

SEIJO ENGLISH MONOGRAPHS

————— NO. 39 —————

**“FACE TO FACE WITH ITALY”:
AMERICAN WOMEN IN ELIZABETH SPENCER’S
*THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA***

BY
YUKO MATSUKAWA
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This study continues, after a long hiatus, work I had originally done on late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century American writers and the character type of the American Girl Abroad. I spent a delightful evening at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center in New York City with Irene Coombs, Amy Coombs, and Barney Simon during the summer of 2005 to see the Tony Award-winning musical, *The Light in the Piazza*; this inspired me to reflect upon literary representations of American women in Europe in the post-World War II era and eventually led to the writing of this monograph. I wish to thank the libraries and librarians at Seijo University, Keio University, and the Center for Pacific and American Studies at the University of Tokyo for their assistance. Josephine Lee of the University of Minnesota kindly read and commented on this manuscript and I appreciate her most excellent advice, as always. All errors in what follows, of course, are mine.

Introduction

In his 2004 *New Yorker* review of the original Chicago run of the Tony Award-winning musical, *The Light in the Piazza*, John Lahr discloses the origins of this project:

Once upon a time in the early sixties, the composer Mary Rodgers suggested to her gloomy father, the composer Richard Rodgers, that he adapt for Broadway Elizabeth Spencer's "The Light in the Piazza" (which occupied almost entire issue of this magazine in 1960); the great man demurred. Four decades later, however, Mary Rodger's son, the gifted composer and lyricist Adam Guettel, took up the challenge. (90)

Lahr, son of the great comedic actor Bert Lahr (best known perhaps for his portrayal of the Cowardly Lion in the 1939 musical film *The Wizard of Oz*) and incisive theater critic, provides a glimpse into one of Broadway's leading musical families that has produced three generations of gifted composers by recounting the origins of this particular musical project as an unfulfilled task passed on from grandfather to grandson with the daughter/mother (herself an acclaimed Broadway musical composer) as mediator. This speaks to the curious continuity that certain themes have not only in musical theater but also in literature and in the American popular imagination as well.

Guettel's musical is set in 1953, the heyday of his grandfather's musical career and is based on the 1960 novella of the same title by

Elizabeth Spencer which tells the story of an American woman, Margaret Johnson, from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, traveling in Italy with her adult brain-damaged daughter Clara and the daughter's romance with a young Italian in Florence. The musical, which opened on April 18, 2005, won six Tony Awards in 2005 and continued its successful run at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center until July 2, 2006; it also had its costumes featured in *The New York Times* (La Ferla 9)¹ and inspired the creation of a new cocktail (Gold 4).²

There is a cross-generational dialogue at work in this musical between Richard Rodgers who created musicals in the mid-twentieth century and his grandson Adam Guettel who composes at the turn into the twentieth-first. Stephen Holden's review of the original cast album of this musical charts their similarities and differences. Holden states that that the score "suggests a personal conversation between Guettel and Rodgers, between "The Light in the Piazza' . . . [and] the Rodgers and Hammerstein blockbuster 'South Pacific'" which opened four years before the events in this musical take place (E1). Holden argues that Guettel's re-imagining of the 1950s both pays tribute to the creations of Rodgers and Hammerstein and complicates the expression of sentiments that drive the score. Holden explains that if Guettel's "melodies suggest sophisticated, angular refractions of his grandfather's, his lyrics question the homilies attached to Rodgers's melodies" and that his "asking of questions that nag at us even now beneath our cynicism, makes 'The Light in the Piazza' a thoroughly contemporary musical. . . . Looking back with longing and forward with trepidation, Mr. Guettel is his generation's most brilliant and persuasive conjurer" (E1).

