

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## **Into the Green Suit: A Caricature of Gentrification in Munday and Chettle's Huntington Plays**

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Anthony Munday's Robin Hood plays – co-authored by Henry Chettle<sup>1</sup> – are almost univocally reduced to the 'gentrification' of Robin Hood and, consequently, accused of conservative complicity in stripping the legend of its radical potential. However, close readings of *The Downfall of Robert, the Earl of Huntington* (1598) and its sequel *The Death* of the aforementioned (1598) reveal that there is much more to the plays than its detractors allow for. While neither *The Downfall* nor *The Death* can be counted unmitigated triumphs in terms of dramatic structure, they are notable for high levels of theatrical self-awareness: far from naturalizing an aristocratic Robin, the plays make the point that one can *play* Robin Hood – with varying degrees of success – but never *be* him; they also deliberately create moments of farce which subvert the ostensible moral of the plays and in general reflect negatively on the potential for political and personal betterment, presenting characters bogged down by selfishness, lust, and lethargy. In what follows I hope to demonstrate that, contrary to expectation, Munday and Chettle's plays do not historicize, nor naturalize, nor yet aggrandize Robin Hood. Instead, both plays

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<sup>1</sup> There is a tradition in Robin Hood studies of ascribing the frame narrative to Chettle, the play itself to Munday. However, the exact nature of the collaboration between Munday and Chettle remains unknown. Cf. M. A. Nelson, 'The Earl of Huntington: The Renaissance Plays', in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), pp. 99-121 (p. 106). Moreover, the frame is thematically integral to the plays, establishing and continuously reinforcing ideas prevalent throughout the *Downfall* and, to a lesser extent, the *Death*.

employ meta-theatrical devices, humor, farce, and a good measure of cynicism to undermine the character's much lamented 'ennoblement'.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of 'playing' saturates the first of the plays, *The Downfall*, in particular: the entire production purports to be the dress rehearsal for a Robin Hood play penned by poet John Skelton for the entertainment of King Henry VIII. Skelton – who is popularly known for his comic verse though never, as far as can be ascertained, produced a Robin Hood play – appears as a character in *The Downfall*, instructing the actors and taking on the role of Friar Tuck himself. In his role as Tuck, Skelton occasionally erupts into wild streams of 'skeltonic' verse until stopped by courtier Sir John Eltham. Eltham himself plays Little John and has brought his own 'greene sute' for the purpose.<sup>3</sup> Ever interested in the staging of the material, Eltham steps out of his role more than halfway through the play to ask Skelton about the absence from the production of 'jests' and 'merry morrises' commonly associated with the popular Robin Hood, an absence which Skelton explains with his courtly and refined approach to the material.<sup>4</sup> While the frame story of the court performance is much pared down in the *Death*, there are some notable remnants still in place. Opening the show, a somewhat disorganized Skelton admits to having 'wholly forgot / The course of our plot',<sup>5</sup> before throwing on his costume, bowing for the audience, and very briefly recapitulating the final moments of the previous play.

It is not only the metatheatrical frame story, however, which flaunts the fictionality of Robin Hood. Alongside plot-convenient reversals of fortune, bizarre disguise plots, and moments of ludicrous physical comedy, it is the transformation of Earl Robert into Robin Hood and that of his beloved Matilda into Maid Marian which most sustains the plays' metatheatrical theme. Earl Robert is presented, not as an aristocratic woodland renegade but as an earl, down on his luck, who opts to play Robin Hood, yet pathetically fails to fill the role. Matilda's transformation into Marian is a similarly abrupt and artificial process and nothing good comes of it. This portrayal of the main characters belies the widespread notion that Munday and Chettle took on an untamed popular legend only to

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<sup>2</sup> Some 'aristocratizing' trends precede Munday. Following in the wake of the chroniclers Andrew of Wyntoun, Walter Bower, and John Major – whose accounts make mention of Robin Hood – Richard Grafton's *Chronicle at Large* (1569) refers to an aristocratic Robin Hood who is outlawed for debt and dies in a bloodletting incident at a Yorkshire nunnery (cf. Knight, p. 40). Like Grafton, John Stow, too, accepts Major's placement of a historical Robin Hood in the 1190s (cf. Knight, p. 37). Some relatively early non-chronicle sources also elevate the outlaw's social sympathies: in the *Gest*, for instance, Robin and his men already imitate and uphold aristocratic structures (cf. Wiles, p. 48).

<sup>3</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Downfall*, l. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Munday and Chettle, *Downfall*, l. 2208.

<sup>5</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Death*, ll. 12-13.

create out of it a new and worse Robin Hood, deliberately draining the outlaw's veins of radical green sap and pumping them full of spiritless blue blood instead. While the plays do show the gentrification of Robin Hood, they show it as a deeply unfulfilling and ridiculous conservative fantasy.

Much of the negative criticism levelled at the plays, as illustrated by the following quotations, has therefore been misdirected.<sup>6</sup> The eminent Robin Hood scholar Stephen Knight, for example, refers to the *Downfall* and the *Death* as 'Munday's aristocratizing plays', and opines harshly that '[t]he newly conservative political meaning of the play is its own reward for the time-server Munday', whose sycophant adaptation of the material only sets him firmly on his way 'to greater depths of servility'.<sup>7</sup> Dobson and Taylor, on the whole, concur with Knight's critique and accuse Munday of handling the matter in a 'high-handed and cavalier fashion'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Larissa Tracy argues that the two Huntington plays create a 'new nationalistic version of Robin Hood', celebrating 'inherent and inherited nobility', while Jeffrey Singman asserts that 'Munday seeks to co-opt him [Robin Hood] for social and cultural officialdom'.<sup>9</sup> Alongside Earl Robert, the Lady Matilda also shares in this development since '[t]he construction of Marian as a woman of noble blood, which began with Munday's depiction of Matilda/Marian, reinforces the status quo and the assumption of inherent and inherited nobility'.<sup>10</sup> The newly noble Marian arguably serves as an asset for the aristocracy, much like Robin, to

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Reid and J.M.R. Margeson have, however, attempted recuperative readings. While Reid stresses the early modern popularity of the plays and the incorporation of popular materials (with Robin's combative side projected onto Scarlet and Scathlock), Margeson argues that the plays – understood as romances – deserve more favorable consideration than they have hitherto elicited. See: Jennifer Reid, 'The 'heavie writ of outlawry': Community and the Transformation of Popular Culture from Early Modern Customary Drama to Anthony Munday's Robin Hood Plays', *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, 10.2 (2017), 69-91; J. M. R. Margeson, 'Dramatic Form: The Huntington Plays', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 14.2 (1974), 223-38.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Knight, *A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p 91, p. 129. These supposed dumps of servility are reached by Munday, so Knight, 'with his masque for the London aldermen, *Metropolis Coronata*' (p. 129), in which Robin Hood also makes an appearance. Yet, many writers, including critically regarded playwrights, competed for the opportunity to script a Lord Mayor's Show – the most popular annual event in the City of London.

