

# [Isabella’s powers](https://assignbuster.com/isabellas-powers/)

Isabella is the strongest female character in “ Measure for Measure.” She debates with Angelo on an equal level and is not undermined by his authority. Her strength as a character derives from several sources; her chastity being one of the most significant. Isabella’s chastity provides her with a tool which most of the other females in this play lack, since they have all been sexually dominated by men. Her status as a nun also helps Isabella convince others of the accuracy of her convictions since she can appropriate the Christian doctrine as her own. Despite these two powers, it is her ability to manipulate two sets of laws, human and divine, and apply these to her advantage which truly allow her to continue to participate in situations typically attributed to males. Finally, Isabella manages to achieve her goal without compromising her values, but eventually bows down under male authority, in her implicit acceptance of the Duke’s marriage proposal. Regardless of the male dominated conclusion, Isabella’s powers of chastity, speech and interpretation of law allow her the opportunity to advance as far in the plot as to free her brother and debate with male authority, two events in which a woman’s participation were inconceivable in this time period. One of Isabella’s most unique characteristics is her chastity. She has renounced a sexual life in order to become a nun of the religious order of St. Clare. This decision elevates Isabella’s status in society due to the importance placed on chastity as a symbol of purity and legitimacy of birth at that time. “ In a patriarchal society, men are privileged with authority, yet, somewhat paradoxically, that authority depends upon the chastity of women” (Baines, 286). When an unmarried woman is chaste she is guaranteeing the legitimacy of her children, thus ensuring the patriarchy of the family. Purity in blood relations was an important issue in Shakespeare’s time, and therefore it was the female’s responsibility to be chaste in order to preserve the family’s honor as well as her own. The Duke exemplifies this mentality when confessing Juliet, and declaring her sexual proclivity “ a sin of heavier kind” (37, 29) than that of Claudio, who was equally responsible for her pregnancy. The excessive sexual license in Vienna leads the Duke to enforce chastity through a law which values chastity above a human’s life. The new valorization of chastity in Vienna increases the respect Isabella’s chaste status receives in the Viennese society; this is made evident in Lucio’s praise of her as a “ thing enskied and sainted, by your renouncement an immortal spirit..” (17, 34)Isabella’s position as a nun also allows her to challenge Angelo using Christian doctrine in defense of her brother’s life. The doctrine is one of the few elements of authority which even Angelo must obey, since God’s laws apply to everyone, including those of the highest authority on earth. Upon Isabella’s first encounter with Angelo she condemns the ease with which Angelo judges others and tries to dissuade his stern judgment of Claudio by asking “ How would you be, if he, which is the top of judgment, should but judge you as you are?” (33, 76) Here Isabella is trying to make Angelo identify with Claudio by implying that even Angelo himself is not free of sin. This vision of all humans as sinners and therefore not apt to pass judgment comes directly from the Christian proverb “ let he who has not sinned, cast the first stone”. Angelo cannot refute Isabella’s imposition of religious doctrine and defends himself by citing the earthly laws as responsible for the condemnation of her brother. Isabella skews Christian law and interprets it to her advantage. Though her brother has committed the sin of premarital sex, she tries to convince Angelo that exculpating him “ is no sin at all, but charity” (42, 63). After Angelo proposes the idea of a “ compelled sin” in order to save Claudio’s life, Isabella changes her perspective on Claudio’s death and tries to uses religious justification to excuse her from renouncing her chastity. “ Is’t not a kind of incest to take life from thine own sister’s shame?” (53, 138) Here Isabella uses the definition of all Christians as siblings in order to transform Angelo’s proposal into a societal sin, that of incest. This could also be interpreted on a more personal level, since Claudio is taking advantage of Isabella’s sex to lure Angelo into pardoning him. In both cases, the use of incest, a sin in Christian doctrine, is being highlighted. Isabella’s role as an exemplary model of Christian worship gives her the opportunity to use Christian doctrine as laws which empower and validate her actions and opinions. Isabella, though desiring to be a part of the religious world, continues to value the norms imposed by the Viennese society. She uses these standards as arguments in defense of her brother, referring to the power of authority since “ that in the captain’s but a choleric word, which in the soldier is flat blasphemy” (35, 130). Isabella focuses on the ability of authority to corrupt the laws of society to their advantage, a common practice during that time, yet a taboo subject to discuss. Her separation from that world because of the convent allows her to breach such subjects without fear of repercussion, since she is not looking to marry and become a part of Viennese society. She knows how authority hides behind the laws and therefore questions Angelo on the legal possibilities of releasing her brother, “ but might you do’t and do the world no wrong…” (32, 53) The issue of bastardy, key to Viennese society, is also important to Isabella. “ I had rather my brother die by the law than my son should be unlawfully born” (55, 187). Though Isabella seems willing to disregard society’s judgment, which would condemn