Henry IV*. Pirandello's vein found, perhaps, its most expressive form in his theatrical works.

It can be said, with good reason, that most of his narrative production (short stories and novels) was conceived in a scenic manner. The purely theatrical production would have flowed into the collection Maschere nude which brought together forty-three works.

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Different from D'Annunzio's contemporary theater marked by the seductive use of words, Pirandello's works stage Hamlets in bourgeois clothes, who philosophize about life, ask questions, search for a truth and often find themselves in a situation of failure. The abolition of the fourth wall, the curtain, involves the spectators within

the scenic fiction leading to the fusion of the audience with the stage.

*Henry IV* is Pirandello's most important drama together with *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, written in the same year, 1921. However, it was performed for the first time on February 24, 1922 at the Teatro Manzoni in Milan, immediately receiving critical acclaim, so much so that Renato Simoni wrote after the premiere: "The news […] is very happy: an audience sometimes surprised, sometimes intrigued, sometimes moved and exalted, and, after two or three scenes, completely won over. It was in all the spectators the awareness that they were attending a work that could be loved or not, but that, in any case, had an unusual value, a closed power, sometimes obscure, sometimes only flashing, often clarifying itself with a bold and yet terribly reasonable originality".

A drama, therefore, not simple, but brilliant, which immediately struck for the originality of the situation, for surprises, twists and suspense, in which appearance and reality mix in a mixture that does not let the audience understand until the end what the truth really is.

Translated into several languages, it soon achieved success in Europe and around the world, so much so that it attracted the interest of the new emerging art form, cinema, with the 1926 version.

In a letter from 1921, addressed to the actor Ruggero Ruggeri, Pirandello explained the background that was at the origin of the protagonist's alleged madness:

> "About twenty years ago, some young lords and ladies of the aristocracy decided to do for their own amusement, during Carnival time, a "costume ride" in a patrician villa: each of those lords had chosen a historical figure, a king or prince, to be depicted with his lady at his side, a queen or princess, on a horse

> caparisoned according to the customs of the time.
> One of these lords had chosen the character of Henry IV; and to represent him as best as possible, he had given himself the pain and torment of an extremely intense, meticulous and precise study, which had obsessed him for about a month".

At the Carnival party, Henry IV showed up in the company of his fiancée, who in turn impersonated Matilda of Canossa. Having fallen from a runaway horse due to Belcredi, his rival in love, after hitting his head, he fainted and woke up convinced that he was really the famous emperor. Then, his relatives supported the fiction, and even hired servants and pages to populate that villa transformed into a court. In the meantime, life went on for everyone. His fiancée Matilde, who had become Belcredi's lover, had a daughter named Frida.

Thus we understand the reasons why twenty years after the antecedents just told, the protagonist of the opera still appears on stage dressed in the costumes of Henry IV, the emperor of Germany who humiliated himself before Pope Gregory VII, in Canossa in 1077.

One day, his nephew Carlo di Nolli, Belcredi, Matilde, Frida and a doctor show up at the court with the plan to give Henry IV a shock that could bring him back to normality. The supposed madman has, in reality, already come to his senses for eight years, but he has decided to play a part, to pretend.

The audience only learns of this in the second act, when Henry IV is talking to the pages and reveals it to them. After years of madness, he has, therefore, recovered consciousness, realizing that for everyone life has continued, except for him who has crystallized in the form, static, not alive.

This is the plan to shock Henry IV. They want to make him believe that the ghost of Matilda of Canossa, embodied by Frida, materializes from the painting, in every way similar to how Henry IV's beloved was twenty years earlier. Henry IV first confesses his recovery, then stigmatizes as crazy the guests who came to him with that plan, finally stabs his rival in love Belcredi. At this point, to escape from prison, he chooses to play a part for life, that of the madman.

The work is complex and lends itself to multiple interpretations. Let's leave aside the metatheatrical hermeneutic reading to focus, in particular, on the similarity between life and theater typically Pirandello. The protagonist represents the emblem of the man who does not really live, but plays a part. Henry IV's attempt to eliminate his rival Belcredi documents the desire for annihilation of the one he has chosen for life, almost as if to indicate that it is impossible to truly live. Thus, theatre coincides with life, precisely because it is impossible for man to truly participate in the full flow of existence.