<sup>8</sup> R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, *Rymes of Robin Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (London: Sutton, 1989), p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Larissa Tracy, Larissa. 'For Our dere Ladyes sake': Bringing the Outlaw in from the Forest – Robin Hood, Marian, and Normative National Identity', *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, 38.1-2 (2012), 35-65 (p. 39, 41); Jeffrey L. Singman, 'Munday's Unruly Earl', in *Playing Robin Hood: The Legend as Performance in Five Centuries*, ed. Lois Potter (Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 1998), 63-76 (p. 65).

<sup>10</sup> Tracy, p. 41.

the extent that she becomes the pretty outward face of systemic corruption rather than a focal point of communal resistance.

Most scholars not only judge Munday and Chettle's Robin Hood plays harshly but argue that they had a decisive negative impact on the subsequent cultural significance of the greenwood material.<sup>11</sup> This view, however, must at least be mitigated since the plays' approach to the world of Robin Hood and Marian is a lot more complex than the accusation of gentrification covers – and it is not only Robin Hood himself who deserves more scrutiny in this regard. In their depiction of Marian, Munday and Chettle were the first to draw on the story of King John's murderous pursuit of Matilda Fitzwalter, originating in the *Dunmow Chronicle* and made widely available via John Stow's *Chronicles of England*.<sup>12</sup> Originally, Robin's devotion had been to the Virgin Mary exclusively but, as a consequence of the Reformation, the saintly Mary turned into secular Marian,<sup>13</sup> and Marian soon became a feature of sixteenth-century May Games where she indulged in wild escapades involving a none-too-celibate Friar Tuck.<sup>14</sup>

The Huntington plays turn Matilda into Marian and emphasize Matilda's celibacy and godliness. This, in turn, creates a chasm between the noble lady of the manor – Matilda – and the folksy flirt of the May Games – the Marian of the popular tradition, whose shadow hangs over Matilda's performance as Maid Marian. Over the course of *The Downfall* the incongruence between Matilda's prim demeanor and the expected lewd behavior of 'a

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<sup>11</sup> Dobson and Taylor refer to the plays as 'unquestionably the most influential of all pieces of dramatic writing about Robin Hood' (p. 163), while Nelson holds that '[t]he influence of these plays on the subsequent tradition was vast, and largely detrimental' (p. 121).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Drayton's *Matilda* (1594) – a long poem in the same tradition as Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* (also 1594) – is an adaptation of this episode (cf. Djordjevic 76); Robert Davenport's play *King John and Matilda* (first published in 1655 but written ca. 25 years earlier) draws on the same material. Cf. Igor Djordjevic, *King John (Mis)Remembered: The Dunmow Chronicle, the Lord Admiral's Men, and the Formation of Cultural Memory* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Tracy, p. 35; Sean Field, Sean, 'Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation: The Evidence of the Robin Hood Stories', *The Journal of British Studies*, 41.1 (2002), 6-22 (p. 12).

<sup>14</sup> Marian's role in the May Games or Robin Hood Games may be connected to the pre-Reformation association of the month of May with the Virgin Mary. Cf. Lorraine Kochanske Stock, 'Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, the Green Man, and Robin Hood', in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), 239-49 (p. 242). In the Elizabethan period, dancing Marians, sacred virgins no longer, were often played by men for comic effect. Cf.: David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981), p. 24. Knight, however, has speculated that neither Robin's Marian, nor Friar Tuck, necessarily derive from the May dances, since a 1280 opera by Adam de la Halle called *Robin et Marian* may or may not be related to the English Robin Hood tradition (p. 104-05).

lustie bousing'<sup>15</sup> post-Reformation Marian is comically utilized by means of frequent innuendo which undermines Matilda's ostensible continence. Tuck, for example, relates to Robert that Marian has distinguished herself in her service to one of the villains of the play, '[w]home newly she hath laine in bed', while a straight-faced Robert earnestly instructs Much the Miller's Son to 'make Matilda merry'.<sup>16</sup> Matilda, for her part, tells Much innocently that she is grateful for his assistance and will 'more reward it than with words'.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the comedy is heightened by the fact that Matilda, like any female character in early modern public theatre, is played by a boy actor, who is explicitly admonished for 'leaping like a lad' in the metatheatrical rehearsal scenario.<sup>18</sup> This both suggests the frequent impersonation of Marian by male dancers in the May Game tradition and, at the same time, reinforces the contrast between boisterous Marian and demure Matilda – who may just not be a good fit for the role.

While the first of the Huntington plays gets unanimously bad reviews, its follow-up is usually ignored completely or subsumed under the first. On the rare occasion that it does elicit comment, the comment tends to be damning. According to Knight, 'the *Death* is more like a category mistake',<sup>19</sup> and the generic classification of the play certainly does pose problems. Whereas the *Downfall* ends on a conciliatory note, the *Death* opens with the titular death of Robert, and subsequently features the doomed flight of Matilda, having reverted to her pre-forest identity, from the relentless pursuit of King John. The play presents John as a dismal ruler, in conflict with the lords of the realm. Yet, most of these lords are little better than their ruler. The conclusion to all this is mixed: while Robert is dead almost immediately and Matilda dies tragically through John's fault, the lords are ultimately reconciled with their – ambiguously repentant – king.

Although the plays are concerned with the deaths of Robert and Matilda (among others), and as such may be said to foster a commemorative impulse, this does not mean that Munday and Chettle are therefore, in any straightforward sense, responsible for debuting what Knight has referred to as the 'heritage' version of Robin Hood.<sup>20</sup> The heritage phenomenon, according to Knight, is characterized by the suggestion that a fabled hero might have been a concrete historical person, or based on one, and, further, by the creation of monuments (like tombs), which simultaneously honor hero and affiliated nation. To Knight, the 'representation of Robin's death in the gentrified mode' both creates and

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<sup>15</sup> Gabriel Harvey, *Pierces Supererogation* (London: 1593), p. 145. EEBO.

<sup>16</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Downfall*, l. 2551, l. 1010.

<sup>17</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Downfall*, ll. 794-95.

<sup>18</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Downfall*, ll. 29-32.