Claudio to death, the dishonor of birthing an illegitimate child supersedes her affections for her brother. This shows Isabella’s true regard for upholding certain standards of Viennese society; she wants to be held in an exemplary position by this society and is not willing to sacrifice this status for her brother. Isabella uses both divine and human law to justify herself, usually invalidating one set of laws to further validate the other. Her decision to “ live chaste, and, brother, die: more than our brother is our chastity,” (47, 183) constitutes an example of her use of religion to validate her chastity, while invalidating the moral law which would encourage her to sacrifice her chastity for Claudio’s life. Nuns participate in a “ marriage” with Christ; by giving herself to Angelo, Isabella would abandon the opportunity to join the sisterhood. She would thus pollute her soul, which should be the purest element of her being. Isabella thinks “ better it were a brother died at once, than that a sister, by redeeming him, should die forever” (44, 106). Isabella has decided to elevate the worth of her soul above that of Claudio’s body. This stance could be considered hypocritical. If purity of soul were above that of the body, by giving herself to Angelo Isabella would be saving her brother’s body and would not have to put her soul at risk. This act would be a sacrifice of her body, similar to Jesus’ corporeal sacrifice, forced upon her by others, thus lacking the participation of her soul. Despite Isabella’s repeated allusions to the death of her soul, it is her fear of dishonor and rejection by both the divine and Viennese society which truly motivates her to reject Angelo’s offer. Isabella also rejects one set of laws in order to further her purpose when Mariana begs her to forgive Angelo, in order to prevent his death. Isabella persuades the Duke to exonerate Angelo by claiming that “ thoughts are no subjects, intents but merely thoughts” (106, 451). Since Angelo did not succeed in his attempt at illicit sex Isabella believes that he should not be charged. This reasoning, though permissible in human law, where charges are lessened if the actual deed does not take place, is unacceptable by Christian standards. In the book of Matthew Jesus tells his worshippers that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Therefore, Christianity condemns the thought as strongly as the action, yet Isabella chooses to ignore this and convince the Duke using society’s laws regarding guilt. Isabella needs the support of a given set of laws to persuade the male characters of the accuracy of her statements, yet she is willing to use divine and human law interchangeably to achieve the desired result, keeping both her chastity and honor intact. Despite the allure of chastity as a rare value in the Viennese society, Isabella does not understand or recognize men’s attraction towards her. She has chosen to devote her life to God, and it is this “ marriage” which she considers holy, not the union between man and woman encouraged by society. One could consider her apprehensive towards men, desiring a “ more strict restraint upon the sisterhood,” (16, 4) and telling Lucio that “ my power, alas, I doubt,” (19, 77) when regarding her ability to convince Angelo to release her brother. This could be a factor in Isabella’s decision to join a nunnery; the isolation from men would prevent her from suffering the dishonor so prevalent among the majority of the female characters in this play, who are subjugated by men. By the end of the play, Isabella begins to grasp the power she holds over men, and defends Angelo by claiming that “ a due sincerity governed his deeds till he did look on me” (105, 444). She now recognizes the power of her beauty and chaste nature in influencing men’s actions. Isabella’s newfound understanding does not indicate her acquiescence with the societal union the Duke offers her, “ what’s mine is yours and what is yours is mine” (109, 535). The uncharacteristic silence which ensues after the Duke’s proposal for her hand in marriage marks Isabella’s dissatisfaction with the idea of marrying him. The Duke is responsible for saving her brother’s life, which makes Isabella indebted to him. Her initial duty, that of preserving her chastity and devoting her life to God, will now be neglected as Isabella is subjugated by the Duke’s authority. This moment marks one of the most significant changes in Isabella’s personality. The impending loss of her chastity, a characteristic which increased her power and value, destroys Isabella. She must now succumb to the authority of a male, the very idea she has been fighting against throughout the course of the play. Marriage represents both a loss of chastity and value to Isabella, who must reject her religious ideals and thus lower her status from a pure worshipper of God to a common female bowing down under the authority of a male. Isabella’s speech, peppered with religious doctrine and societal morals, persuades most of the male characters in the play. Unfortunately, her beauty and sexuality work against her, tempting Angelo to propose illicit sex as payment for her brother’s freedom. The implication of Isabella’s transformation from a nun, renouncing sexual activity, to a whore, giving herself over in exchange for her brother’s life, is impossible for her to accept, and she chooses to let Claudio die. Isabella’s chastity, at the beginning a persuasive tool, turns into a distinguishing part of her identity which must be guarded at all costs, even if this cost is Claudio’s life. Isabella’s power is such that she is able to save her brother and keep her chastity, through her cunning and speech. Yet, in a tragic turn, Isabella unwillingly succumbs to male authority and her powers vanish; she is now a common female whose opportunities have been thwarted by societal norms.