The reviews of the musical do more than comment on the musical legacy: they also connect this musical to the long history of representations of Americans abroad in Europe. Indeed, the title of Lahr's review, "Innocence Abroad," makes an allusion not only to Mark Twain's hilarious account of Americans traveling to Europe in the decade after the Civil War entitled *Innocents Abroad* (1869) but also to the stereotypical innocent American tourist overwhelmed by the splendors of the Old World. The title of Ben Brantley's review of the musical published in *The New York Times*, "A Wise Autumnal American in Florence" casually reminds us of a previous musical based on George Gershwin's celebrated symphonic composition from 1928: the Academy Award-winning film, *An American in Paris* (1951) starring Gene Kelly, Leslie Caron, and Oscar Levant. The review also picks up on how both Spencer's novella and the musical deal with a theme that is easily recognizable as particularly American by describing Spencer's narrative as a "Henry James-style culture clash" (E1).

The 1962 film version of Spencer's novel, directed by Guy Green, starring Olivia de Havilland, Yvette Mimieux, and George Hamilton, and filmed on location in Florence, though well received, does not participate as pointedly in questioning the 1950s in the way Guettel's musical does; this is perhaps because the film was made less than a decade after the time frame depicted in the novella and only a couple of years after its publication. The film is more or less faithful to the book and highlights the cultural clashes between the Italians (the Naccarellis) and the Americans (the Johnsons) as Clara is romanced by Fabrizio Naccarelli. However, it did not satisfy Spencer, who in her memoir, *Landscapes of the Heart*, comments, "Perhaps the movie was not quite what I had written—it lacked the irony that a writer's voice is

able to give and glowed with a little too much picture-postcard prettiness—but on the whole one had to be pleased with such a faithful effort” (319).

The irony present in the novella (which is missing in the film) and its relationship to the cross-generational dialogue between Spencer and James (which may be compared to that of Rogers and Guettel) is often overlooked because many see this work as a lighthearted love story. Spencer herself is dismayed by all the attention this work has garnered over the years at the expense of her other novels and short stories and seems to consider it a slight tale whose farcical elements have been overshadowed by optimistic readings.

In an interview with Robert Phillips in 1986, Elizabeth Spencer remarks that *The Light in the Piazza* is her albatross (131). She explains:

I think that it has great charm, and it probably is the real thing, a work written under great compulsion, while I was under the spell of Italy. But it only took me, all told, about a month to write, whereas some of my other novels—the longer ones—took years. So to have people come up to me, as they do, and gush about *The Light in the Piazza*, and be totally ignorant that I ever turned a hand at anything else, is . . . upsetting. (131)

In other interviews, Spencer is perplexed by how this work, which she wrote “as a sort of amusement in six weeks” (Haley 16), has become her signature piece but at the same time acknowledges its commercial success: after its initial publication in *The New Yorker*, she recalls, “[t]hen came the movie contracts and the book clubs. So the book was really a financial success” (Haley 16).

The success was not simply financial, even with the addition of the \$10,000 from the McGraw-Hill Fiction Award she won for this work. *The Light in the Piazza* was the novel that changed the course of Spencer's career and catapulted her into literary celebrity. The work was regarded highly enough so that it was included in a collection published by Doubleday in 1966 called *Great Modern Short Novels: Lost Horizon, The Red Pony, The Third Man, A Single Pebble, The Light in the Piazza, Seize the Day, Breakfast at Tiffany's*, showcasing this novella along with works by popular mid-century writers such as James Hilton, John Steinbeck, Graham Greene, John Hershey, Saul Bellow, and Truman Capote.