<sup>19</sup> Knight, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Knight, p. 129.

fulfills the desire ‘to have a tomb and funeral to mark the passing and importance of a man of great social and propertied importance’, and, thus, neutralizes the subversive potential of the character.<sup>21</sup> Yet, as I illustrate below, Munday and Chettle, whatever their writerly faults, do not bury Robin and Marian to praise them. They do not bury Robin and Marian at all. Rather, it is their alter egos, Robert and Matilda, who must die (stage deaths only), and their deaths do not signify their national importance so much as the degree to which they are miscast.

### **Into the Green Suit: Playing Robin Hood**

Scholars tend to describe the portrayal of characters in *The Downfall*, predominantly but not exclusively of Robert and Matilda, as incoherent and lacking.<sup>22</sup> Nelson, for instance, notes that multiple characters ‘undergo sudden and unmotivated changes of character’, while of all of them ‘Robin Hood himself is usually the least credible figure on the stage’.<sup>23</sup> Djordjevic concurs that Munday and Chettle render the titular hero as ‘probably the least interesting of all’ persons of the play.<sup>24</sup> I suggest that this lackluster portrayal of the aristocrat outlaw may be a deliberate choice rather than a fruit of dramatic ineptitude. It is certainly true that the Robin Hood of the Huntington plays is not an appealing character. He neither demonstrates the physical prowess typical of Robin Hood in many of the ballads, nor does he call much wit or cunning his own. Instead, put in uncharitable terms, he is slow-witted, passive, self-centered, and self-pitying. Yet, the blame, the plays suggest, lies not with the traditional outlaw but with an earl who presumes to play an

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<sup>21</sup> Knight, p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> Among those characters frequently considered inconsistently drawn is Matilda’s father, who is initially referred to as Lacy and then called Fitzwater throughout most of the *Downfall* and all of the *Death*. Djordjevic argues that ‘[i]n the *Death* Fitzwater plays several archetypal roles but none consistently’ (p. 83). He plays an upright lord opposing a tyrannical king who seems to waver in his loyalties, however, and who condones the killing of his own brother; he is a doting father who, nonetheless, would rather see his only daughter dead than a mistress to a married man. He is also the object of comedy: In act 3, scene 2 of the *Downfall*, having just been sent into exile by King John, Fitzwater – an old man – pays a covert visit to his daughter in the forest, disguised ‘like an old man’, or, in Matilda’s words: ‘An aged man, a silly sightless man’ (3.2). Unsurprisingly, his daughter soon suspects Fitzwater’s true identity. In his disguise as an old man, Fitzwater is offered a meal by Robert and Matilda. This he apparently proceeds to gulp down with unseemly abandon. As Matilda observes Fitzwater rapidly ingesting his meal – ‘see how fast he eats’ (3.2) – she comes to the melodramatic conclusion that he must have experienced starvation when, in fact, as an aristocrat very recently embarked on his forest adventure, greed is the more likely explanation for his poor table manners.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson, p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> Djordjevic, p. 78.

outlaw, or even with an actor who plays an earl who plays an outlaw. When Nelson criticizes that ‘we are never quite allowed to forget that we are watching an earl playing at being an outlaw, like a queen with a shepherd’s crook’,<sup>25</sup> the observation is fair, but it is not, as most critics would have it, evidence that the plays get it wrong. It is not that Munday, ‘[i]n trying to make his protagonist noble... succeeded only in making him wooden’,<sup>26</sup> but that he purposefully creates an uninspiring nobleman who gives an unconvincing performance as Robin Hood.

Moreover, Munday and Chettle’s approach to the matter of Robin Hood seems not to have been very much out of the ordinary. Five of seven known Elizabethan ‘Robin Hood plays’ survive. Next to the *Downfall* and the *Death*, the extant plays are George Peele’s *The Famous Chronicle of Edward I* (written by 1593), Robert Greene’s *George a Green* (composed no later than 1594), and *Looke About You*, a disguise comedy written for the Admiral’s Men. Two plays have been lost: *Robin Hood and Little John* (1594) and *Robin Hood’s Penn’orths* [Pennyworths] (1600-01), the latter attributed to William Haughton. Robin’s role in all extant plays tends toward the marginal and is inflected with a sense of irony. In *Looke About You* – which most scholars assume to have been written in the wake of Munday and Chettle’s plays – the young Earl of Huntington, alias Robin Hood, only features as a minor character.<sup>27</sup> In Peele’s *Edward I*, Robin does not appear ‘in person’ at all: King Edward’s opponent, the Welsh prince Llywelyn, and his companions merely use a book of Robin Hood stories as a basis for some escapist make-believe.

As this proves, Robin Hood portrayals in the playhouses of the 1590s were centered on ‘banished aristocrats... who dress in green to “play” at being Robin Hood’.<sup>28</sup> This trend chimes with the deliberate artificiality of Munday and Chettle’s dramatization of the outlaw legend. Moreover, while Peele’s Robin Hood is a fictional character to the characters of the play, the Huntington plays double the metatheatrical effect of ‘playing’ Robin Hood: it is, after all, not only Earl Robert who imitates Robin Hood but an actor at the court of Henry VIII, identified humorously as Sir Thomas Mantle, who imitates Earl Robert, who imitates Robin Hood. While the sartorial associations of the actor’s name of Mantle hint at the costumes he routinely dons, the parallel with the moniker Hood suggests that Robin Hood is not an authentic identity but a role that can be put on and off like a hood or a mantle, i.e., a theatrical costume.

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<sup>25</sup> Nelson, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson, p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> Djordjevic, p. 101. Djordjevic also puts forward the case that Munday himself might have authored *Looke About You* (p. 115).

<sup>28</sup> Djordjevic, p. 326. Also cf. Meredith Skura, ‘Anthony Munday’s ‘Gentrification’ of Robin Hood’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 33.2 (2003), 155-80 (p. 163).

Earl Robert himself proves inclined toward role play even before he becomes Robin Hood. When, on the day of his engagement to Matilda, he is informed of a conspiracy to have him outlawed, he wants to confront his treacherous guests with his displeasure. To do this, in an unnecessarily convoluted manner, he lures them into his presence by suggesting that he is about to ‘present some scenes / Of tragic matter, or perchance of mirth, / Even such as first shall jump with my conceit’ (251-3).<sup>29</sup> Robert does not, in fact, perform these scenes for his hostile audience but he does, soon after, decide that it ‘jumps with his conceit’ to become Robin Hood. This is a choice available to him because the character exists, as a fictional character, in Earl Robert’s world. This is confirmed by the fact that, toward the end of the *Downfall*, Prince John sings some verses from the well-known Robin Hood ballad ‘The Pinder of Wakefield’ (2507-12).

