Disguise, Downclassing, and Social Invisibility in Shakespeare’s

*Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*

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Abstract

This article investigates the disguise of Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* and that of Earl Kent in *King Lear*. It argues that through their disguises and downclassing, the two characters transgress their elite social position to maintain further power, control, status, and authority. Their aims are geared towards benefiting themselves. M. C. Bradbrook relates disguises to a decrease in social status, and Patrick Chura defines downclassing as experiencing the harsh life conditions of the less fortunate classes. By considering these views and the two plays’ socio-political contexts, the article maintains that Shakespeare disguised Vincentio and Kent to suggest moral weaknesses on their parts. Also, Vincentio’s and Kent’s motives, social invisibility, and social roles determine and complicate their chosen forms of disguise and downclassing. The article suggests that Kent’s disguise is more practical than the Duke’s. It concludes that the two disguises might indicate Shakespeare’s political mocking of the upper classes of his time.

Keywords: Disguise, Downclassing, Social Invisibility, *Measure for Measure*, *King Lear*.

Introduction

William Shakespeare’s plays are full of examples of disguise, downclassing, and social invisibility. In at least two of his plays, *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*, these social concepts intersect; however, previous scholars and critics have given a great deal of attention to disguise only. David Thatcher (1996), for example, suggests that in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare uses disguise to portray the Duke as a “comic victim” (114), neglecting Vincentio’s agency in manipulating the events in the play. Richard A. Levin (1982) argues that Shakespeare created several of his characters in the play, including the disguised Duke, to point out the irrationality and ambiguity of human behavior (257-8). Nevertheless, the disruption to the natural order that a disguised character causes is not considered in Levin’s article. Other critics have tried to establish links between the Duke’s disguise and other historical events. For instance, Jeffrey Doty (2012) argues Shakespeare disguises his Duke in the play to replicate the story of King James I entering London in 1604 (32-4). Doty specifically states that the “problem of popularity is central to Shakespeare’s vision of politics” and that the majority of “his princes recognize the latent power of the people and the potential for their rivals to harness that power” (33). The importance of Doty’s article comes from him...
finding a possible source that likely had inspired Shakespeare in writing *Measure for Measure*, suggesting that, similarly to James I, the disguised Duke is on a mission to guard his position through taming and disciplining his citizens.

By the same token, disguise in *King Lear* has attracted a good number of literary scholars. Hugh Maclean (1960) argues that Kent’s imperfect disguise is used to highlight Edgar’s successful role as the only character who is “wise and active” (54) in the kingdom after Lear’s fall. Other scholars see that both Kent and Edgar play their roles gracefully while in disguise. For instance, Marcia Holly (1973) explains that Kent and Edgar succeed in their disguises because they are undeceived about themselves as they know the reality of their identities and the roles they play while in disguise (137). Other critics have focused on the linguistic function of the texts to evaluate Shakespeare’s purpose behind disguising some characters in the play. For example, James Dale (2016) explores Edgar’s disguised role in the play, and he shows that Edgar’s use of prose while he is disguised carries social and political implications (86). However, Dale’s study fails to explain Kent’s disguise in similar terms. Reviewing previous scholarship on the topic shows that a number of literary critics have tried to explain the functions and purpose of disguise in the two plays. Nonetheless, downclassing and social invisibility remain undiscussed in the works of Shakespeare even though these dramatic devices cannot be separated from disguise, and they were important parts of the medieval traditions of drama.

This article explores, in light of the concepts of downclassing and social invisibility, the form and nature of disguise that Shakespeare chooses for two of his characters – the Duke in *Measure for Measure* and Kent in *King Lear*. Some critics such as Ivan Cañadas (2002) believe that the Duke disguises himself “to prevent the misdeeds of his deputy” (47). However, other critics describe Vincentio’s behavior as nonsensical and confusing. As Edward Siemon (1975) remarks, “Duke Vincentio’s feeble motivation for his apparently devious behavior has consistently troubled critics, and the more strictly the critics think of motivations in realistic and psychological terms, the greater his trouble” (118). Similarly, in *King Lear*, Kent’s actions seem to be puzzling, especially the fact that he remains in disguise longer than is necessary. Accompanying this disguising and downclassing are the Duke’s and Kent’s choices to make grand decisions to better serve their states and/or the individuals around them, but their actions are often vague. The claims to help their people create a discrepancy between their behaviors and the announced motives. As we will argue, despite what these characters claim, they are interested in role restoration to avoid social invisibility, and their chosen form of disguise and downclassing is influenced by their social roles and statuses. However, the new roles they adopt render them even more socially invisible. As a result, and due to being used to stand slightly socially invisible, Kent succeeds in his new role more than the Duke. In other words, because Kent’s original status is not as high as the Duke’s, he is more capable of assuming the role of a lower-class character. Nevertheless, in the end, the Duke attains almost all of his goals by disguising himself while Kent is devastated with the turn of events.