We all attend a spectaculum, we take part in it, perhaps even as protagonists, without, however, truly being autonomous in the decisions, which, for the most part, we suffer like the protagonist of the drama who finds himself in a form, without having been able to love the woman he would have wanted to marry. Henry IV "certainly does not kill a rival in a jealous contest, but his own degraded double, figure of that other possibility which is life enjoyed at the price of an unbearable decay" (E. Gioanola).

You may find yourself discovering that you have never lived. Henry IV exclaims to Belcredi, a few moments before killing him:

> "I (my hair) have gone gray here, me, as Henry IV, do you understand? And I hadn't even noticed! I noticed it one day by myself, all of a sudden, when I

> opened my eyes, and it was a fright, because I immediately understood that not only my hair, but everything had gone gray like that, and everything had collapsed, everything was over: and that I would arrive with a wolf's hunger at a banquet that had already been cleared away".

## The Characters

**Henry IV:** The main sufferer, he lives in a castle and has been assumed to be mad for many years. His delusion was that he was Henry IV of Germany, back in the eleventh century. After waking out of his madness, he decided to keep playing the role.

**The Marchioness Matilda Spina:** Also known as Donna Matilda, an older woman now, she used to be Henry IV's old flame, the woman he loved.

**Frida:** The daughter of the Marchioness Matilda Spina, she looks exactly like her mother did at her age. Henry IV feigns madness at the end and tries to kidnap her.

**Charles Di Nolli:** The young Marquis, engaged to marry Frida. He is the man who has been funding the counselors and the villa so that Henry IV is comfortable in his madness.

**Baron Tito Belcredi:** The current lover of the Marchioness Matilda Spina, he may be the person that stuck Henry IV's horse, thereby causing the fall that made Henry go mad. He is stabbed by Henry at the end of the play.

**Doctor Dionysius Genoni:** A physician who has gone along with the group in order to cure Henry IV; his plots instead almost end up making Henry IV go mad for real.

**Harold (Frank):** One of the valets or private counselors to Henry IV. As a counselor, he pretends to serve Henry IV and helps the guests assume the proper parts in order to maintain the pretense.

**Landolph (Lolo):** One of the valets or private counselors to Henry IV. As a counselor, he pretends to serve Henry IV and helps the guests assume the proper parts in order to maintain the pretense.

**Ordulph (Momo):** One of the valets or private counselors to Henry IV. As a counselor, he pretends to serve Henry IV and helps the guests assume the proper parts in order to maintain the pretense.

**Berthold (Fino):** One of the valets or private counselors to Henry IV, he is a new actor who has just been hired. As a counselor, he pretends to serve Henry IV and helps the guests assume their proper parts in order to maintain the pretense.

**John:** An old waiter who firmly believes the Henry IV is mad, the four valets and Henry IV allow him to continue believing that Henry is mad even after we learn that he is lucid.

## Summary and Analysis

### Summary and Analysis of Act I

Berthold has been newly hired to work as a counselor for Henry IV, a man who has gone mad and believes that he is Henry IV of Germany back in the 11th century. The other three couselors show Berthold around the throne room and make fun of his ignorance. It turns out that Berthold studied his history on the wrong Henry IV, but the others tell him it does not matter because they themselves are not always

sure of their roles. They promise to help him learn the proper material in order to play his role better. Harold points to the pictures of Henry IV and the Marchioness and asks Berthold if he knows who they are. Berthold is surprised to see the two modern painting in the middle of all the antiquity, and inquires about them. Landolph informs him that Henry IV pretends that the paintings are mirrors. A little frightened by the concept, Berthold worries that he might go mad if he stays and works in the castle.  Soon John enters, a man in twentieth century clothes, and informs them that the Marchioness has arrived along with several gentlemen and her daughter Frida. The other gentlemen turn out to be Belcredi, her current lover, Charles Di Nolli, her daughter's fiance, and a Dr. Genoni who does psychoanalysis. They arrive in the throne room and Donna Matilda immediately spots the painting on herself. She is astonished that the painting, done in her youth, looks exactly like her daughter does. Belcredi and the Doctor are not at all astonished that the daughter resembles her mother so much, but the others get mad at Belcredi when he points this out. It turns out that the painting was given to Henry IV about four years after the accident that made him go mad, as a gift from the Marchioness. The doctor starts to ask questions about the past in order to better analyze Henry's condition. He learns that Henry IV, Belcredi, and the Marchioness were all taking part in a pageant, dressed up for their parts. As a result, they all had the paintings done while in costume. After Henry IV fell from his horse and went mad, his sister (Di Nolli's mother) requested that Donna Matilda give her picture to him, which she did. The doctor then starts to learn about what happened at the pageant. Donna Matilda assumed the role of the Marchioness of Tuscany, thereby causing Henry IV to choose his role so as to be near her. He was courting her at the time, but he was so serious that she merely laughed at him when he approached her. Apparently it became a public affair, and the other men present laughed at him as well. Belcredi then informs the doctor that Henry IV used to be the type of man that would let himself go when playing a role, able to forget his real self in the process. After the