### **The Measure of a (Merry) Man**

Even as Robert transforms himself into Robin Hood, the character of the earl continues to shine through the outlaw façade, and it is not a very pleasant character. Initially, he faces the plot against him with none of the courage or cunning that would perhaps be expected from a convincing Robin Hood. Instead, he absents himself from the throng and dramatically proclaims: ‘As I am outlawed from my fame and state, / Be this day outlawed from the name of daies: / Day lucklesse, outlawe lucklesse, both accurst’ (169-71). With histrionic fervor, he goes on to tell his servant, Little John, not to try ‘to make smooth my grieffe: / For the rough storme, thy windie words hath rais’d, / Will not be calm’d till I in grave be laied’ (178-87). John considers the implications of the plot for Robert’s betrothed, Matilda, and tells his master to check his outburst for her sake, i.e., to ‘[b]ridle this over-greeving passion, / Or else dissemble it, to comfort her’ (220-2): The plea for Robert to appear strong for Matilda’s sake comes cloaked ‘in words which disturbingly suggest “Assume a virtue if you have it not”’.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Robert struggles to get a hold of himself and it is ultimately only the resourcefulness of his servant which allows him to overcome the condition of ‘a melancholy pseudo-Romeo bemoaning his unjust fate and

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Munday, [and Henry Chettle], *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington*, ed. by Russell A. Peck, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. by Knight and Ohlgren, Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997). Subsequent references are to this edition and line numbers will be cited parenthetically. Following the original 1601 edition, the TEAMS edition does not supply consistent act and scene divisions.

<sup>30</sup> Nelson, p. 109.



wishing to die’, and opt instead for the role of ‘a jolly gentleman enjoying a pastoral vacation’.<sup>31</sup>

In his role as Robin Hood, however, he clings to the privileges of the earl and outsources both manual and intellectual labor to his underlings. When his men go out hunting, for example, he informs them that – ‘as sovereigns of your toyles’ (1362-3) – he and Matilda will stay behind and lounge in their bower. As in the manor, so ‘[i]n the forest Robin has lordship, not egalitarian participation’.<sup>32</sup> While the earl may want to play ‘simple’ Robin Hood, he is obviously not about to implement socioeconomic equality; and just as Robert keeps the bearing of an earl, it comes natural to Matilda, in the role of Marian, to view another woman – the low-born love interest of ‘Much the Miller’s Son’ – as a servant and to scold her for idleness. Yet, Matilda herself is subservient to Robert in their outlaw adventure, which Robert himself refers to as a ‘game’ (1022). After claiming for himself the name of Robin Hood, he announces that ‘Matilda shall be my maid Marian’, without consulting her in the matter (1020-1).<sup>33</sup> By bestowing this name on her, Robert hopes to ensure that Matilda ‘lives a spotlesse maiden life’ until such a time as he is reestablished in his former position (1539-41). On the one hand, connecting the idea of virginity with the character of Maid Marian, famed for her lascivious conduct in the ‘wanton may games’,<sup>34</sup> creates a moment of comedy at Robert’s expense, whose good judgment is put into doubt. On the other hand, the move characterizes Robert as a lord with a vested interest in controlling his human ‘property’, i.e., not only his subservient ‘merry men’ but also Matilda.

As this suggests, Robert not only shirks strenuous action in the greenwood as much as outside of it, he also lacks forest smarts. In one notable instance, Friar Tuck tries to warn him of an imminent attack in a manner that is covert yet simple enough to decode. Robert, however, is decidedly slow on the uptake and insists that Tuck ‘be more plaine’ (1599-1600). It is also a lack of insight into the machinations of others that finally costs Robert his life when, early in *The Death*, he fails to see obvious warning signs and consumes a poisoned drink offered him by his foes.

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<sup>31</sup> Djordjevic, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> Knight, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Singman acknowledges that when Robert announces his name change, ‘[t]he atmosphere is that of the May games, in which Robin Hood is not a historical character but a play-acted role, supported by a temporary set of rules mutually agreed on by the participants. From this perspective, Munday has co-opted not Robin Hood, but his shadow’. Yet, Singman believes that this is a trap posed by the material itself which ‘officializing’ Munday unintentionally falls prey to (cf. p. 71, pp. 73-5).

<sup>34</sup> Robert Copland, *The Seuen Sorowes that Women Haue When Theyr Husbandes Be Deade* (London, 1565), n. pag. EEBO.

Passive and dim-witted, Robert has yet another decisive character flaw. His banishment, procured by his villainous uncle, the Prior of York, and Warman, Robert's own steward, can only be achieved because Robert himself has amassed substantial debts. This suggests that Robert is not a blameless victim but that his aloof indifference toward the affairs of the common people contribute to his downfall. This latter attitude is revealed when Robert acknowledges that he has knowingly allowed Warman to mismanage his estate. Furious over his betrayal, Robert reminds his steward of his lowly origins:

You from a paltry pen and inkhorne clarke,  
Bearing a buckram satchell at your belt,  
Unto a Justice place I did preferre,  
Where you unjustly have my tenants rackt,  
Wasted my treasure and increast your store (348-52).

Intended as a righteous accusation, the outburst also contains an unintentional admission of complicity in Warman's harmful misconduct.

Huntington's profligacy is testified to by multiple characters in the *Downfall*: his uncle refers to him as 'wastfull Huntington' (160); the prior's evil associate Doncaster knows Huntington to be 'an unthrift' (1391); and Warman opines that his one-time employer and benefactor 'is downe the winde, as all such shall, / That revell, wast and spende, and take no care' (975-6). While the prior, Doncaster, and Warman are all – at least temporarily – ill-disposed toward Huntington, other – apparently more authoritative or, at least, more disinterested – parties confirm the earl's spending habit. King Richard's deputy, the Bishop of Ely, echoes the prior's phrasing in his reference to 'the wastfull Earle of Huntington' (770), while playwright John Skelton confirms in the frame story that 'Earle Robert greatly is in debt' (105) to his uncle. Ultimately even 'good King Richard' acknowledges Huntington's collusion in his own misfortune, telling him that his estate is '[f]alne by thy folly, to the Priors hands' (749).

