



Henry IV: Followed by "The License" (Italice Renaissance and Modern Plays)

Luigi Pirandello

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Luigi Pirandello's "Henry IV" opened to general acclaim at the Teatro Manzoni in Milan on February 24, 1922, less than a year after his revolutionary theatrical achievement, "Six Characters in Search of an Author." The title of the later play suggests a historical drama, recalling Shakespeare's great history plays. Yet "Henry IV" is instead anti-historical in that it "plays with" history, presenting historical events not as sequential and true, but as simultaneous and as an imaginary refuge. Henry IV (whose real name is not given) lives in a fake medieval castle where everyone must wear the costume of a historical figure. He is a twentieth-century Italian aristocrat whose madness traps him in the role of the Holy Roman Emperor, the German Henry IV, who reigned from 1056 until 1105. Numerous comparisons have been made between Pirandello's "Henry IV" and Shakespeare's "Hamlet." The affinities between their protagonists include madness, along with the pretense of madness, involving a consummate theatricality. Like other "mad" Pirandello characters, the man consumed by the role of Emperor Henry IV has been judged to be insane by a society that he judges to be insane. Madness, for Pirandello, can reveal a particular lucidity that gives access to truths not evident to "normal" people. Pirandello's one-act play "The License" ("La Patente," 1918), displays an earlier version of this theme. Its main character, Rosario Chiachiaro, may be mad or pretending to be mad as he also dons a costume and prepares to play a role for the rest of his life, the role of a purveyor of the "evil eye" — his means of self defense against a society consumed by hypocrisy and superstition. — "After the brilliant translation of "Six Characters in Search of an Author," Mary Ann Witt and Martha Witt return to Pirandello with yet a bigger challenge: translating the complex play "Henry IV" and placing it next to "The License," a much less performed work. The insightful and original introduction well supports this coupling, which is based on the theme of madness, so central in Pirandello's production. An absolute must read for understanding Pirandello's work." — Daniela Bini, University of Texas, Austin — "At once elegant and absorbing, subversive and vibrant, this superb translation of Pirandello's story of the bankruptcy of reason and of the seemingly pointlessness of life, is truly one ripping good read. Catching the humor of a desperately moving journey of self-invention and unpredictability, the translators skillfully succeed in bringing out Pirandello's bleak and yet life-affirming creation of alternative worlds in a drama that — just like the short one-act play that accompanies it — tells us much about the human condition and the society's role in policing it." — Valeria Finucci, Duke University A new English translation with introduction, notes and bibliography.

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