In another interview, she also remarks on how in writing *The Light in the Piazza* she thought "about how to bring together the two concepts that are strongest in [her] life—the South and Italy" (Prenshaw, "The South and Beyond" 189). *The Light in the Piazza* tells the story of a mother and daughter, the Johnsons, from Winston-Salem, North Carolina visiting Florence, Italy in the early 1950s. The daughter, Clara, has the body of an attractive twenty-six year old but the mental capacity of a ten year old, due to a childhood accident. Her father, Noel, sees Clara's institutionalization as inevitable but her mother Margaret protests and takes her daughter on a long visit to Florence, Italy. There a young shopkeeper, Fabrizio Naccarelli, falls in love with Clara. When Margaret sees her daughter reciprocate his affections, she starts to have misgivings about the relationship and decides to separate them by taking her daughter to Rome. However, Clara's deep despondency moves Margaret and they return to Florence, where Margaret, and Signor Naccarelli, Fabrizio's father, play a high stakes game to marry off their children. Margaret achieves

her goal: Clara is married before her father can arrive to interfere and in the last scene, Signor Naccarelli gives Margaret his arm as they make their way from the church after the ceremony.

It is this “Henry James-style culture clash” in Spencer’s novella, a characteristic strong enough to define both the musical and film versions of *The Light in the Piazza* that is the topic of this essay. In interviews, Spencer has repeatedly expressed her skepticism over the comparisons to Henry James. She declares that she had not been thinking about James at all when writing the novella: “Well, everybody immediately made the comparison because of the theme . . . and also because of the use of romance. But, no, I wasn’t particularly conscious of Henry James when I wrote my book” (Broadwell 67) and notes that she only started reading James in graduate school (Phillips 119).

On the surface, the culture clashes between the Florentines and the traveling American mother and daughter invite comparisons to Henry James, who in the latter part of the nineteenth century, used the character type of the American Girl Abroad as the symbol of an up-and-coming nation to delineate the differences in culture and sensibility between Europe and the United States. Given that this theme of Americans abroad, or the American Girl Abroad, is part of the fabric of the American literary imagination, denying a direct connection to James does not mean that Spencer is not writing in, or against, that tradition. As I argue here, whether she is conscious of it or not, Spencer is part of this conversation and her response to James resembles, in fact, Guettel’s response to Rodgers: Spencer’s characters in *The Light in the Piazza* suggest “sophisticated, angular refractions” of the American Girls Abroad who populate the pages of

James's works and the situations her characters find themselves "question the homilies attached" to their collective consciousness.

Nevertheless, Spencer argues, "the correct comparison for *The Light in the Piazza* might have been Boccaccio" (Phillips 120). She continues:

Here was a situation outlandish enough to have delighted [Boccaccio]. Can't you hear one of his *Decameron* ladies beginning this tale: "Chancing to travel to Florence was a little countess from a town in France who had as a daughter, a beautiful young girl, a cause of great unhappiness. For, since an unfortunate accident had overtaken her at an early age, she had no little trouble with reasoning, reading being beyond her to learn and ciphering also, so that no doctor could tell her parents that she could never be cured, and no young nobleman, being exposed to her conversation, could dream of offering a serious proposal. Nonetheless, she was of so charming a nature, and so unaffected in her responses, which were all sweetness and delight, that anyone not knowing of her defect might take true pleasure in her company . . .," and so on through to a satire on the empty-headedness of certain well-born youths around Florence. I don't think James should even be considered when it comes to that story . . . (Phillips 120)

In invoking Boccaccio and *The Decameron*, Spencer shows her preference for appreciating the "comic situation" (Haley 15) of this work and considers it and "a little tall tale to satirize Florence . . .

Florentines and Italians in general for that matter” (Broadwell 67-68). She also discloses how this novella was informed by a fairy tale and explains that she often uses myths and folk tales and fairy tales “just as a sort of framing idea. In *The Light in the Piazza*, the story sprang out of the tale of the princess with the harelip and the prince who fell in love with her. Love being blind, he could not see her defect” (Broadwell 71).

