Who is Isabella?

*Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare

**Teaching notes**

The student task sheets below are designed to help students unpick the portrayal of Isabella in various stage productions, and specifically in Act 5 Scene 1.

In task four, you could direct weaker students to the following representations of her through the eyes of other characters and through her own behaviour, as well as in Act 5 Scene 1:

- Act 1 Scene 2 (Claudio)
- the end of Act 2 Scene 2 (Angelo’s soliloquy)
- Act 3 Scene 1(175-183) (the Duke)
- Act 1 Scene 4 (especially her initial complaint that the rules of the convent aren’t strict enough, lines 3-5); Act 2 Scene 2 and Act 2 Scene 4 (Isabella’s behaviour).

Here are some further ideas for how to explore Isabella’s character in more depth:

1. **Isabella’s ‘best bits’**

Imagine a scenario similar to the TV programme *Big Brother* where characters are summed up by a series of sound bites. Students should select their top five quotes from Isabella. This could be done as a whole class with students justifying why their ideas should be included rather than someone else’s. Your more able students could do this without support. Weaker students could select the ones they consider to be most important from the suggestions below:

‘I speak not as desiring more [privileges] / But rather wishing a more strict restraint’
(Act 1 Scene 4)

‘... What poor ability’s in me / To do him [Claudio] good! ... My power? Alas, I doubt.’
(Act 1 Scene 4)

‘There is a vice that most I do abhor, / And most desire should meet the blow of justice;’
(Act 2 Scene 2)

‘O, it is excellent / To have a giant’s strength, but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant.’
(Act 2 Scene 2)

‘... were I under the terms of death, / Th’impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies ... ere I’d yield / My body up to shame.’ (Act 2 Scene 4)

‘Better it were a brother died at once, / Than that a sister, by redeeming him / Should die forever.’ (Act 2 Scene 4)

‘Sign me a present pardon for my brother, / Or with an outstretch’d throat I’ll tell the world aloud / What man thou art.’ (Act 2 Scene 4)

‘... may Angelo, / In all his dressings, caracts, titles, forms, / Be an arch-villain.’ (Act 5 Scene 1)
2. Madonna or whore?

More able students could consider how feminist criticism has tried to understand Isabella’s character, perhaps using the quote from L.C. Knights below, and how the traditional Madonna/whore dichotomy could be applied to her. Students could first try to find different sections of the text to provide evidence for both these ways of viewing her. If support is needed then the sections of text identified above for task four would be useful.

‘What ... are we to think of Isabella? Is she the embodiment of a chaste serenity, or is she, like Angelo, an illustration of the frosty lack of sympathy of a self-regarding puritanism?’

L.C. Knights in ‘The Ambiguity of Measure for Measure’ (Scrutiny, 10, January 1942).

Students could discuss whether this text is an entirely male one as McLuskie argues in the criticism below. Is there any way of seeing Isabella as powerful? Or is she a mere object of exchange? What can we deduce about Shakespeare’s opinions on women from reading this play?

‘Any criticism which argues whether Isabella is a vixen or a saint places itself comfortably in the limited opening that the text allows for it; it takes up the argument about whether Isabella is to be more than a woman in giving up her brother or less than one in submitting to Angelo’s lust. The text allows her no other role ... Feminist criticism of this play is restricted to exposing its own exclusion from the text. It has no point of entry into it, for the dilemmas of the narrative and the sexuality under discussion are constructed in completely male terms ... and the women’s role as the objects of exchange within that system is not at issue, however much a feminist might want to draw attention to it.’


3. Close analysis of Act 2 Scene 4

Students will need the passage from line 96-end. They should answer the questions and more able can attempt the final extension task (the questions are aimed at lower ability).

a) Isabella uses two similes in her speech from line 99. Find and explain them commenting on the language closely and the impression it gives us of her character.

b) What does Isabella mean when she says ‘Seeming, seeming!’ about Angelo (line 149)?

c) Explain the image that Isabella uses at the end of this passage to illustrate her thoughts about her brother.

d) In your own words list the arguments Angelo uses to try to persuade Isabella.

e) Find the best quote from the passage to show Angelo’s abuse of his power. Explain what it shows and how it shows it.
f) Find the best quote from the passage to illustrate Isabella’s strength. Explain what it shows and how it shows it.

Extension (and exam practice question)

This could be done as a passage based question (for AQA) or an essay question (for OCR): ‘Isabella comes across as a strong, caring woman in the play’. Discuss your opinion with reference to the passage and other sections of the text.