In order to draw this conclusion, the concepts of disguise, downclassing and social invisibility must first be discussed. It is now well-established among literary scholars that the use of disguise appealed to medieval playwrights. Both literary and social critics have clarified the meaning and the function of this
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dramatic device. Victor O. Freeburg (1915) defines dramatic disguise as “a change of personal appearance which leads to mistaken identity. There is a double test, change and confusion” (2). The confusion results from the disguised character’s attempt to hide his/her true identity from other characters but not from the audience. Of course, the audience has to know the true identity of the disguised character(s) as the progression of the plot in such plays depends on the audience’s knowledge of the trick. As Peter Hyland (2002) explains, disguise needs to be explicit to the audience; otherwise, the audience encounters a problem in distinguishing between the disguiser and the double character (79). Disguise can be seen as a form of mistaken identity in the sense that it blurs identity and the supposedly uninformed characters in the play behave as if the disguiser is someone else. The technique, as Bridget Escolme (2013) argues, was used in early modern performances as a method to assert the fragility of identity and social performance. Escolme also adds that it must have been very appealing for the audience who liked watching upper-class characters being downclassed on the stage and exposed to humiliation and insults due to their hidden identities (120).

In their analysis of Shakespeare’s use of disguise, critics such as M. C. Bradbrook (1952) and Peter Brand (1991) maintain the relevance between disguise, downclassing, and the rejection of societal rules. Bradbrook (1952) notes:

Disguises generally mean a drop in social status (except in farce) and in comical histories came a whole series of rulers who wooed milkmaids, learnt home truths from honest countrymen, stood at buffet with their subjects and finally revealed themselves with all graciousness. (162)

Much as disguise can give its bearer more access, it can also grant more options. In his commentary on the function of disguise in the early modern era and in Shakespearean comedies, Brand (1991) in the same manner argues that disguise was used as a method to represent the human wish to rebel against the man-made and divine established orders. Brand explains that the character’s taking on a form of disguise represents the character’s wish to change or manipulate his/her fate (19-20).

Most often in Shakespeare’s plays disguise goes hand in hand with downclassing. However, there are very few works that deal with the concept of downclassing in literature. Perhaps Patrick Chura (2005) did the most mature and complete study on downclassing in Anglo-American literature. Chura defines downclassing as sharing “a life experience with the lower classes” wherein a character from the middle class or an elevated class experiences first-hand the life of lower-class citizens (6). The experience is often described as having “condescension at the heart of the effort to elevate the lower classes by assuming the habiliments of poverty” (6). Chura also remarks that downclassing can reveal “far from selfless motives” because it can “supersede ostensibly altruistic purposes” (6). Thus, it is possible that one can downclass, or de-class, for self-gain because the experience itself is reflected on the role bearer. For example, as Chura explains, for some “male seekers of vital contact, class descent often resulted in a renewed masculine identity as a result of the exchange of the softened conditions of privileged life for the rugged hardship of a labor environment” (2). Nevertheless, despite the likely gain, downclassers are not immune to the side
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effects of downclassing because often they miss their old form(s) of life, as declassing will most likely render them socially invisible.

The term social invisibility is often associated with the marginalised status of certain people who are neither noticed nor perceived by their community due to political or ideological reasons. The novelist Ralph Ellison alludes to this meaning in *Invisible Man* (1952), a novel that depicts an African American character as socially invisible, marginalised, mistreated, misjudged, and ostracised. According to Françoise Král (2014), the term ‘social invisibility’ is relevant to “the process of social decline — otherwise known as ‘downward mobility’ (the loss of one’s job, social status and existence in the public sphere in various capacities)” (2). Král notes that there are two aspects of ‘political invisibility’: “the invisibilization of the ungrieved lives of marginalized migrants … and on the other hand the overstating or understating of the visibility of certain groups to serve the purposes of a certain political agenda” (31). In Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*, social invisibility is related to downward mobility, wherein aristocratic characters descend into lower classes. These characters, in spite of their original superior class, feel themselves to be socially invisible. Aiming to gain more power and authority, they downclass themselves although this mobility causes increased social invisibility. Therefore, the Duke’s and Kent’s motives for disguise and downclassing are self-serving, social-political ones. As we review in the following section, Shakespeare drew on important social and political figures from his age in composing the two plays.