The Boccaccian influences definitely embrace the ironic and critical side that is overshadowed by the fairy tale romance and the image of the American Girl Abroad as a beautiful ephemeral tragic figure representing what is beautiful and fresh and American. Spencer tempers the fairy tale aspect of this story by presenting a different kind of American Girl Abroad in the figure of Margaret who is older, experienced, and disillusioned by life. Her world view is colored by the realities of the 1950s and the aftermath of World War II which do not allow her daughter the luxury of a normal life. Margaret is not necessarily ironic in temperament, but she is the instrument for Spencer to construct a novella that can be read as criticism of problems that beset American womanhood in the 1950s. Reading this novella then, as Spencer’s clever appropriation of several genres to provide ironic commentary about the state of American women in the 1950s, reveals the tension between competing roles for women at that time: that of a fairy tale princess (Clara) and a woman fighting against society’s restrictions on what she is allowed to do (Margaret).

I. The Italian Experience and the American Girl Abroad

Spencer's Italian stories were inspired by her sojourn in Italy in the 1950s but *The Light in the Piazza* did not mark Spencer's literary debut: on the contrary, Spencer was an established writer by the time *The Light in the Piazza* was published. Born in 1921 in Carrollton, Mississippi, Spencer lived in Mississippi until she graduated from Belhaven College. She then went on to earn an M. A. in English at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. After a few years as an instructor at private schools and a stint as a reporter for the *Nashville Tennessean*, her first novel, *Fire in the Morning*, was published by Dodd, Mead in 1948. Joining the faculty of the English Department of the University of Mississippi that year, Spencer continued writing, publishing short stories and the novels *This Crooked Way* (1952) and *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956), and winning awards, including the Guggenheim Fellowship that marked the beginning of her five-year stay in Italy (1953-58). It was only after she moved from Italy with her husband, John Rusher, an Englishman whom she had met in Rome, to Montreal, Canada, that Spencer started writing *The Light in the Piazza*. She explains:

I got the idea for the story when we'd left Italy and were living in Canada. The idea sort of came to me about missing the light in Italy very much. . . . I started writing about Italy when I left Italy. The whole Italian experience meant a great deal to me, and when we left Italy and came to Canada, I had this kind of sense that I was going to lose a lot of that unless I started to write about it. I wanted to get it down.

(Broughton 152-53)

Spencer's writings about Italy fall neatly into the tradition of writing about Americans in Italy.³ For American writers, especially writers from the nineteenth century onwards, Italy has continued to serve as a location from which to draw inspiration and accordingly, many scholars including James Buzard, William Stowe, and Mary Suzanne Schriber have noted the importance of Italy on the American literary imagination in their studies.⁴ Still other scholars such as Theodore Stebbins, Leonardo Buonomo, and Annamaria Formichella Elsdén refer to American writers and their relationship to Italy as they chronicle and analyze the importance of travel in America.⁵ Other volumes are devoted to anthologizing writings by non-Italian writers (mostly British and American) who traveled to Italy; others, such as Mary Suzanne Schriber's *Telling Travels: Selected Writings by Nineteenth-Century American Women Abroad* (1995) as well as Leo Hamalian's *Ladies on the Loose* (1981), and Jane Robinson's *Unsuitable for Ladies: An Anthology of Women Travellers* (1994) anthologize women's travel writing. Furthermore, the dozen scholarly essays that comprise Robert K. Martin and Leland Person's *Roman Holidays: American Writers and Artists in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (2002), provide us with perspectives on how Italy and Rome forced American writers and artists to reassess their beliefs as well as themselves.

As Annamaria Formichella Elsdén is quick to remind us, most of the volumes listed here, though engaged in a critical inquiry about the nature of America's fascination with Italy, disregard the contributions made by women travelers and writers and privilege the male experience (xix). Elsdén and Schriber in particular, make it very clear

that American women traveled and wrote about those experiences too. Therefore, though many scholars may highlight the Italian tours and writings about Italy (diaries, letters, essays, fiction) of male writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James, Elsdon, Schriber and others counter with female travelers, such as Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Constance Fenimore Woolson, Edith Wharton, Mary McCarthy and of course, Elizabeth Spencer.