It is, therefore, not quite right to claim, as many scholars do, that 'Munday's prodigal is as blameless as a younger son or an orphan for bringing on his social descent'.<sup>35</sup> While Nelson concedes that in 'fleeting phrases' Munday does 'allow the old story of the nobleman reduced to debt by riotous living to peep through the façade of the hopelessly exalted character of the Earl of Huntington', he still holds that 'Munday treats the downfall so as to make its victim seem as sympathetic and blameless a figure as

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<sup>35</sup> Skura, p. 178.

possible'.<sup>36</sup> Yet, the earl, ultimately, does not come across well and this is unlikely to be entirely unintended, given what other characters have to say on his oblivious wastefulness.

### Sweet Forgiveness

Robert is defined by another – superficially laudable – quality which can, however, be problematic, depending on the circumstances. This quality also distinguishes him rather starkly from the Robin Hood of most ballads. Throughout both plays, Robert as well as Matilda are extremely forgiving, willing to condone any crime committed against them as well as those committed against others. On the surface, this seems to amount to a celebration of Christian meekness and the doctrine of turning the other cheek. Yet, the structure of the plays runs counter to this message: simply forgiving trespassers (including the sovereign) never changes anything for the better, certainly not in the world of the play. It only perpetuates the existing wrongs. The plays, in effect, indict forgiveness by subjecting its overt celebration to a covert undermining. Moreover, Robert's defining virtue is an especially passive quality,<sup>37</sup> and passivity throughout both plays turns out to be an inadequate response to conflict.<sup>38</sup> Yet, it is the response that Robert will choose most frequently.

Robert's characteristic demeanor of non-involvement becomes evident very early in *The Downfall*. He first reacts to his banishment with great lamentation but does not oppose it actively in any way. After having assumed the persona of Robin Hood to while away his exile, he swears off negative emotions and charges his companions to 'never more let woefull sound / Be heard among yee; but what ever fall, / Laugh grieffe to scorne; and so make sorrowes small' (1316, 1318-20). Whereas, at the beginning of the *Downfall*, Robert is passively sad, he now embraces a happy passivity and decides to wait out his

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<sup>36</sup> Nelson, pp. 111, 109.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Knight, p. 127.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Dekker phrases the same moral explicitly in *The Whore of Babylon* (1607), having fairy queen Titania – the allegorical alter ego of Elizabeth I – argue firmly that '[...] bloud wrongly spilt / Who pardons, hath a share in halfe the guilt'. (2.1.162-63) In Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* (1605) Emperor Tiberius strikes a similar note in his letter to the Senate: '*In the meane time, it shall not bee fit for vs to importune so iudicious a Senate, who know how much they hurt the innocent, that spare the guiltie*' (5.641-43). Cf. Ben Jonson, *Sejanus: His Fall*, in *Ben Jonson*, Vol. 4, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 327-486; Thomas Dekker, *The Whore of Babylon*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, Vol. 2, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1955) 491-592.

crisis contentedly in the hope that King Richard will eventually return and put the world – and Robert’s world in particular – to rights.

It may seem very fortunate, then, that the king does, in fact, return to his kingdom. What is more, he is conveniently drawn to Robert’s dwelling place in Sherwood Forest where most major characters have at this point inexplicably assembled in anticipation of a conclusion. Thus, the play ends ‘without [Robert] having personally done anything to remedy his own situation’.<sup>39</sup> Robert forgives his enemies and superficially what follows is an ‘orgy of forgiveness presided over by a Christ-like Robin Hood and sealed by the arrival of Richard the Lionheart who restores all the pastoral exiles to their rightful places and corrects all wrongs in the political world’.<sup>40</sup> However, we never see any of Richard’s promises fulfilled. Indeed, the *Death* immediately begins subverting all happy-ever-after expectations raised by Richard’s ‘magical’ appearance at the end of the *Downfall*: Robert dies before he has time to consummate his marriage, let alone move back into his manor, the yeomen are recruited into Richard’s army only to embark on an apparently ill-fated crusade, and Matilda is hounded to death by Richard’s successor, John.<sup>41</sup> These, it turns out, are the consequences of indiscriminate forgiveness.

Crucially, most offenders in the play simply do not deserve forgiveness. Of all the characters, only Robert’s delinquent steward Warman experiences genuine remorse and atones for his misdeeds. Yet, Warman is murdered at the beginning of *The Death* by Robert’s uncle and his associate Doncaster, whom Robert had generously forgiven for their previous crimes at the end of the first play. If he had not, Warman might well have lived and so might Robert himself since, after Warman’s murder, the prior and Doncaster go on to poison Robert. Glaringly, Robert’s lenity does not change anything for the better but results in renewed betrayal and at least two preventable deaths.

Doncaster himself mocks Robert’s willingness to be ‘reconcilde, / To anie foe hee hath’ (*Death*, 311-12), and hints that he himself will exploit this tendency for his own nefarious purposes. A similar note is sounded by the more neutral voice of King John’s wife, Queen Isabel, who declares, almost prophetically, that ‘it’s often seen, / A reconciled foe small

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<sup>39</sup> Djordjevic, p. 78.

<sup>40</sup> Djordjevic, p. 78.

<sup>41</sup> The *Downfall* is the first drama known to bring together King John and Robin Hood (cf. Djordjevic, p. 61). John had previously been portrayed as a flawed and ambiguous character in both *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (printed in 1591 and attributed to George Peele) and in Shakespeare’s *King John* (circa 1594-95). While Djordjevic argues that ‘Richard Coeur de Lion would have to wait several more centuries before the first historically ambivalent portraits of his agency and governing style came into fashion’ (p. 113), Munday and Chettle, in fact, create an ambivalent picture of the ‘lionheart’.

good affords' (1071-2). This certainly proves true for Robert. While his mercy toward his uncle is, perhaps, understandable, even though he has committed considerable crimes, his willingness to let villainous Doncaster escape punishment as well is unjustifiable. Doncaster himself boasts of serial rape, mutilation, and murder, including child murder. Still, Robert pleads for forgiveness and asks, incongruously, only to '[l]et sweete forgiveness be my passing bell' (689).<sup>42</sup>

He thus accepts – wittingly or not – that other victims must go unavenged along with himself and that his surviving dependents will be exposed to further violence. With Robert slowly dying from the poisoned drink, naively accepted from his reconciled foes, Matilda starts considering her own bleak future. She implores her moribund husband: 'Shield mee love. / Canst thou not Robin? Where shall I be hid? / O God, these Ravens will seize upon thy Dove' (556-8). Matilda realizes that with Robert out of the picture, and Richard's enduring protection by no means guaranteed, she is more vulnerable than ever to John's advances. These worries prove only too well-founded as Matilda spends the remainder, and majority, of the play trying to escape from John's pursuit and ultimately dies – persecuted by John's most violent lackey, Will Brand – in the very abbey where she takes holy orders in hope of peace and shelter.