**Historical Context**

The examples of disguise, downclassing, and social invisibility in *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear* resemble what historically took place in Britain during King James I’s accession. In 1604, King James I, several days before his coronation, passed incognito to spy on constructions close to the Royal Exchange (Doty 2012, 32). The king appreciated the civility of the people of the Exchange, which exclusively consisted of merchants, while he criticized the “rudeness of the Multitude” whom he encountered on the way to the constructions (qtd in Doty, 32). Somehow, the “multitude” identified James and tried to initiate physical contact with him. James did not like the crowd to touch him, and he wanted the crowd to respect him to signify their “deference” to his royal position (33). Indeed, James was anxious about being public:

> Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authority, are as it were set (as it was said of old) upon a publike stage, in the sight of all the people; where all the beholders eyes are attentively bent to looke and pry in the least circumstances of their secretest drifts: Which should make Kings the more careful not to harbour the secretest thought in their minde, but such as in the [sic] owne time they shall not be ashamed openly to avouch; assuring themselves that Time the mother of Veritie, will in the due season bring her owne daughter to perfection. (qtd in Goldberg, 379)

When James I decided to pass incognito, he performs downclassing and he becomes socially invisible and unrecognized as the ultimate power of the state which is something he is not used to as the head of the kingdom. The idea of disguise, downclassing, social invisibility, and the monarch’s seeking authority and
supremacy over the crowd are central to *Measure for Measure*. Duke Vincentio wants to know everything in the state; he disguises himself as a friar; his motives from the disguise and downclassing are to gain more authority. Not unlike King James, he does not want to humiliate his role as the head of the state when he comes into an approximate contact with the public (Multitude).

*King Lear* is also linked to the political and cultural atmosphere in Britain during the reign of Queen Elizabeth and King James I. James, Elizabeth’s successor, was notorious for his love for ultimate power and enmity for freedom of speech. James believed that, as the head of the state, his power should not be challenged or questioned because, as he claimed, he had divine rights (Kanemura 2013, 318). James’s desire for an absolutist regime was alarming that, to limit his power, the English parliament in 1607 denied him the opportunity to hold the title of ‘King of Great Britain’ (Lingard 1825, 116-17). James thought that by holding the title he would unite Britain under one central power; however, by doing so, James’s ambition, as some historians explain, led to civil war between 1637-1642 (Croft 2003, 5). Likewise, there is a great correlation between *King Lear* and James I’s politics: “*King Lear* both reflects and inverts the contemporary political situation of James, representing a king who tears Britain apart in the mistaken belief that he is handing over a secure and well-ordered kingdom to the next generation” (Hadfield 2004, 99). In *King Lear*, the first scene opens with Lear demanding a map because he has decided to divide the kingdom among his three daughters thinking this act would bring harmony and peace. To the contrary, Lear drags the kingdom into chaos and blood-soaked civil war that ends in the death of his family which is an outcome Kent tries to stop. Comparably to the conflict between Lear and Kent, James had a set of beliefs that made it improbable for the subjects to intervene politically nor their counselling to be taken seriously by the king (Hadfield, 100).

The character of Kent, a loyal counsellor to Lear, advises Lear that his eldest two daughters deceive him. Kent’s advice was not followed by Lear, and similar incidents took place historically in the monarchy of King James (101). Kent, a representation of a counsellor or a public servant, struggles with an authoritative ruler for the unity of the state. Kent is humiliated because he tries to stop Lear from making rash decisions that may cause calamities for the Kingdom. Kent was banished from the kingdom, and a similar thing happened with Peter Wentworth, a member in the Elizabethan parliaments, who “was imprisoned for arguing … that the House of commons needed to be independent of the crown’s demands and that members of parliaments should possess freedom of speech” (105). Indeed, Shakespeare complicates the representation of such a political figure. The character Kent, who finally realizes that Lear has lost his senses and won’t listen to his counselling, decides to downclass and disguise himself for personal and impersonal reasons.