Susan Cahill defines the lure of Italy for women writers as seen through their writings:

If there is a unifying theme, it may be an intuition and embrace of the wholeness of life in Italy. Instead of the divorce between body and spirit, the secular and the sacred that alienates the more Protestant ethos of northern countries (and climates), in Italy physical and spiritual experience feels like one vibrant continuum. Perhaps it is the liberating humor of this acceptance of complexities and contradictions that intrigues and pleases women. (xi)

Cahill also comments on what distinguishes women's writing about Italy:

The women's narratives come across with a down-to-earth concreteness. They're irreverent, critical, and anecdotal, but they are never brittle, mean-spirited, or smug at the Italian's expense. Italian religion is never (or almost never) dismissed

as superstition or the Italians' warmth as crudeness. No narrator observes safely from a cool, all-knowing, aesthetic distance. Rather, their affection for the place and people moves the current of their prose. (xiii)

This difference of perspective may help to explain how male writers and female writers portrayed the American Girl Abroad in Italy. The ur-text for this character type is Henry James's celebrated short story, "Daisy Miller" which was first published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1878. Though Daisy had her precursors—Hilda in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860) is a good example—James's Daisy popularized the figure of the vibrant and audacious American girl traveling in Europe in literature. Though later iterations of the American Girl Abroad in James's fiction such as Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* provided a more measured look at the perils that beset the American Girl Abroad, it is the story of Daisy which has been accepted as template for this character type. Daisy, after tantalizing an obtuse Winterbourne for months, contracts malaria after a late-night visit to the Colosseum with Giovanelli (an Italian who is considered by the Americans to be disreputable), dies, and is buried in the Protestant cemetery in Rome, transforming her into a romantic and tragic figure who exudes an innocent sexuality. With her, James defined the image of the American Girl Abroad as the product of a rapidly industrializing nation eager to take on the world.

James's story establishes the paradigm of the young female protagonist traveling in Europe with her mother and siblings or other companions but seldom with her father who usually continues

to work in the United States. In Daisy's case, traveling with an inept provincial mother and a bratty younger brother combined with what others considered an intimacy with their courier Eugenio while her father stays at home in Schnectady, New York (presumably to provide capital for his family's European jaunt) marks this entourage as part of the American newly rich of the post-Civil War period and underscores the class and cultural differences between the Millers and the old-money matrons such as Winterbourne's aunt, Mrs. Costello, who dictate how expatriate Americans should act.

What Barbara Welter defined as "The Cult of True Womanhood," with its four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (21), dictated American female conduct for women of the middle to upper classes in the United States of the nineteenth century; these virtues were also the standards for the expatriate community. These standards were employed to censure Daisy, who as a representative of a burgeoning new class and generation, is not easily identifiable as someone who conforms to these rules; her frank and open discussions with Winterbourne as well as her acquaintance with the Italian Giovanelli challenges the existing standards of the American expatriate community in Europe but did not necessarily revise them. Daisy's death indicates that James could not imagine a world that would accommodate Daisy: by killing her off, he does not have to think through what Daisy would have to undergo in life if she were to live. Therefore she remains an innocent and romantic figure.

Spencer follows in the tradition of previous women writers who appropriate the character type of the American Girl Abroad in order to examine the situation of American women in a given period. One of James's contemporaries, Constance Fenimore Woolson,

provides a counterpoint to "Daisy Miller" in her short story, "Dorothy" (originally published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1892) by illustrating how a pretty young flirtatious American girl can be sincere in her love for her husband and how even those who have her best interests at heart may fail to understand her because they too succumb to the power of the stereotype of young American women. Though published in 1892, the story takes place only a few years after "Daisy Miller" is published: from 1881 to 1883, mostly in Belosguardo outside of Florence. Woolson revises the situation so that Dorothy, who lives with her widowed stepmother Mrs. North and a family friend, Mrs. Tracy, is considered socially acceptable, genteel, and popular amongst the English-speaking expatriate set.

