
Point - Counterpoint: Isabella



Isabella

“so weak an advocate, so rigid a moralist, and so uncharitable a sister”

Isabella is one of the most divisive characters for readers and audiences of *Measure for Measure*. Although some critics have upheld her as a paragon of virtue, Isabella’s actions and motivations are potentially inconsistent with the faith she professes. She is a morally questionable character because of her lukewarm defense of Claudio, her reasons for rejecting Angelo’s proposal, and the callous condemnation of her brother immediately juxtaposed with an eagerness to assist with the bedtrick.

Isabella appears unwilling to plead on behalf of her brother after his sin of the flesh. Lucio must dispel Isabella’s doubts and convince her to confront Angelo because she is either too shy or unsure about her persuasive powers. When she finally goes to the deputy seeking mercy, she inexplicably begins her suit by telling him that she agrees that fornication is an abhorrent vice and that she is at odds about defending Claudio. Richard Grant White writes, “She briefly and coldly states her case; and after receiving only a quasi-denial of her proposition, she instantly retires; not neglecting the opportunity, however, to eulogize the law which in the morrow will leave her brotherless.”¹ Isabella eventually practices her “prosperous art . . . with reason and discourse” (1.2.174-5), following several shrewd arguments from Angelo and repeated urgings by Lucio, Claudio’s indispensable advocate and friend in the scene; however, as everyone knows, she inadvertently appeals to Angelo’s “sense” more than his sense of justice or reason. Isabella apparently has no desire to debate

¹ Richard Grant White (1854) in *Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition: Measure for Measure*, ed. George L. Geckle (London: Athlone, 2001), 129.

at the beginning of their second encounter; she is prepared to depart after the first denial of her plea. Although she claims to love her brother dearly, Isabella's defense of Claudio displays inconsistent levels of intensity and commitment to the cause because her personal feelings toward sex and sin make her an unsatisfactory advocate.

One's response to Isabella will largely depend on how one views her refusal of Angelo's indecent proposal. Supporters of Isabella place her beside Una and Lady Britomart as an emblem of pre-marital virginity; however, other people have disapproved of her "porcupine purity"² and her "virtue that is 'sublimely good' at another's expense."³ Whether or not Isabella should sacrifice her chastity is one of the central and most vexing moral issues of the play, but even a reader who agrees with her can question her motives. Isabella believes that her very soul is at stake in this proposition, thinking that if she submits she will be eternally and irrevocably damned for committing a mortal sin. Hence, she is envisioning a God no more just or merciful than Angelo, the corrupt deputy who has propositioned her. Isabella affirms, "More than our brother is our chastity" (2.4.186), using the royal pronoun "our"; this presumptuous language reflects a level of self-righteous indignation that is repulsive given the calamitous situation of her brother. Furthermore, she immediately asserts the superiority of the virtue of chastity without even considering the possibility that another virtue such as charity may be more appropriate for the situation.

Act 3 of *Measure for Measure* throws Isabella into an emotional turmoil that reveals another considerable character flaw. In her first line to Claudio, Isabella says, "Lord Angelo, having affairs to heaven, / intends you for his swift ambassador" (3.1.56-7), an insensitive attempt at lightening Claudio's mood. Isabella unintentionally torments her brother over the next few lines by withholding information from him that concerns his very life and death. When she finally describes Angelo's proposition, Claudio expresses his fear and desire to live in moving poetry. Isabella lashes out at him in utterly uncompassionate defensiveness. Rather than trying to empathize with a brother awaiting execution and clearly not "absolute for death" (3.1.5), she hotly condemns him for beastliness and cowardice. Isabella even prays, "Heaven shield my mother played my father fair" (3.1.143), hoping that

² *Ibid.*, 128.

³ William Hazlitt (1817), *ibid.*, 56.

her mother was unfaithful to her father and that dishonest Claudio is some other man's son. As well as protecting her deceased father's honor, Isabella here wishes to be alienated from the sentenced sinner, who she believes is no longer deserving of mercy. Regardless of whether or not Claudio's plea is immoral, Isabella would certainly gain greater sympathy from an audience if she treated her brother with more charity and empathy. Taken with the rest of her actions in the play, we can imagine an actress portraying Isabella without any affection for her brother at all; however, when the Duke proposes the bedtrick and when someone else's virginity and potential salvation is on the line, Isabella is perfectly ready to help in any way she can, even if it entails lying, another sin forbidden by the God to whom she is supposedly devoted. Isabella does not hesitate to promote profitable sins when she believes that any possibility of consequent blemish will be on someone else's soul.

The audience is probably meant to recognize a moral progression in Isabella by the end of the play. Shakespeare contrasts her earlier actions, which range from mildly conscientious though eloquent to wholly devoid of human feeling, with her final gesture of true charity as she kneels and pleads for Angelo's life. Although some readers have criticized this speech for being overly legalistic or even openly vain, the moral significance of this selfless deed carries more weight than all the lines she uttered on behalf of Claudio put together. Only at the end of the play does Isabella learn to implement her coldly abstract virtues in a positive way. Perhaps the development of Isabella's character should be paired with an acceptance of the Duke's proposal and a shift from the isolated world of the nunnery to a married vocation, where her virtues can serve as an example for others and reappear in her offspring. Unfortunately, the playwright has not given us a clear answer regarding Isabella's response. In any event, it is difficult to feel an abundance of compassion for so weak an advocate, so rigid a moralist, and so uncharitable a sister, and Isabella's intentions should not be taken for granted as just or wholly motivated by religious sentiment.