4. Video representation

This video shows a post-performance ‘game’ played with students in the New Victory Theater in America asking them to decide whether aspects of the plot are reprehensible or virtuous. Although not all points are about Isabella this provides an interesting discussion frame. Students could watch the video with the teacher stopping it at specific points to give them a chance to decide their own opinions: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEO4EjkCOus.

NB All references to the text are from the Arden edition (2013).
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*Measure for Measure*, like other Shakespearean plays, has very few stage instructions, therefore when it is being performed, a great deal of the interpretation is left up to individual directors. Different versions of the same play can sometimes show completely opposite presentations of the same scene or character.

**Task one**

How do you visualise Isabella? Describe or draw what she would look like on stage and what you would emphasise about her character and personality.

**Task two**

Look at the images of Isabella at the end of the task sheets and discuss how she has been presented. Are they broadly in line with how you had imagined she would appear or not? Which image is closest to your ideas from task one and which one is least like you had imagined?

**Task three**

The last scene of *Measure for Measure* where the Duke proposes to Isabella, presents directors with a challenge, and there have been many different presentations over the years. For example:

*Isabella visibly recoils when faced with the Duke’s proposition. It is clear that not only was it totally unexpected, but also completely undesired.*
1975 Greenwich Theatre, London
Directed by Jonathan Miller

*A joyful Isabella embraced the Duke after he proposed. There had been various clues throughout the performance that the Duke was having trouble controlling his attraction to Isabella, and was finding it increasingly hard to maintain his disguise as the Friar. This led to visual comedy as the Friar found a number of occasions to embrace Isabella as part of his Godly duties!*”
1984 Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican Theatre, London
Directed by Stuart Burge

*The BBC production was heavily influenced by a group of critics who drew out the Christian allegory within the play. The production used a variety of methods to suggest that the Duke was God in disguise and Lucio was a close relative of the devil. The end scene saw Isabella as a fledgling nun exalt in her symbolic union with God.*
1955 The Third Programme of the BBC
Directed Raymond Raikes (advised by Nevill Coghill)

1. How do each of the interpretations affect how we see Isabella’s character? You could consider how powerful she seems, how in control and how sympathetic.

2. Which of these presentations do you think works the best? Choose your favourite and find evidence from other parts of the play to back up your reading of Isabella’s character.
Miller’s production was quite radical in general, and the character of Isabella also looked completely different from previous versions of the play. The following is an extract from a New Statesman review of the time (Vol 90 p.230):

‘Consistent with the overall realism (of the production), the Duke is divested of divine overtones. The office he transfers to Angelo is not the ‘demi God authority’ but a seedy room - furnished with one faded portrait, a metal bin, paperclips, rubber stamps and books of regulations ... In this setting Angelo, the complete bureaucrat from his precise gold spectacles to his cheap briefcase, is sexually stirred by Isabella. Not that her person has anything to do with it. Penelope Wilson plays her as a flat chested, flat footed nun in black rubber soled shoes, clutching in her purple hands a nasty handbag, into which she claws for a handkerchief to scarify her raw nose. Angelo is turned on by the only thing that could attract him - the different, harsher set of rules she embodies so fervently.’

Do you like this interpretation of Isabella? Why or why not? Try to justify your ideas with reference to the text.
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Images of Isabella (for task two)

Engraving dated 1797 by W.C. Wilson after W. Smirke RA of Angelo and Isabella in Act 2 Scene 4 of *Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare. / Credit: Design Pics Historical Collection / Universal Images Group / Copyright © Design Pics Historical Collection / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit [www.britannica.co.uk/trial](http://www.britannica.co.uk/trial).

Dilys Hamlett, in the role of Isabella, in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* at the Old Vic Theatre in London. / Credit: PA Archive / Press Association Images / Universal Images Group/ Copyright: © Press Association Images/ For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit [www.britannica.co.uk/trial](http://www.britannica.co.uk/trial).
Miss Glyn as Isabella and Mr Hoskins as Lucio, Act I Scene 4, in Measure for Measure, by William Shakespeare. Credit: Bridgeman Art Library / Universal Images Group / Copyright: © Bridgeman Art Library / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit www.britannica.co.uk/trial

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Isabel's pleading, Measure for Measure, Act II Scene 2, illustration from 'Tales from Shakespeare' by Charles and Mary Lamb, 1905. / Credit Norman Mills Price / Bridgeman Art Library / Universal Images Group / Copyright: © Bridgeman Art Library / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit www.britannica.co.uk/trial