But there are similarities. Daisy Miller and Dorothy Mackenzie share initials. Like Daisy's father, Dorothy's late father, a captain of the United States Navy, works in a profession that signifies the robustness of America. Dorothy's husband Alan Mackenzie dies of the Roman fever that takes Daisy's life; Dorothy's death comes the year after her husband's demise, the result of her wasting away because she misses Alan so much. And Mrs. North and Mrs. Tracy consider taking Dorothy to Vevey for a change of scenery after Dorothy is widowed: this is where Daisy first meets Winterbourne.

Just as James does to Daisy, Woolson makes Dorothy an object; however, not only her suitors but those who know her best are also among those who can not read her. Woolson indicates here how the stereotype of the flirtatious, flighty American Girl is so ubiquitous that even women such as Mrs. North and Mrs. Tracy are affected by it and do not take Dorothy seriously. However, Woolson tries to redeem the American Girl Abroad, making her capable of love and fidelity and by

doing so, Woolson's story very subtly addresses the stereotype of the American Girl Abroad, noting its widespread nature as well as critiquing it as shallow and insufficient to understand American women.

Edith Wharton's short story written late in her career, "Roman Fever" (1934), also addresses the problem of the American Girl Abroad, the Jamesian legacy, and the changing mores of American culture. There are several generations of American women featured in this story: the widows Grace Ansley and Alida Slade, their daughters Barbara and Jenny, and Grace's great-aunts (one sent the other to the Colosseum at night to catch Roman fever because she was a romantic rival). During the course of Grace and Alida's conversation on a terrace overlooking the Roman Forum, Alida, who has for over two decades felt superior to Grace because she married the man Grace loved, discovers that Grace's daughter is the result of a tryst between her own fiancé and Grace. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, in her analysis of this short story, notes how "Roman Fever" resembles "Daisy Miller" and comments on the genealogy of the American Girl Abroad:

Like "Daisy Miller," it equates floral imagery and female virginity; describes American mothers and daughters in Rome; explores the tension between women's sexuality and social mores; and emphasizes the themes of forbidden knowledge and female transgression. And although Wharton's story withholds the name of Grace's long-ago great-aunt, who died of Roman fever, it might well have been "Daisy"; by plucking her night-blooming flower, she recalls James' heroine, who is

described as a “wholly unspotted flower” . . . “wild” and “naturally indelicate” . . . who is finally buried among “thick spring-flowers” and “April daisies” . . . (319)

Sweeney argues that a major difference in these two novels is how they treat the theme of female transgression: while James’ *Daisy* is innocent to the end, Wharton “calculates the price that women must pay for gaining forbidden knowledge” (319), connecting women’s bodies and commerce. As Sweeney points out, the transgressions in this short story are sexual—Grace’s illegitimate child fathered by Alida’s fiancé—and textual—Alida’s forging her fiancé’s initials on the letter that lured Grace to the Colosseum; again, as in “*Dorothy*,” we see that men do not have to be active participants in a narrative to uphold patriarchal norms and stereotypes and as Sweeney states, “[w]e can read it as an account of the curse of patriarchy, which turns women against each other and themselves” (328). Unlike in “*Daisy Miller*” and “*Dorothy*” where both heroines can be read as innocent and therefore deserving of a sentimental early death, Grace and Alida must live with the consequences of their actions. Sweeney reminds us that “Grace and Alida must pay for their transgressions throughout their long and uneventful lives, remaining always vigilant lest someone discover what they have done” (320).