accident, where Henry fell from his horse and hit his head, they took him to a villa. As a joke, the other actors continued playing their roles when he woke up. It was only a few moments later that they realized while still wearing their masks that Henry IV was no longer wearing a mask, but playing his role in deadly earnest. Belcredi laughs and points out to them that Di Nolli was only a child at the time, and that he and Donna Matilda have gotten old over the years, whereas Henry IV is permanently fixed in time. Berthold rushes into the room, surprising them all. He has managed to get Henry IV mad at him, and as a result Harold and Landolph propose that the guests visit Henry IV in order to make him forget about Berthold. They agree, and costumes are soon brought for them. After they get dressed, Henry IV enters and looks at them. He first calls Belcredi “Peter Damiani” and pretends that they are who they are dressed up to be. However, he soon digresses and remarks on the fact that it is much easier to go through life having everything fixed rather than not knowing what will happen. He also comments on the fact that being Henry IV is his reality, whereas they see him as someone pretending to be Henry IV. After his speech, he starts to act mad and pretends that he is really Henry IV. Historically, Henry IV fought with Pope Gregory VII and was excommunicated, and as a result he was forced to crawl into Rome and beg forgiveness. Henry IV asks to be allowed to meet the Pope. He is further convinced that the Pope is using magic against him, magic that has made him eternally twenty-six years old, the same age as in the portrait. Henry IV therefore begs the doctor and Donna Matilda to intercede with the Pope on his behalf. He bows grandly and exits, leaving Donna Matilda in a state of tears.

**Analysis**

Henry IV is a play concerned with the concept of a mask on a face. This concept has many different interpretations and is elaborated on in several ways. Foremost the

mask is worn by the sufferer to keep out prying eyes. The mask also serves to fix oneself in time; by choosing an historical character Henry IV is able to live out his life at the same age. The mask also deals with the merger of actor and character, such as when Henry IV took off his mask but still believed he was Henry IV: “I shall never forget that scene – all our masked faces hideous and terrified gazing at him, at that terrible mask on his face, which was no longer a mask, but madness, madness personified.” This quote fits in well with many of Pirandello’s beliefs. Donna Matilda is describing the masquerade right after Henry IV woke up, where everyone else is wearing a mask except Henry. Because he is not wearing a mask, he is accused of being mad. What Pirandello is saying is that madmen tell the truth, but it is a truth that no one else wants to hear. Thus, society forces people to wear masks in order to conform. When Henry IV emerges without a mask, he is more terrifying to the others because he finally free of the inhibiting masks that they wear. One of the themes of this play is the exploration of ways to fixate time. There are three ways shown to fix oneself in time: you can become an actor and identify yourself with history, become a portrait as in the pictures of Henry IV and the Marchioness, or you can go mad. Identifying yourself with history has the advantage that your role in time is pre-ordained. You are thus able to go through life without ever having to make a decision, a desire that Pirandello believes many people have. Becoming a portrait also stops time, “Because a portrait is always there fixed in the twinkling of an eye”, as the Doctor explains. The third method is to go mad. By going mad you are able to act any way that you wish, essentially freeing yourself from the constraints of both time and society. Madness is further appealing because of the idea the consciousness demands coherence and form, both of which are ruined by changing time. It is therefore necessary to be mad in order to be conscious in this sense, because only through madness can you effectively stop time and formulate the necessary coherence and form. Henry IV has clearly done this by creating a role everything fits into a coherent historical period and where

events are pre-formed. Henry's revenge here is that when he wakes up out of his madness, he chooses to continue acting. This forces others to act with him; it his method of making the others go mad in order to humor him. By drawing people into his own world, Henry is able to exercise absolute power over them. He prefers this to the real world where shifting time means that there is never an absolute moment of control. The arrival of Berthold is meant to provide the exposition for us. Notice that Berhold is used to call attention to the two large paintings. These paintings represent both the fixed and moving time, fixed in terms of the images they represent, but moving in terms of the fact that the people they represent are now older (notice that Henry IV has died his hair). "[The paintings] are images such as…well- such as a mirror might throw back." Thus the portraits are a way to see yourself caught in time. They make you younger and allow you to deny time. Henry IV is convinced the paintings are a magic trick of the Pope's; he wants to be free from always appearing at the same age. The question of the real self emerges quite early in this act. Landolph tells Berthold: "We don't any of us know who we are really." He is alluding to the fact that they are all playing other roles, shown through the use of two separate names for each of them. This calls into question the real self, forcing us to realize that they are just as real when acting as counselors or when acting as valets.