**Discussion**

The Duke’s and Kent’s original social standings play essential roles in selecting their forms of disguise. Siemon (1975) points out that in Shakespearian plays, there is an association between the played role and the real role of the disguised characters (105-6). Obviously, both characters go from higher classes and disguise themselves to fit into a lower class. The nature of the Duke’s disguise suggests that he looks
for a role in which he can downclass yet maintain some type of authority, a role that will also soften the suffering he will experience by removing himself from his elite position. As the head of Vienna, Vincentio is already at the height of all social classes, so any attempt to disguise himself means that he must enter a lower social class. Being a ruler means having power. It demands that those of a lower hierarchy respect him, either out of deference to him or the position, or out of fear, to avoid the punishment that often resulted from disrespect or disobedience. Likewise, King James demanded this kind of respect from his people; he wanted them to signify his majestic position even when he tried to pass unnoticed (Doty, 33), and the character of the Duke is featured similarly. As the head of the state, the Duke in *Measure for Measure* controls most of the events that take place in the kingdom, and, as a result, his subjects trust his decisions because it is believed that he represents the best interests of the state and the subjects. The role he chooses enables him to have omniscience over his subjects. Similar to King James who put on a disguise seeking unlimited knowledge of what happened in the state (Doty, 33), the Duke craves to ultimately show the multitude his supreme knowledge and authority.

The Duke decides that the disguise most suitable for himself is a friar. This will enable the Duke to achieve his goals under a disguise that would provide him new sets of privileges, for a friar is also granted certain elevated rights, similar to those of a duke, but under a different form. Friars have agreed-upon rights that are not available to regular people because they can give orders in the name of religion. The Duke quickly takes advantage of such rights. When he first goes to the prison to ask the prisoners to confess their sins, he demands the Provost give him access claiming his authority as a religious figure. He commands, "Bound by my charity and my blest order/ I come to visit the afflicted spirits,/ Here in prison. Do me the common right/ to let me see them, and to make me know/ The nature of their crimes" (*Measure*, 2.3.3-7). The provost responds to the Duke’s request, "I would do more than that, if more were needful" (2.3.9), agreeing to the friar’s rights.

Because of the religious nature of a friar’s role, anyone in this position is highly respected by both higher and lower classes. A friar can also give orders in the name of religion. For example, while in disguise, the Duke addresses Juliet, who committed adultery, saying: “Repent you, fair one, of the sin you carry” (2.3.20). A friar’s instructions are usually followed, for a friar is believed to be divinely inspired. Juliet responds to the Duke: “I do, and bear the shame most patiently” (2.3.21). She is agreeing to the friar’s/Duke’s authority that is attained by the disguise. People greatly trust friars, thus talking to them freely and easily. They confess their guilt in order to rid themselves of sin. This gives the Duke access to obtain information and control people’s behavior. Additionally, as one critic puts it, “Once the Duke has his friar’s garb on and has learned how formally in person [to] bear like a true friar … he is able to move freely about his kingdom without being exposed” (Escolme 2013, 122). So the role of a friar best matches the Duke’s desire to disguise and downclass yet maintain status and authority.

The Duke seems to understand that a tremendous discrepancy would exist if he decides to assume a drastic disguise that has no common characteristics with his old role. A disguise is only effective if it is successful, because, as Christie Davies (2001) explains, “Most people have neither the skill nor the motivation to adopt a drastic disguise” (38). Bradbrook (1952) defines disguises as “the substitution,
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overlaying or metamorphosis of dramatic identity, whereby one character sustains two roles. This may involve deliberate or involuntary masquerade, mistaken or concealed identity, madness or possession” (160). The Duke disguises himself voluntarily and his choice of disguise is purposeful: he wants to succeed in the new role, and he is aware that downclassing is his only option. The Duke knows that he must sacrifice many of his privileges as a ruler when he takes a disguise. A friar is something that the Duke can naturally relate to because a friar, like a duke, holds social power, but he lacks knowledge concerning a friar’s practical role. Determined to succeed in his disguise, the Duke seeks the help of Friar Thomas to teach him the secrets of the profession. The Duke insists, “Therefore, I prithee,/ Supply me with the habit, and instruct me/ How I may in person bear/ Like a true friar” (Measure, 1.4.45-8). The Duke’s old role is similar in many ways to a friar’s role. Both roles enable the bearer to give commands based on two different forms of authority: ruling and religion. Yet, the Duke lacks knowledge in the ethics of the new role, so he asks for assistance from Thomas.

