

Faculty Colloquium 19 October 2012
Incommensurability in *Measure for Measure* (MM)
Summary of key points

The Greek letter “pi” or π is a mathematical symbol representing the ratio of radius to area of a circle: the “incommensurable quantity”

“Incommensurable” means “no common standard of measurement”: used by Feyerabend and Kuhn (1960s) to describe scientific “paradigm shifts”

Also used in ethics by Berlin (1950s-60s) to describe “value clashes” which can be very deep in cultures: Machiavelli vs Jesus

In fact like pi (but not Kuhn) they are so deep they may be essential to our value thought: our need to eliminate them seems almost pathological

The plot of MM (date probably 1604): roles of the Duke of Vienna, his corrupt deputy Angelo, the novice nun Isabella, her brother Claudio. A’s sexual proposal, I’s near-hysterical reaction, the potential for tragedy averted by the Duke

The significance of “measure” and the play’s title: etymology; the Sermon on the Mount; Old Testament (OT) vs New Testament (NT)

The Duke evokes OT, echo of Solomon, and possibly Machiavelli

The Angelo/Isabella story has much of the NT about it: and much of tragedy too. Isabella is like Antigone, the great Greek tragic heroine. She argues for mercy over justice; but is also fanatical about “chastity”. Her character has traces of hypocritical Puritanism. So does Angelo’s, ironically, as he experiences desire clashing with justice. They are alike in some ways.

But the Duke prevents the tragedy and we find the ending disturbing. We don’t really see the value clashes worked out; they never really happen.

Maybe we need tragedy to confront the deepest incommensurable value clashes. They can’t be solved, they can only be recognized. A piece of pi.