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(ITALICA RENAISSANCE AND MODERN
PLAYS) BY LUIGI PIRANDELLO**



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About the Author

Luigi Pirandello was born on June 28, 1867 in Kaos, near Agrigento in Sicily, where his father owned sulfur mines. He left Sicily to study in Rome and eventually completed a doctorate in linguistics at the University of Bonn in 1891 with a dissertation on the dialect of his home town. He initiated his writing career as a poet. In 1894 he married Antonietta Portulano, the daughter of one of his father's colleagues. The couple settled in Rome, where Pirandello became acquainted with other writers. He began to write short stories — eventually hundreds of them — and to adapt some of them for the stage. In 1903 the failure of the family sulfur mines caused severe financial problems for Pirandello, his wife, and their three children Fausto, Stefano, and Lietta. Antonietta began to suffer from severe mental problems from which she never recovered, and she was eventually placed in an institution. Needing to work, Pirandello taught at the Magistero, or normal school. He published his first — still his best-known — novel, "The Late Mattia Pascal," in 1904 and an important theoretical essay, "On Humor," in 1908. His early plays such as "Sicilian Limes" and "Liola" explore the Sicilian mentality and culture, contrasting it with those of the mainland. His period as a major dramatist began with "Right You Are (If You Think So)" in 1916 and culminated with his two greatest plays, "Six Characters in Search of an Author" (1921 and 1925) and "Henry IV" (1922), now both newly edited and translated by Martha Witt and Mary Ann Frese Witt and published by Italica Press. A member of the Fascist Party as early as 1923, Pirandello hoped that Mussolini would support the Teatro d'Arte, which he began to direct in 1925, staging his own plays, some foreign plays, and the works of contemporary Italian dramatists, including Massimo Bontempelli. Il Duce, however, although expressing interest in his work, never gave financial support and the experimental company disbanded in 1928. Despite this disappointment and other disagreements with Mussolini, Pirandello remained a loyal fascist until his death. Pirandello was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1934 for his "bold and brilliant renovation of the drama and the stage." His plays are still regarded as groundbreaking and a major influence on modernist and postmodernist theater. He died in Rome on December 10, 1936.

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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.

- Sales Rank: #306750 in Books
- Published on: 2015-11-24
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x .30" w x 5.50" l, .35 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 118 pages

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