Kent’s disguise is more drastic than the Duke’s, but, unlike the Duke, his new role is a transformation he can relate to without further assistance from another character in the play. When Kent goes into disguise, he must go even further down the social ladder because, as an earl, he is of a lower social class than the Duke. It is very important to examine Kent’s role in King Lear before examining how his social class affects his choice of disguise. Kent has always been a noble and faithful servant to King Lear. He addresses Lear as “Royal Lear,/ Whom I have ever honored as my king,/ Loved as my father, as my master followed,/ As my great patron thought on in my prayers—” (Lear, 1.1.139-42). Kent continually demonstrates his faithfulness to Lear, saying: “My life I never held but as a pawn/ to wage against thy enemies; nor fear to lose it,/ thy safety being the motive” (1.1.155-7). It is evident that Kent has always been Lear’s noble servant. He is one of Lear’s close advisors, and does whatever is commanded of him. Clearly, the relationship between the two is based on authority, depicting a king and his advisor/noble servant. Therefore, when it is necessary for Kent to downclass, a servant under Lear’s command seems the most fitting disguise for him. As Hadfield (2004) puts it, Kent realizes that “drastic action is required to bring the king to his senses before everybody suffers” (100) including himself. Kent hopes that his new role will enable him to remain close to Lear as well as hold a role with duties similar to his old role. Kent disguises himself to avoid being banished and chooses to assume the role of a servant because, as we argue, Kent remains socially visible as long as he is close to Lear. Plus, opening Lear’s eyes and restoring the role for him means restoring status and authority for Kent too. At one point, Kent tells King Lear that he “can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale/ In telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly. That which/ Ordinary men are fit for, I am qualified in; and the best of me/ Is diligence” (Lear 1.4.129-32). Kent is prepared for his new role. His many years of service to King Lear help him easily adapt to his new role of a regular servant, for a servant at any level performs many of the same duties. Kent downclasses into a role that enables him to remain relatively close to Lear and enjoy some of the privileges he had in his old role.

Kent is addicted to Lear’s authority and that is why he does not leave the kingdom although he considers having a fresh start in another country. One of the biggest challenges for him is that he is an earl. This class, unlike the Duke’s class, permits competition between its members. Kent has become a favorite
of King Lear because he has dedicated himself to Lear’s service. Being one of the king’s advisors, Kent is given many privileges. Yet, when King Lear eventually surrenders his authority to Regan and Goneril and banishes Kent, Kent tries to undo his punishment by attempting to convince Lear, “See better Lear; and let me still remain the true blank of thine eye” (1.1.158). Kent knows that if someone else replaces Lear, the replacement will bring his favorite advisors and noble servants into the court, for they have already proven themselves to be loyal to the replacement. For political reasons, old entourages are always replaced with new ones when a new king or ruler is appointed. However strong the bond has been between Kent and King Lear, it is broken when King Lear becomes angry with Kent and punishes him. Assuming that King Lear represents King James I as discussed in the previous section, Kent’s harsh words to Lear “abruptly challenge James’s political assumption” that the monarch’s wishes should not be questioned or challenged. (Hadfield 2004, 100). Lear addresses Kent, “Hear me, recreant!/... Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow,/ Which we durst never yet, and with strained pride/ To come between our sentence and our power, which nor our nature nor our place can bear” (1.1.167, 169-74). The reaction to Kent’s objection to Lear’s decisions is similar to what happened to Peter Wentworth for voicing his objection to absolute monarchy. Kent is banished from the kingdom, and he is to be killed if found in the kingdom after the tenth day following his banishment (1.1.75-80). Hearing that, Kent says: “Thus Kent … / He’ll shape his old course in a country new” (1.1.186-7), but he doesn’t leave. This indicates that Kent is loyal to King Lear. While in disguise, he tries to convince the king to take him as a servant:

Kent: No, Sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.
Lear: What’s that?
Kent: Authority. (1.4.24-7)

Kent is so accustomed to being a close servant of King Lear that Kent does not know how to serve unless it is Lear he is serving. So, Kent disguises himself in hope of restoring his role and enjoying its privileges. Kent says, “If but as well I other accent borrow,/ That can my speech defuse, my good intent/ May carry through itself to that full issue/ For which I razed my likeness” (1.4.27-9). When Lear dies later in the play and Kent is asked to hold a role that would give him reign over the kingdom, Kent declines, saying, “I have a journey, sir, shortly to go:/ My master calls me, I must not say no” (5.3.320-1). Kent feels that his existence is pointless without Lear and recognizes that the importance of his old role is directly linked to Lear, so the significance of his role has died along with Lear.

In spite of his commitment to Lear, Kent, similarly to the Duke in Measure for Measure, disguises himself for personal motives. Several textual pieces of evidence suggest that both the Duke and Kent have pragmatic reasons to assume disguises, but their goals are different by nature, for they belong to different classes and play different roles in society. Social class affects the disguises that both choose, but it is not the only deciding factor. Underlying assumptions about what each character wishes to accomplish while in disguise must be discussed.

