

## MY VIEW

# Eliot's undoing, according to Shakespeare

By John F. Andrews

In his March 12 resignation speech, former Gov. Eliot Spitzer told listeners, "I go forward with the belief, as others have said, that as human beings our greatest glory consists not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."

Mr. Spitzer didn't specify the "others" to whom he referred in these remarks. But whether he intended to do so, he echoed several passages in a tragicomedy that seems remarkably pertinent as a mirror for reflecting upon his recent experience.

*Measure for Measure* features a self-righteous youthful magistrate, Lord Angelo, who insists that the surest way to maintain a well-ordered society is to enforce every statute, among them those that regulate sexual behavior, with absolute rigor. In keeping with this conviction, he endeavors to shut down all the brothels in Vienna.

He even goes so far as to apprehend, and sentence to death, a decent husband-to-be named Claudio, whose only offense is to have impregnated his betrothed a short time before they were to certify their matrimonial vows.

Refusing to listen to anyone who suggests that such severity may be inhumane, if not unjust, Angelo notes, correctly, that he is demanding no more of his fellow citizens than he expects of himself. And he honestly thinks that he is immune to the kind of temptation that undermines his weak-willed subjects.

Predictably, Angelo's naïve self-confidence is immediately put to the test. Just as predictably, he quickly succumbs to the same impulses that he has condemned in others.

Plummeting to a depravity he recognizes as shameful but feels powerless to resist, he betrays the office he holds, waxes tyrannical in his desperate attempts to conceal his guilt, and is ultimately prevented from committing further high crimes and misdemeanors only by an arresting exposure of his misdeeds that proves providential.



**Eliot Spitzer**  
A Shakespearean lesson?

Humiliated and profoundly remorseful, Angelo resigns himself to the same fate he believes Claudio to have suffered. But then another reversal occurs.

Thanks primarily to mitigating circumstances, but owing as well to gracious intercession by the women he has grievously wronged, a corrupt ruler is granted forgiveness and receives no more than a token penalty — and one whose effect is to ratify what turns out to have been a blessing in disguise.

Like that of Angelo, Eliot Spitzer's crusading zeal both as attorney general and as governor impressed many of his detractors as excessive, if not hubristic.

The ironic development

that brought him low can be viewed, then, as a stunning illustration of the Shakespearean paradox that "some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall."

Now that Mr. Spitzer has been humbled, however, it might be salutary to recall the magnanimous words of Mariana, Angelo's spurned fiancée: "They say best men are molded out of faults/And for the most/become much more the better/For being a little bad."

It would be hard to find anyone in today's America who would dismiss the activities that curtailed Eliot Spitzer's gubernatorial tenure as only "a little bad." But what should we make of the contrite leavetaking of "A leader recalled as

focused but unable to bend," as the *Sunday New York Times* depicted him on March 23?

And how will we assess his character and career in the long run?

Much will be determined by how he deals with his "private failings."

If he makes good on a pledge to "take responsibility" for his "conduct" and pay the price that is deemed appropriate, I see no reason why a vigilant public servant, an official who has exhibited the virtues, as well as the vices of one of the playwright's most high-minded protagonists, couldn't eventually surprise us again, this time as a "man new made" — a wiser, more sensitive and more

compassionate figure who has fallen into grace.

*Santa Fean John F. Andrews is president of The Shakespeare Guild, which bestows the annual Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts, and editor of The Everyman Shakespeare, an annotated paperback collection of the playwright's dramatic works.*