Still, at the end of her ordeal, Matilda herself chooses to follow in Robert's footsteps and to forgive her tormentors, above all King John and Will Brand. When she is given the 'choice' to become John's mistress or drink poison, like Robert, she opts for the latter and tells Brand: 'Good fellow, tell the king I thanke his Grace, / And doe forgive his causelesse crueltie' (2591-2). Matilda's choice seems to demonstrate the magnanimity of a martyr but it really continues a dangerous trend which will inevitably leave John free to commit more causeless cruelty in the future. The lords of the realm ultimately follow Matilda in pardoning the king's crimes and acknowledging him as their rightful sovereign. While John's loyal follower Hubert voices the commonly accepted party line that, though a king may commit awful crimes, '[s]ubjects must sue, not mend with violence' (2316), less devoted barons temporarily turn on their king but ultimately choose to condone John's crimes and to uphold his claim. Two further factors are decisive in this development: John's apparent contrition over the murders he has committed and fear of 'the French yoke' (2998), i.e., a French invasion.

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<sup>42</sup> In her brief but on-point discussion of the Huntington plays, Jean Howard emphasizes Robert's nobility and his new 'stoical, patient-Griselda masculinity', and argues that the plays offer 'criticism of kingly and clerical abuse but no model of resistance, only powerful identification with the suffering of power's victim'. Cf. Jean Howard, 'The Political Fortunes of Robin Hood on the Early Modern Stage', *Forms of Association: Making Publics in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Paul Yachnin and Marlene Eberhart (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), pp. 272-88 (p. 282).

Though less consequential on the face of it, the forgiveness Matilda extends to John's lackey Will Brand is just as significant. Not only does she pardon his earthly crime against her, she also implores Brand to see to the welfare of his own ailing soul and so, if possible, prevent his damnation in the hereafter (2630-1). Dubiously, Matilda reinterprets her murder as deliverance, by suggesting that her death frees her from worldly woes, and turns a killer into a liberator. Brand, however, shirks Matilda's lesson and does not consider his soul's salvation. He immediately kills himself and in doing so ensures his condemnation (as most Anglicans agreed). While Brand's suicide removes him from the picture effectively, the evil he represents is not vanquished since he merely functions as an extension of King John, i.e., as a personification of his passionate and violent impulses.

John is presented as 'a slave to extreme passions',<sup>43</sup> who is prone to order acts of great cruelty in the heat of the moment. Thus, musing on the potentially dire consequences of poor affect control, Tuck greets John's succession with a rhetorical question: 'O what is he, that's sworne affections slave, / That will not violate all lawes, all oathes?' (899-900). Especially in the powerful, impulsiveness is a big problem; as Salisbury points out to Queen Isabel, with '[I]ust being lord, there is no trust in kings' (1879). The king certainly is a willing slave to his carnal desire in his pursuit of Matilda, telling her that she is '[a]ble to tempt even Iove himselfe to rape' (1339), casting himself as (notoriously promiscuous) Zeus/Jupiter and simultaneously blaming the victim for her ordeal.<sup>44</sup> Queen Isabel laments her husband's inconsiderate self-indulgence in these words:

Is it not shame, he that should punish sinne,  
Defend the righteous, helpe the innocent,  
Carves with his sworde the purpose of his will,  
Upon the guarders of the vertuous (2367-70).

It should, indeed, fall to John to protect his subjects and not prey on them with impunity. Yet, as the Queen argues, in John's pursuit of personal gratification, the ends justify the means.

The specific wording that Isabel chooses to castigate John is noteworthy: not only does she refer to his *sword*, an avatar of power and virility (and certainly operating as a lewd

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<sup>43</sup> Djordjevic, p. 94.

<sup>44</sup> John's mind also turns toward the Greco-Roman pantheon and toward Zeus's philandering and abducting ways when he describes the cattle belonging to the Bruces as '[s]o faire, that every cow did Iö seeme, / And every bull Europaes ravisher' (cf. Munday and Chettle, *Death*, ll. 1149-50).

joke here), she also calls John out for his proclivity to viciously enforce his *will*. This is significant since John's *will* is externalized in the character of Will Brand, the evil henchman who carries out his most reprehensible orders – all borne from excessive lust or wrath – without question and without qualms.<sup>45</sup> It is surely no coincidence, either, that the second component of his name, Brand, evokes the conventional trope of burning desire – an association which the plays establish by connecting lust in general, and John's lust in particular, to the semantic realm of fire.<sup>46</sup>

Earl Robert himself tells King John that '[l]ove is a flame, a fire, that being mov'd, / Still brighter growes' (*Downfall*, 578-9), while Leicester compares John unfavorably to his brother Richard in igneous terms. To him, John is merely an '*ignis fatuus*', i.e., a 'wandring fire, / This goblin of the night, this brand, this sparke' (1906-7). Matilda, meanwhile, hopes that her admission to the religious order of nuns at Dunmow will serve to quench the 'fire of lust' burning in John (*Death*, 1961). John's desire 'rages like the sea, [...] burnes like fire' (1730), and even his devoted subject Hubert criticizes the 'raging fire' (2293) of John's desire and laments that '[t]o quench this flame full many a tide of teares' (2289) must be shed. Considering John's fiery temper, it is only too plausible that Will Brand should serve as the conduit for his violent fantasies. On occasion, John does have regrets over the evil he has countenanced. When a vengeful deed is done and his passion has cooled, he laments that Brand '[r]udely effected what I rashly wild' (2848) and carried out 'kill[ings] ere one have time to bid him save' (2945). Yet, these moments of remorse never last, and it is only a matter of time before the monarch's temper flares up again and spends itself in Brand's violence.

## Outlaw and King

Traditionally Robin Hood is seen as upholding 'the primacy of royal authority' against 'mid-level corruption'.<sup>47</sup> Earl Robert, however, is neither up to nor interested in actively fighting corruption, whichever level it happens to exist on.<sup>48</sup> For one thing, he remains too focused on his own bad fortune to be concerned with more general social ills. For

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<sup>45</sup> Matilda's puns on the word 'will' in act 2, scene 2 of the *Death* call further attention to the word itself and its double function as a proper noun and a personal name.

<sup>46</sup> When Brand is introduced, he is immediately affiliated with fire. As King John and his entourage prepare to make an appearance at Fitzwater's London residence, costumed as masquers, Brand is identified as their chief torch bearer. The man enters the scene as a malevolent force and one, moreover, literally carrying the torch of John's desire.