In Duke Vincentio’s case, he is overly concerned about his popularity and status as a ruler. He is the head of the state and has ultimate power and authority. His goals for disguising himself must be greatly
affected by the nature of the role of a duke. Any person who occupies the position of a duke would feel threatened if another person in the dukedom shows that he is capable of performing his duties. As Doty (2012) comments, “The Duke’s problem is that his authority is too dependent upon the customs of popularity” (55). The Duke feels he cannot fully enjoy the privileges of being a duke, for a large part of his role is enforcing the laws, which he fears doing. He wants to implement the laws, but feels that enforcing the “strict statues and most biting laws” (Measure, 1.3.19) will threaten his popularity because he presents his position as a merciful one. So if the Duke implements the laws, then he must punish those violating them. Punishment is not mercy. His reputation and popularity would significantly decline. The Duke finds a way to implement the law and preserve his reputation as a merciful ruler. He decides that Angelo, his deputy, shall enforce the laws while he temporarily retreats politically and disguises himself as a friar. Angelo plays a key role, because if the Duke himself were to “enforce the laws like Angelo, he would be subject to wider slander” (Doty 2012, 55). The Duke is sure that Angelo will enforce the laws because he is, as Lucio comments, “A man whose blood/ Is very snow-broth; one who never feels/ The wanton stings and motions of the sense,/ But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge/ With profits of the mind, study, and fast” (Measure, 1.4.56-9). With Angelo in charge, the subjects will blame the deputy for enforcing the severe laws, not the Duke. Eventually, the Duke plans to return to his position and its privileges without his popularity being affected.

The Duke knows that Angelo has the courage to enforce the laws, hence re-establishing a more orderly power for the Duke to reclaim. He directly tells Angelo that he has the full privileges of the Duke (1.1.43-4). Angelo tries to evade the responsibilities, but the Duke insists, “We have with leavened and prepared choice/ Proceeded to you: therefore take your honours” (1.1.51-2). The Duke forces the power on Angelo and forces him to up-class, which is something Angelo would likely fail in doing as up-classing is harder to manage than downclassing. Imposing the burden of ruling on Angelo is not a sign of trust or admiration because, as Levin (1982) explicates, the Duke’s emotions “seem more like hate, especially when he bestows power despite Angelo’s vehement protests about being ill prepared for high office” (256).

The Duke disregards whether or not Angelo is adequately prepared for the role, possibly to degrade Angelo’s political reputation in the dukedom. He could have chosen Escalus to be his deputy, as Escalus is neither strict nor too soft. In fact, Escalus seems to be wiser and more capable of managing Vienna than both the Duke and Angelo. Escalus advises Angelo, “Let us be keen, and rather cut a little/ Than fall and bruise to death…/ That in the working of your own affections/ Had time cohered with place, or place with wishing” (Measure, 2.1.5, 6, 10, 11). Yet, Escalus is not who the Duke desires to be in charge. The Duke does not even demand that Escalus correct Angelo or report to him in case Angelo becomes tyrannical. He claims that he must disguise himself in order to observe Angelo at work; nevertheless, he neither sets guidelines for Angelo’s actions nor does he ask Escalus and others to monitor Angelo.

The Duke’s true intention is deceptive. He puts Angelo in charge to restore his full authority over the state without negatively affecting his own popularity. As Doty (2012) puts it, “the Duke’s primary motive … is to establish his authority in Vienna in more absolute terms” (34). Moreover, Michael J. Redmond (2009) suggests that the Duke’s disguise is a method of self-protection by “silencing the opinion of the
individual subject” (167). Indeed, the Duke stays in Vienna, disguised, to stir the public against Angelo. Friar Thomas is skeptical from the beginning about the Duke’s scheme of disguising himself. Thomas demands that the Duke enforce the laws himself. Friar Thomas says, “It rested in your grace/ To unloose this tied-up justice when you pleased./ And in you more dreadful would have seemed/ Than in Lord Angelo” (Measure, 1.3.32-5). The Duke responds that he has “on Angelo imposed the office,/ Who may in th’ambush of my name strike home,/ And yet my nature never in the fight/ T’allow slander” (1.3.40-3). Despite the Duke’s rationale, Thomas knows that the Duke could stay in power and enforce the law with the help of Angelo and Escalus. The Duke could supervise his advisors without endangering any of the subjects’ safety or lives, and this would have avoided later situations, such as when Claudio is about to be executed and Isabella is blackmailed to have sex with Angelo to save Claudio’s life. Indeed, the Duke’s aim from being in disguise suggests moral weakness on his part.