**Summary and Analysis of Act II**

Belcredi and the Doctor are engaged in a discussion concerning Henry IV's madness. The Doctor tries to argue that Henry is able to recognize that they are faking their roles, but that his madness makes him believe it is real. Donna Matilda disagrees, claiming that Henry IV clearly recognized her. Both the Doctor and Belcredi argue that it is not possible for him to have been lucid, but she refuses to back down. The Doctor has planned a risky trick in order to snap Henry IV out of his madness and back into sanity. They are waiting for Di Nolli and Frida to return so

that Frida can wear an old dress of her mother's, the same dress that is worn in the portrait. Finally Frida walks in wearing the dress; she is the spitting image of the portrait. Belcredi criticizes the Doctor's plan, which involves making the mother and daughter stand next to each other in similar attire, claiming that it will ruin Henry IV's mind to be so violently pulled out of his delirium. Landolph arrives and asks them to stand before Henry IV again in order to convince him that the Pope is willing to receive him. Donna Matilda and the Doctor agree and enter Henry's room. Belcredi remains behind and tells Di Nolli that he cannot understand why the phychologists take degrees in medicine when they never cure anyone. He thinks that a law degree would make more sense. While peaking through the keyhole, Belcredi sees the Doctor and Donna Matilda returning along with Henry IV. He, Frida, and Di Nolli rush out of the room. Henry enters, continuing a conversation he started in the previous room. He then takes Donna Matilda aside and asks her if she loves her daughter, causing her to become confused about whether he is speaking out of madness or in reality. He further tells her to have her daughter, his wife (she is pretending to be his "wife's" mother), come and visit him at his castle. Once Donna Matilda and the Doctor leave, Henry IV says, "Buffoons, buffoons! One can play any tune on them!" He turns to his counselors and tells them that he is not mad, but merely pretending to be mad. He calls them by their real names, thereby convincing them that he is completely lucid. Henry argues that society labels certain men "mad" because it cannot bear to hear the truths that madmen tell. The counselors gradually grow used to the fact that he is speaking coherently, and Henry finally asks them why they never stopped to realize that they had the perfect life, the life of living in a pre-ordained dream with foreknowledge of the ending. John, the old servant, arrives in order to take dictation from Henry. Ordolph wants to play a joke on him, but Henry insists on acting his part because he does not want to dissappoint John, who cares deeply about helping him.

**Analysis**

An interesting feature of this play is that Pirandello speaks out against the Doctor on several occasions. This is probably due to his personal experience with his wife's madness. Belcredi offers us Pirandello's opinion: "I say, I've never understood why they take degrees in medicine." When asks what he means, Belcredi claims that law degrees would be more suitable. He continues by saying that the more the doctors claim they cannot perform miracles, the more people believe in their abilities. The irony is that a miracle is exactly what is needed. One of the more interesting passages occurs after Donna Matilda and the Doctor leave for the second time. Henry remarks, "And you [the valets] are amazed that I tear off their ridiculous masks now, just as if it wasn't I who had made them mask themselves." He is referring to his ability to not only make the other characters wear masks for him, but also to his sense of being able to peer through all masks. Henry IV states that he is a madman because he is aware of the mask that he wears, whereas everyone else is merely mad because they are not aware of their own masks. This definition of madmen as men who tell the truth is a continuation of the first act. "Because it's impossible to hear [madmen] speak!" Henry IV is claiming that madmen are labeled mad so that other men can shut them up and not have to listen to them. This is directly related to the fear with which the people present at the masquerade realize that Henry is no longer wearing a mask the way they are. Masks and telling the truth are oppositions; Henry is only able to tell the truth by pretending to be mad. The action of making the valets get a lamp rather than turn on the electric light is important. "No, it would blind me!" Henry is actually afraid that the electric light would dazzle him by returning him to the real world. He is unequipped to deal with reality, a fact that he later admits as the reason for choosing to feign madness for over eight years. Pirandello introduces the concept of the variability of truth in this act. He does this by having John appear. When John the monk arrives, Henry convinces the other valets to pretend everything is "true", when of course it is all

fake. This is a form of meta-theater, where they are acting that they are acting for John. The truth thus becomes different for each character on the stage, making it impossible for any one character to know what is real.