<sup>47</sup> Tracy, p. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Tracy, p. 48.

another, he is neither a traitor to the aristocratic system which he is himself a product of and which he hopes to rejoin nor to the crown. His attitude toward King Richard, in particular, is one of fawning adulation. Yet, Munday and Chettle subvert the idealization of Richard and make John more than a negative foil to his brother. John may, for instance, voice sound criticism of Richard, show good will toward Little John, and he is even allowed to demonstrate physical prowess, proving that he is not the weedy carpet knight his opponents would have him be. He beats Scathlock in battle easily and fairly and holds his own against Little John – until Matilda interrupts their fight.

Richard may also be bold, but his boldness in battle comes in for some ridicule. When his admiring subject Leicester elevates Richard as a lionhearted, barrel-chested, thoroughly manly slayer of ‘heathens’, his stance is subjected to satire. In a sharp and witty discussion with Leicester, John calls out his brother’s flaws and criticizes the loyal lord for glorifying a warmongering absentee. When word is sent that Richard is awaiting a king’s ransom in Austria, John refuses to pay for his brother with the argument that:

[...] Richard is a king,  
In Cyprus, Acon, Acres, and rich Palestine.  
To get those kingdomes England lent him men,  
And many a million of her substance spent,  
The very entrals of her wombe was rent.  
No plough but paid a share, no needy hand,  
But from his poore estate of penurie,  
Unto his voyage offered more than mites,  
And more, poore soules, than they had might to spare.  
Yet were they joyfull. For still flying newes,  
And lying I perceive them now to be,  
Came of King Richard’s glorious victories,  
His conquest of the Souldans, and such tales  
As blewe them up with hope, when he returnd,  
He would have scattered gold about the streetes (*Downfall*, 1824-38).

According to John, paying for Richard’s ransom is unwarranted because his subjects have already paid more than enough in support of his foreign activities without having received anything in return.

Leicester’s fantasy of Richard’s ‘glories’ (1891) is primarily based on the latter’s supposed prowess in battle and his vision of the Lionheart is accordingly martial and monolithic (2035). A smitten Leicester describes his fantasy of his regal idol, ‘stand[ing]



/ In his guilt armour, staine with Pagans blood, / Upon a gallies prow, like warres fierce god, / And on his crest, a crucifix of golde' (1863-6), all the while flinging 'wounded Turkes' into the 'greedy waves' (1869). When John mocks Leicester's nearly orgasmic fantasy of royal violence (1885), Leicester insists that Richard 'made the greene sea red with Pagan blood' (1880). Although John's arguments are reasonable, the lords choose to abandon his cause and rally behind Richard when they hear that the latter has unexpectedly made his own way back to England.

With Richard back home, Robert, like a sycophant courtier, is singularly focused on the impression he hopes to make on the king. As a consequence, he callously orders the body of murdered Warman to be hidden so as not to spoil the forest idyll for the monarch. No contemporary directions relating to the staging of this scene survive but it seems likely that the absurd attempt to hide a lifeless body from the king would have been exploited for its darkly comic potential. Clearly, although Robert concedes that '[s]ometime anone he [Warman] shall be buried' (*Death*, 235), on his list of priorities the successful entertainment of King Richard has pride of place before mourning and burying a prodigal employee.

When Richard's arrival in Sherwood Forest is first announced, Robert's eagerness to present well shows in his quick decision to have new clothes put on Matilda's father, and to bring out Doncaster and the Prior from their resting places 'to grace our shoue'.<sup>49</sup> This leads Doncaster to accuse Robert of merely using a show of mildness to screen his true 'ambitious pride' and desire '[t]o be a monarch, raigning over us'.<sup>50</sup> Doncaster, of course, still is the villain of the piece but his description of the situation is not far off the mark. He asks: 'Did hee [Robert] not bring a troope to grace himselfe, / Like captives waiting on a conquerours chaire, / And calling of them out, by one and one, / Presented them, like fairings, to the king?'<sup>51</sup> This is, in fact, precisely what the audience has witnessed Robert doing. While a sincerely merciful Robert would surely have allowed himself to grieve for his steward, the Earl of Huntington here proves to be more tuned in to ceremony than humanity. Robert's self-conscious stagecraft – heartless in its eagerness to eliminate undesirable elements from the picture – once more reveals his Robin Hood persona to be a mask worn by an aristocrat seeking royal favor. As Robert's alleged mildness is eroded by his desire to host a king, Warman's journey from betrayal via repentance to forgiveness

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<sup>49</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Downfall*, l. 2685.

<sup>50</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Death*, l. 140, l. 143.

<sup>51</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Death*, ll. 162-65.

and new-found loyalty ends with his body reduced to a comic prop and his experiences rendered ultimately meaningless.<sup>52</sup>

At this point in the play, Robert is just about to disregard all the warning signs and drink the deadly poison presented to him by his uncle. Even in death – or, particularly in death – Robert continues his habit of giving a sub-par performance in the role of Robin Hood. His passing ‘in the midst of all this joviality is pathetic in the extreme but certainly not tragic’.<sup>53</sup> It is preceded neither by a fight, nor a sacrifice, nor even the treacherous bloodletting of ballad fame. Robert’s slow death allows him to leave minute instructions for his burial and to voice a comically long goodbye. Indeed, he has time for six farewells and two adieus.<sup>54</sup>

In his dying speech, which very much points to its own theatricality by means of its absurdly protracted nature, Robert requests that Warman’s body be interred at his feet. This direction evokes the tradition, in funerary sculpture, of placing a dog by the feet of an effigy in recognition of the fidelity of the departed. In this ‘chivalric allegorical tableau [...] Warman replaces the conventionally symbolic dog at the feet of a loyal knight’.<sup>55</sup> While this arrangement certainly comments on the question of Warman’s new-found loyalty to Earl Robert, it is also dehumanizing. The symbolism of the dog is necessarily ambivalent: Although one might naturally assume that Warman’s own loyalty is to be commemorated, he himself is cast in the role of the dog,<sup>56</sup> not the loyal knight. In the positioning of the bodies, that part falls to Robert. Thus, the gesture itself is rendered

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<sup>52</sup> In both Peele’s *Troublesome Reign* and Shakespeare’s *King John*, the corpse of John’s ill-fated nephew Arthur becomes ‘the catalyst of the politically crucial moment when the lords (and through them the broader commonwealth) read the sign of the prince’s corpse’. (Djordjevic, p. 28) In the Huntington plays, the dead bodies apparently serving as catalysts are those of the Bruces and, most importantly, that of Matilda Fitzwater. Yet, the plays simultaneously ridicule scenarios in which dead bodies are supposed to – but do not – serve as loci of meaningful conversion.