Despite Friar Thomas’s skepticism about the Duke’s disguise, the Duke’s plan is successful. In the final scene, he is seen as a savior of the dukedom – as Angelo puts it: “like power divine” (5.1.361). As Levin (1982) suggests, “The Duke has made Angelo seem the source of all evil, and himself the source of all goodness” (259). The Duke’s actions seem to bring justice. He punishes those who have done wrong, and sets free those who have falsely been accused of doing wrong, and this enhances his popularity as a just ruler. The Duke ends up pardoning almost everyone, except Lucio, who questions the Duke’s morality, which might indicate that Lucio has touched on the Duke’s hidden motives. He pardons Angelo, even though his actions do not deserve to be pardoned. In other words, Angelo is made a living statue of a tyrant, a scarecrow and reminder to the people that nobody is capable of competing with the Duke. His plan has officially secured his popularity at the expense of Angelo and his subjects, as well. He is reassured that his position is safe. Furthermore, he is now seen as merciful, wise, and the alpha male in the dukedom; now he punishes and pardons as he wishes, reminding of the divine rights and privileges once King James I claimed.

Comparably, Kent’s motives for disguise are more called for than the Duke’s. Kent hopes that his disguise will help him survive and walk freely in a hostile kingdom. Kent speaks out against Goneril and Regan who become the new rulers. He says, addressing Lear, “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least;/ Nor are those empty-hearted [Goneril and Regan] whose low sounds/ Reverb no hollowness” (Lear, 1.1.152-4). Kent fears the reaction of the two sisters, which is proven in the text to be harsh against those who are faithful to Lear, like Gloucester. A good disguise is the safest option for Kent. For the most part, critics take Kent’s justification for disguising himself in stride, and his declared motives remain unquestioned. The only criticism one critic offers is that Kent continues in disguise “beyond the point where it would appear to be necessary” (Maclean 1960, 49). Kent originally claims that the disguise is necessary to re-establish closeness to Lear. Also, he fears that Cordelia and Regan will chase him for revenge. This proves that Kent’s disguise serves two functions: role restoration and a tool for survival.

Although Kent is left disappointed at the end of the play and the Duke achieves almost all his goals by disguising himself, Kent makes a more believable disguised character than the Duke. This is likely because Kent chooses a role that resembles his old one. Simultaneously, the new role prevents Kent from being banished. Indeed, both Kent and the Duke downclass and seek social invisibility. They experience problems
due to the conflict between their roles in reality and their roles in disguise. Every disguise involving
downclassing makes the disguised person suffer. They experience a loss of power and miss the privileges
of their real roles in the upper class. Both men experience this, but the Duke’s religious disguise complicates
his situation.

The benefit of the Duke’s religious disguise is that “he is able to move freely about his kingdom
without being exposed” (Escolme 2013, 125). However, the religious nature of the disguise gives the Duke
more invisibility. Although he is well known as a duke, society tends not to notice a person such as a friar
who chooses not to participate in worldly matters. Invisibility should be a positive device when in disguise;
however, the Duke already suffers from self-inflicted social invisibility as a duke. He is the ruler, yet he
feels he cannot practice his full authority. Feeling like he does not have full power leaves him somewhat
socially invisible. So, when he takes on the lower-class role of a friar, the social invisibility the Duke feels
is doubled.

As a side effect of the social invisibility that the Duke experiences while in a friar’s guise, he forgets
the limits of his new position, which makes him commit some mistakes. Sometimes he behaves as if he has
full authority and acts more like a duke than a friar. His disguise becomes less successful during those
moments. As Thatcher (1996) notices, “The Duke is playing a role which he mismanages grossly” (116).
For example, instead of comforting Claudio who is to be executed, the Duke tells him, “Prepare yours
elf for death. Do not satisfy your resolution with/ Hopes that are fallible. Tomo
[knees and make ready” (Measure, 3.1.169-71). This is not how a friar would respond. A friar’s warning
would be about the punishment of the divine after one dies. This statement comes from someone who has
the authority to punish. He also tricks Isabella. The Duke’s bed-trick “scheme may stain Isabella both
morally and sexually” (Levin 1982, 265). The Duke manipulates Isabella emotionally, too. His personal
and moral judgments are those of a duke rather than those of a friar, and so he did not entirely succeed in
managing to masquerade his identity.

The Duke tries to manipulate all aspects of the plot. This is not how a friar behaves. Escolme (2013)
comments on the contrast between the Duke’s disguise and his actual role, writing that “Disguise gives
Duke Vincentio an ultimate dramaturgical power: as a humble friar he completely controls the plot, whereas
as duke he was unable to control his kingdom” (30). The Duke’s power exceeds that of a ruler, as exhibited
when he, disguised as a friar, commands an officer to “Take him [Pompey] to prison, officer./ Correction
and instruction must both work/ Ere this rude beast will profit” (Measure, 3.1.286-8). Furthermore,
disguised as a friar and supposed to be a foreigner, the Duke defends himself when Lucio attacks him: “Sir,
the Duke is marvelous little beholden to your reports” (4.3.149-53). He further threatens Lucio that he will
be punished for his words. The Duke releases his anger and stress by taking it out on lower classes, and
Lucio becomes the victim.