Isabella

“a good sister, a good friend, a good woman, and a good servant of God”

Often critics are likely to cast Isabella as either a saint or a cold-hearted bitch. By restricting her to one of these two mutually exclusive categories, they deny her a rich human complexity that is sometimes contradictory and irrational. Despite her initial harsh reaction to Claudio’s fear of death, her assistance with the bedtrick, and her strict adherence to her faith, she is an admirable character worthy of respect and admiration.

On the simplest secular level, people dislike Isabella because she refuses the gender roles prescribed for her by society. Isabella has a talent for speech and rhetoric, but her gifts would surely be wasted in Vienna, where such outspokenness is characteristic of prostitutes, and where wives are expected to be submissively obedient to their husbands. The laws of the social world are imposed by men like the Duke and enforced by men like Angelo. Women suffer the consequences: Mariana, rejected, pines away at the grange; Juliet is pregnant and alone; Mistress Overdone is carted off to jail; Kate Keepdown gets pregnant and gives up her baby. A woman is “nothing” if she is not a maid, widow, wife or “a punk” (“prostitute,” 5.1.182-3) in the patriarchal society of the play. In such a world, ironically, the convent is a place where strong-minded women like Isabella can defy gender norms and live God-affirming lives together without men dictating their lives. Who can blame Isabella for retreating into a convent where the laws are self-imposed? It is the only way she can retain independence without compromising her virginity and her faith.

The main reason people dislike Isabella is her apparently cold manner toward her brother in 3.1, when he, frightened about his impending execution, begs her to let him live by sacrificing her virginity to the corrupt magistrate. “In Isabella’s declamation there is something harsh, something forced and far-fetched,” Samuel Johnson said. But Johnson considered the matter further: “her indignation cannot be thought violent when we consider her not only a virgin but a nun.”⁴ As Johnson suggests, our sympathies certainly lie with Claudio because we know that his punishment is severe and excessive. But this sympathy should not blind us to the nature of Isabella’s predicament and what is truly at stake for

⁴ Samuel Johnson (1765) in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Brian Vickers, 6 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974-81), 5: 104.

her. Shakespeare chose to make Isabella a young novice, a feature not present in any of his sources. As a votarist of St. Clare, she will live a life consecrated to God, and, in fact, be spiritually “married” to God, becoming a *sponsa Christi*—“a wife of Christ.” The preservation of her virginity is integral to her commitment, her vocation, and her faith. Isabella must remain chaste not because she wishes to remain “pure” for her own vain sake, but because she has dedicated her body and her soul to God. In her view, celibacy is the perfection of Christian charity because the self is completely dedicated to God’s will. For her, going against God’s will would be a sin, even if that sin means saving her brother.

So in both secular and spiritual terms, if Isabella “put[s] on the destined livery” (2.4.139) dictated by Viennese men, she will lose agency in her own life. Not only will she lose a part of herself but she will also lose eternal life: “Better it were a brother die at once, / than a sister, by redeeming him, / should die for ever” (2.4.107-9). Sleeping with Angelo would mean relinquishing her honor, her personal beliefs, her independence, her identity, and her chance at salvation. She would have to die emotionally and spiritually in order to save Claudio.

To be sure, Isabella is perfectly willing to make great sacrifice of herself for her brother. She says that she would gladly suffer or die on his behalf: “were I under the terms of death, / th’impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies, / and strip myself to death as to a bed” (2.4.100-2); “were it but my life, / I’d throw down for your deliverance / as frankly as a pin” (3.1.105-7). Being this kind of a martyr would not be a sin as would yielding her body up to shame (2.4.103-4). In his fear and weakness Claudio tries to convince Isabella otherwise, saying “what sin you do to save a brother’s life, / nature dispenses the deed so far / that it becomes a virtue” (3.1.136-8). Claudio implies that their “natural” familial bond will dispense with the sin. However, this is a logical fallacy for Isabella; no sin can be inherently virtuous. Her bitter reaction to Claudio’s pleas for life is not evidence of her selfish cold-heartedness, but of her anger and disappointment in her brother, feelings that momentarily prevent her from recognizing his very human fear. Yes, she lashes out in irrational anger, but when the Duke dressed as a friar offers a solution, she is again determined to save him: “I have spirit to do / anything that appears not foul in the truth of my spirit” (3.1.202-3).

Those who denounce Isabella for her purity also denounce her for her

compliance with the Duke's plan to ensnare Angelo through the bedtrick; why does Isabella urge Mariana to do the very thing she condemned a few scenes earlier? The answer is simple: their situations are not the same. Mariana is engaged to Angelo and wants to be his wife: "This forenamed maid hath yet in her the continuance of her first affection" (3.1.231-2). She uses her virginity to complete a commitment not to violate one, to forge a union not to destroy one. Ironically, Mariana resembles Isabella in that she uses her sexuality to exert control over her own life. Mariana chooses to sleep with Angelo so she can get the husband she wants. Isabella refuses to sleep with him so she can retain her independence and keep her promises to God. Furthermore, it is important to note that Isabella thinks she has been given religious instruction from a spiritual authority, the Duke disguised as a friar.

Although mercy is central to the play, critics often condemn Isabella as "uncharitable" in her words and actions. However, Isabella in the last scene best embodies mercy, which adorns great ones better than "the king's crown" or the "deputed sword" (2.2.65). She humbly kneels and pleads for the very man who nearly raped her and executed her brother. Her merciful forgiveness of Angelo moves the play from the Old Testament law, "an eye for an eye," to the New Testament mandate of "turning the other cheek." In a play laden with deception and disguises, Isabella's non-wavering commitment to her faith ultimately enables her to be a good sister, a good friend, a good woman, and a good servant of God.