

# [Shakespeare’s presentation of isabella](https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-presentation-of-isabella/)

‘ Different audiences respond to Isabella in different ways.’ Show how Shakespeare’s presentation of Isabella could lead to a wide range of responses. The mere mention of Isabella’s name appears to strike indignant fear into the heart of the literary critic. Her character divides them into factions of warring interpretations, just as her moral dilemma divides an audience. In the words of Quiller-Couch, critics make ‘ two opposite women of her, and praise or blame her accordingly.’ As Measure For Measure has aged, new dimensions of moral outrage and blind exoneration have added to this complexity, which is, in essence, the confused reactions of writers and audiences to Isabella’s decision in the face of Angelo’s ‘ sadism’. To the esteemed Quiller-Couch (1922), there is a ‘ rancid’ element in Isabella’s chastity brought to the surface when she turns into a ‘ bare procuress’ substituting Marianna shamed body for her own. He highlights the divide between Isabella’s morally ‘ righteous choice’ and her own deplorable self-preservation. Rosalind Miles (1976) also remarks on her ‘ unscrupulous readiness to place another head on the block intended for herself’ after the unshakeable righteousness of her decision to refuse Angelo. This could, perhaps, be seen as evidence of Isabella’s fall from grace. Is it possible that she came to the wrong conclusion in the face of her dilemma? Mary Suddard (1909) has arrived at an entirely contrary conclusion in the face of the same play. She describes how Isabella is a representation of ‘ Puritanism under its most favourable aspect …intense in its moderation, passionate in its self-control.’ This peculiarly Puritan paradox is confronted with ‘ real life’ and the full consequences of human frailty and immorality, before reaching a new moral high ground where Isabella’s early nunnery training has been ‘ not only transcended but unconsciously condemned’. The lofty rules of Isabella’s faith are transformed into narrow constraints, just as the locked doors and walled gardens of her abode are, as the play closes, about to be replaced by the Duke’s palace of light. Many critics are swift to condemn Isabella for her ‘ triumphant preservation of chastity’ (Ellis-Fermor 1936). More shocking to Mrs Lennox in 1753 was Isabella’s abuse of her brother:’That torrent of abusive language, those coarse and unwomanly reflections on the virtue of her mother, her exulting cruelty to the dying youth are the manners of an affected prude, outrageous in her seeming virtue; not a of a pious, innocent, and tender mind.’Mrs Lennox proclaims Isabella ‘ a vixen’ for her cruelty and ferocity in Act 3, and perhaps she is correct in thinking that, whatever her distress, Isabella’s rage at doomed Claudio’s desperate attempts to save his life could not be exonerated. Nevertheless, J. W. Lever (1965) has tried, pointing out that this is ‘ her second male solicitation in a short space of time,’ and the trusted brother on whom she was relying for rescue betrays her, dashing her hopes of salvation. Thus the once clear waters of social acceptance are muddied again. He does however, suggest that though Isabella pleads for her brother’s life, her actions are against her true convictions, contriving to comment on the extremely unusual form of Isabella’s mercy plea. Far from attempting to vindicate her brother, she questions Angelo’s fitness to judge other human beings, and pleads the principle of mercy.’Go… and ask your heart what it doth know that’s like my brother’s fault. If it confess a natural guiltiness … let it not sound a thought upon your tongue against my brother’s life.’Although a argument relevant to Angelo’s later revelations, it is still strange that Isabella foes not address the mitigating circumstances of Claudio’s case, and thus make more a feature of the distinction between civil betrothal and holy wedlock introduced as a theme earlier. F. R. Levis (1952), Harriet Hawkins (1978), S. Moore (1982), R. A. Levin (1982), Ronald Huebert (1983), and Carolyn E. Brown (1986) have all presented a more damning explanation. Moore remarks that Isabella’s persuasions to Angelo have a strong unconscious sexual suggestiveness, and Hawkins describes Isabella as a counterpart of Angelo’s hypocrisy in her professed hatred of sex and unrealised keen appetite. It is Brown, however, who takes the hypothesis to its fullest extent, basing her interpretation of Isabella as a sexual masochist unconsciously offering herself in fantasy to a sadistic Angelo. Brown is keen to stress Isabella’s helpless postures before Angelo, how her plea is based on the possibility of Angelo feeling lust, and the ‘ graphic envisioning of her ‘ violation’ which could be extrapolated from Act 2 sc. iv lines 100-104. Here Angelo’s shocking transformation from purity to perversity is more understandable is Isabella’s innocent suggestiveness and inadvertent sexual invitations ‘ acts as a stimulus to Angelo’s overwrought imagination’ (Miles.)It is, however, perhaps worth remembering here the hatred of the Puritans for contemporary playhouses and vice versa. Puritans claimed that plays set examples of immorality; that such conventions as the playing of women by boys encouraged perverse and lascivious thoughts; that on Sundays the theatres seduced the people from church attendance, and that the public playhouses were haunts of the dissolute and lecherous. When the Puritans came to power in 1642 following the revolution, one of their first moves was to close the theatres completely. Isabella and Angelo, as symbols of Puritanism, would hardly be treated sympathetically by Shakespeare, but were more likely to be turned into ridiculous figures of fun like poor Malvolio for their rigidity. Conversely, R. W. Chambers (1939) suggested that to a fifteenth-century audience, Isabella’s ‘ fanaticism’ was well understood in Shakespeare’s day as necessary and swift action in a ‘ stern age’. Martyrs were commonplace and the Smithfield fires were still in living memory. Isabella’s cruelty to her brother might have been better received four hundred years ago. Critics have yet to reach a consensus on Isabella’s moral dilemma, J. C. Maxwell (1949) even going so far as to declare it irrelevant, unimportant, and ‘ undramatic’. Her ‘ unattractive moral grandeur’ (Mrs Jameson 1832) was interpreted by M. Doran (1954) as ‘ superior strength and nobility of character’; and by J. Masefield (1911) as an obsessive fire of ‘ white generosity’ and Puritanism equating to Angelo’s religious fervour. W. Temple felt her preservation of chastity was the only theologically right thing to do, and A. E. Taylor (1901) argued that it was impossible to pass moral judgement on Isabella. Shakespeare’s ambiguity makes this character impossible to define. However, this does not seem to stop critics from trying.