Contrary to the Duke’s situation, Kent’s disguise is more equitable because he assumes a role which
is similar to his actual role and behaves accordingly. His ability to achieve social invisibility is far better
than the Duke’s. Kent is humble in his role as a servant, and this allows him to move freely to achieve his
plan. Plus, it is a necessity for Kent to achieve social invisibility, for if anyone were to discover him in the
kingdom, he would be killed. His survival depends on remaining unnoticed. Of course, Kent suffers from aspects of downclassing and being socially invisible in the new role, but the nature of his disguise and his determination to pass unnoticed makes him more successful. However, Kent is not perfect in his disguise. His true identity is almost revealed to his message carrier. The messenger could have revealed Kent’s secret to Goneril and Regan, but Kent insists the messenger know that he is “a gentleman of blood and breeding;/ And from some knowledge and assurance, offer/ This office to you” (Lear, 3.1.40-2). This moment denotes that Kent is in pain as a drawback of being socially invisible; he misses his actual role and identity.

Despite this one moment of weakness, Kent proves to be a good disguiser in various situations. When Cornwall and Regan command that Kent must be punished in the stocks all night, Kent keeps his true identity hidden. He only objects to the punishment, and argues that he is too old for the punishment and that it would insult the King if one of his men should be ill-treated (2.2.119-20). Further, in Act 2, Scene 4, Kent remains silent and suppresses his impulsiveness when Cornwall and Regan treat King Lear badly and deny him shelter. In addition, Kent refuses to cast off his disguise when Cordelia asks him to do so:

Cordelia: Be better suited. These weeds are memories of those worser hours. I prithee, put them off.

Kent: Pardon me, dear madam; Yet to be known shortens my made intent. My boon I make it, that you know me not till time and I think meet. (4.7.811)

Because of all these moments of staying true to the disguise and therefore achieving social invisibility, Kent’s ability to disguise himself is more successful than the Duke’s.

In Measure for Measure and King Lear, Duke Vincentio and Kent disguise themselves and claim that they must do so for the benefit of their states and the people around them. Yet, when the two plays are examined closely, it is evident that disguise enables Vincentio to establish his power and popularity, while Kent restores his role and ensures personal safety. The choices of disguise, downclassing, and resulting social invisibility complicate the disguisers’ situations. Although both the Duke’s and Kent’s true identities are never revealed to the rest of the characters in the plays, Kent’s choice of disguise and performance are more practical than the Duke’s.

Disguise is an important strategy in medieval drama because it enables those in disguise to switch back and forth between different roles and classes. This appeals to the Shakespearean audience, which often included a mix of people from different social classes. Disguise intersects with downclassing and social invisibility, and this thematic intersection engages the audience and opens new vistas of understanding. It allows the audience to witness different situations and question the motives of those seeking a disguise.

Conclusion

In parallel to Shakespeare and his medieval audience, literary critics have shown great interest in disguise. They have questioned the motives of Vincentio and Kent in assuming disguises; however, previous studies have approached the device in isolation from downclassing and social invisibility. When the concepts of disguise, downclassing, and social invisibility are considered together, we find that Shakespeare’s choices of disguise for his two aristocratic characters indicate moral weaknesses on their parts. For example, making Kent’s disguise more practical than the Duke’s indicates the playwright’s
politically mocking attitude towards the upper classes of his time. Shakespeare has been criticized by groups of critics for being classist and an advocate for the nobles. However, his writings suggest that he is a social reformer. Doty (2012) insists that Shakespeare, in his plays, “taught his audiences how to analyze political situations and statecraft more broadly” (34). Shakespeare was ahead of his time by pointing out the faults of all class members in his community, including the fact that the aristocrats are not divinely inspired, or have divine rights, nor do they always have the best interests of the state in mind. Sometimes they want to make sure that the state and the rulers are doing well because that directly impacts their personal interests matching king James I’s desire to be inaugurated as the ‘King of Great Britain’ and the push back by people such as Peter Wentworth. In *Measure for Measure* and *King Lear*, hence, Shakespeare seemingly sent messages to the aristocrats by showing them how to adopt morally practical roles in reality to help them succeed in life and govern their states wisely for the benefits of their subjects.
References