**Summary and Analysis of Act III**

The pictures have been removed from the throne room and Frida and Di Nolli have replaced them, with Frida pretending to be the Marchioness and Di Nolli pretending to be Henry IV. Henry IV enters the room, preparing to go to bed. Frida calls out, “Henry!”, causing him to become terror-stricken and think that he is really mad. However, Frida’s courage soon gives out and she screams that she is frightened, causing the others to run in and help her. They have been told by the counselors that Henry has been cured. Henry is furious about the deception and the fact that the Doctor’s plot nearly drove him mad again. In order to get some revenge on them, he chooses to pretend that Di Nolli and Frida are in fact the characters they are dressed up to be. Belcredi intimates that Henry is again faking it, and finally Henry asks him what he should do now that he is cured. He tries to make Belcredi understand that there is nothing for him to do in the real world since he has lost twenty years of his life by living in the castle. Henry tells them that after falling from his horse he was really mad for about twelve years. When he woke up, he realized that he knew nothing of the outer world, and that he had lost his love, had his friends deceive him, and been replaced. He accuses some of his former friends of having pricked his horse, thereby causing it to rear and cause his fall. Henry IV then turns to the Doctor and says that he must be a completely new case for the Doctor to study: a man who chooses to remain mad.

Henry tells them a story about an Irish priest who fell asleep in the sun one day on a park bench. He was dreaming, and when a young boy walked by and brushed his cheek with a flower, the priest woke up, but still looked happy and forgetful of everything around him. Suddenly he straightened up and the look of seriousness

returned to his face. Henry then compares his acting the part of Henry IV for all these years with the Irish priest acting his part. He concludes that it is really the other people, such as Belcredi and Donna Matilda, who are mad because they wear a mask everyday but do not realize it. Henry claims that he is not a madman as they understand madmen, since he can recognize the different realities in which he plays a role. He points to Donna Matilda and tells her that she has lived a different reality from his, and is no longer recognizable in his reality, that of Henry IV. Turning to Frida, Henry informs her that she is part of his reality, that she is his. He takes hold of her and hugs her, laughing like a madman. When the others start to approach him to free Frida, he order the valets to restrain them. Belcredi breaks free of them and lunges towards Henry, who has drawn his sword. Henry stabs Belcredi, mortally wounding him, and the others carry him offstage. After a sharp cry from Donna Matilda, meant to signify Belcredi's death, Henry gathers the valets around him and tells them, "here we are…together…for ever!"

**Analysis**

The Doctor's climax and ruse turns out to be unnecessary. However, the ruse does have the effect of almost driving Henry mad again. Immediately thereafter Henry talks about the past. This is his way of making an effort to contain time. His fight at the end is fundamentally an effort to avoid a reality where time is flowing. Seeing Frida is in a sense a miracle because she is "resurrected" for him out of his past. Henry's preference for absolute time makes him seize her at the end; he is essentially seizing frozen time. When Henry IV kills Belcredi, there is a subtle shift in his behavior. He uses the valets for protection, thereby isolating himself in his masquerade of madness. If is now apparent that the murder of Belcredi will force him to be forever caught in his masquerade of madness. The story of the Irish priest is important in its relation to the concept of masks on face. Henry is trying to explain that the priest had removed his mask for a second, dreamily staring out into

space and smiling. However, once he caught himself he immediately put his mask back on. Henry's point is that he is similar to a priest in that he has chosen his mask and wears it diligently. The difference lies in the fact that Henry is completely aware of his mask, whereas the priest was not. The Doctor's ruse again invokes the concept of variable truths. He creates a double image, a young Henry IV and Marchioness and an old Henry IV and Marchioness. Although unaware of it, the Doctor has really done nothing more than create two false realities. Henry elucidates this when he acknowledges that he immediately knew Di Nolli was not Henry IV, because he himself is Henry IV. However, since both he and Donna Matilda have changed due to time, even they are no longer the real representations of the portraits. This again challenges our sense of reality as created in a world where time is flowing. In many ways, Pirandello is saying that a stage reality is more real than the "real" world.

**Henry IV – Full text**

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

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

**▶ Pirandello in English**

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