<sup>53</sup> Nelson, p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> ‘My liege farewell, my love, farewell, farewell. / Farewell faire Queene, Prince Iohn and noble Lords. / Father Fitzwater heartily adieu! / Adieu my yeoman tall. Matilda, close mine eyes. / Frier farewell, farewell to all’. (Munday and Chettle, *Death*, ll. 819-24.) It is tempting to imagine the actor playing Matilda to close Robert’s eyelids on his command, only for Robert to spring back into action to finish his long farewell.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Djordjevic, p. 79 (footnote 50).

<sup>56</sup> After Warman’s fall from grace with King John, he is refused meat by a jailer who would rather feed his dog: ‘[m]y dogge’s my servant, faithfull, trustie, true; / But Warman was a traitor to his Lord, / A reprobate, a rascall and a Jewe, / Worser than dogges, of men to be abhorrd! / Starve therefore, Warman; dogge, receive thy due’ (*Downfall*, ll. 2314-18). Faced with so much contempt, Warman laments: ‘Worse than a dogge, the villane me respects, / His dogge he feedes, me in my neede rejects’. (ibid. ll. 2323-24) He later recalls the time ‘[w]hen men fed dogs, and me they would not feede’ (*Death*, l. 185).

simultaneously affectionate and contemptuous, appropriate for an earl who may be fond of an underling but is permanently wed to his own sense of superiority.

A scene at the end of the second play also features the defilement of human remains by a person of superior social standing. This time, however, Robert is not involved. Instead, King John himself makes Matilda's body the morbid centerpiece in a scene which crucially undercuts his alleged reformation. Following her suicide at Dunmow Abbey, Matilda's body is brought into the presence of the king, who bewails her fate and his own hand in it. This public show of contrition convinces the lords to once again rally around their sovereign. Yet, John immediately goes on to behave in a way that makes it abundantly clear that he has not sufficiently reflected on his vices. While the lords are earnestly considering the future of the kingdom, John proceeds to kiss Matilda's corpse passionately. Faithful Hubert absurdly misinterprets the scene for the benefit of his fellow lords, encouraging them to, 'looke my Lords upon his silent woe: / His soule is at the doore of death I knowe. / See, *how he seekes to suck, if he could drawe, / Poyson from dead Matildaes ashie lips*'.<sup>57</sup> (emphasis mine) What reverent Hubert construes as a sign of the king's deep remorse, actually describes a farcical necrophiliac assault. Considering the reason for Matilda's death, i.e., her desperate attempt to avoid the monarch's unwanted intimacies, John's *sucking* on her lips, when she can no longer resist him, clearly constitutes a major violation. Not only does John still covet an objectified Matilda, he remains an impulsive man unable or unwilling to exercise reason or restraint when in the throes of passion.<sup>58</sup>

Immediately preceding the play's epilogue, John orders the following message to grace Matilda's tomb: 'Within this Marble monument doth lye / Matilda martyred, for her chastitie'.<sup>59</sup> At the very least, this is a major lie of omission. John erases his guilt by celebrating his victim as a self-sacrificial saint. Worse, the lords of the realm are seemingly content with this depiction as it allows them to renew their support of John without losing too much face. The king suffers no consequences for his heinous deeds and the lords ignorantly collude in the injustice. Thus, with both King John and Earl Robert demonstrably unconcerned about violating the dead and the concept of forgiveness stretched beyond any ethically defensible limits, *The Death*, like *The Downfall*, concludes with a mockery of a redemptive ending.

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<sup>57</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Death*, ll. 3003-06.

<sup>58</sup> In truth, whether she is dead or alive does not make a great difference to the way John treats Matilda: She is always the inanimate object of his lust. He even speaks of her – when still very much alive – as a 'matchlesse Effigie' (Munday and Chettle, *Death*, l. 1865), notably choosing a phrase which renders Matilda as a lifeless statue and alludes to funerary sculpture.

<sup>59</sup> Munday and Chettle, *Death*, ll. 3047-48.

With that being so, it turns out that Stephen Knight is right in calling the second Huntington play a ‘category mistake’ but the mistake is deliberate, and his verdict is applicable to both plays if the incongruence of representation and represented events constitutes a category mistake. Munday and Chettle’s misshaped two-part ‘tragedy’ invites audiences to laugh at its ill-fated characters and, as I have argued above, the effect is unlikely to be unintentional. It follows that the gentrification of Robin Hood is also a ‘category mistake’: the category of the outlaw hero will not merge seamlessly with the category of the ‘man of great social and propertied importance’.<sup>60</sup> Earl Robert is passive, profligate, entitled (literally as well as metaphorically), and the outlaw life does not suit him. Robert, as the proverb goes, may talk of Robin Hood but he never shoots his bow. In the green suit, in the liminal world of the forest, the earl is out of his element, just as the matter of Robin Hood is out of key with the tragic form and mode. A tragedy of Robin Hood might need to ennoble its protagonist for the sake of generic decorum, but the Huntington plays neither aspire to convey genuine tragedy nor do they mean for their hero(es) to be taken very seriously. After all, the Earl of Huntington not only plays an implausible Robin Hood, but he, too, is a role, played by the ludicrously-named actor Sir Thomas Mantle, who – in a metatheatrical *mise en abyme* – is yet another character embodied by a performer.

It is precisely by foregrounding the fictionality of their title character that the plays are most in tune with the contemporary perception of Robin Hood as the embodiment of folk entertainment, ‘[a]s light as lef on lynde’.<sup>61</sup> Munday and Chettle’s Robin Hood is, after all, not a man but a role and, as such, pure story potential. Yet, at the same time as the plays insist that Robin Hood is a story, they also demonstrate that some stories resist certain forms, and that some characters resist certain portrayals: stories of Robin Hood should not be tragedies and whiny earls do not make convincing Robin Hoods. Therefore, the place of *The Downfall* and *The Death* in the Robin Hood tradition is overdue for reevaluation. As plays which mock the stories they tell as well as the medium they tell them in, they should no longer be condemned as the source of all that is conservative, stodgy, or nationalistic about Robin Hood. In the end, Munday and Chettle’s plays have more in common with Mel Brooks’s *Men in Tights* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1993) than Kevin Reynolds’ *Prince of Thieves* (Warner Bros., 1991), and critical engagement with these plays – rare as it is – should no longer refuse to see them as a caricature of gentrification.

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<sup>60</sup> Knight, p. 128.

<sup>61</sup> *Robin Hood and the Monk*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Knight and Ohlgren, Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), I. 302.