The advent of the twentieth century and literary modernism made this frank admission of an illegitimate child possible and opens the way for writers to depict the American Girl Abroad as a sexual being unlike *Daisy*, whose sexuality lurks beneath a veneer of virginal freshness and whose death comes before any transgressions. This growing openness about the sexual side of the American Girl Abroad—

Barbara and Jenny are young and eligible and running around with young Italian men (the daughters's rivalry mirrors that of their mothers and of Grace's great-aunts)—as well as the waning of the stigma against Italians (in “Daisy Miller,” Italians were servants or disreputable hangers-on; in “Dorothy,” one of the protagonist's suitors is deemed quite respectable, despite being half Italian). This sea change marks a shift in attitudes that continues on into *The Light in the Piazza*.

Many of the similarities between “Daisy Miller” and “Roman Fever” that Sweeney lists are also in operation in *The Light in the Piazza*.⁶ The floral imagery and virginity are bifurcated in this case: the mother's name, Margaret is the name of the patron saint of farmers whose flower is the daisy (hence the nickname Daisy for those named Margaret) which in French is *marguerite*; she is safeguarding her daughter Clara's virginity; instead of Rome, this mother-daughter pair is in Florence, home of Boccaccio—Clara's straw hat is purchased in Fiesole where the narrators of the *Decameron* are said to have told their tales—as well as Savonarola and the birthplace of the Renaissance, signifying the respective rebirths of mother and daughter; and the industrialist father is hard at work on the homefront while in Florence, Margaret and Clara wrestle with their sexuality as well as the social mores of both Florence and Winston-Salem.

The differences between *The Light in the Piazza* and “Daisy Miller” also mark this work as a product of a post-World War II world: transatlantic communication is possible via telephone and telegrams, and travel to Europe did not require weeks of traveling on an ocean liner. The American cliques abroad, though undoubtedly they existed, no longer have the potency they used to have now that

travel has been democratized and made affordable to most everyone. The American Girl Abroad is no longer a product of the upper and upper-middle classes of New England and the Mid-Atlantic states: that the Johnsons hail from Winston-Salem signals the shift of capital from the Northeast to the Sunbelt. Unlike Daisy, Clara's suitor is not immediately considered unsuitable because he is Italian and unlike Daisy's passive mother, Margaret actively has a hand in determining the outcome of her daughter's romance. Furthermore, though Noel Johnson is absent, because Margaret spends a great deal of energy and thought in trying to outwit her husband from afar, he is very much present, unlike Daisy's father or the deceased fathers of Dorothy, Grace, and Jenny. And because Clara's marriage would free Margaret to work on rehabilitating her own marriage, Margaret's sexuality and life after Clara seems vital and important, compared to the other mothers of American girls.

That Margaret is the main character and that Clara, the character who would most easily be considered the American Girl Abroad protagonist, is disabled by a freak childhood accident—her Shetland pony kicked her in the head—demonstrates the satirical side of Spencer's storytelling process and signals a turn in the discourse of representing American women. Spencer injects irony into the depiction of the American Girl Abroad; this is the irony that she claims is missing in the film version of the novella. If Clara is the protagonist, just like Daisy, we can not get inside her consciousness but possibly it is because there is nothing much there; the American Girl Abroad as a disabled young woman indicates a disillusionment with and rebellion against how American women are represented. If Margaret is the American Girl Abroad, we understand too well how

she needs to be free of the social restrictions and rules that govern southern women of her class to not only see to a happy ending to her daughter's fairy-tale romance but also conceive of a life of her own. She is no longer young or innocent and is living testimony of how American society has disappointed her. By leaving the United States, she is able to come to terms with those rules and how she might get around them.

Unlike "Daisy Miller" or "Dorothy," no one in *The Light in the Piazza* dies young; on the contrary, both Clara and Margaret muddle their way through to a place where they are at last eluding stagnation and metaphorical death through rebirth in Florence. However, in making the ending of the story ambiguous—neither a tragedy nor an ecstatic happy ending—Spencer does not shy away from letting the readers know that Margaret and Clara will both have to work hard for their new lives. As American Girls Abroad of the mid-twentieth century, Margaret and Clara mirror the complexities of post-World War II American womanhood.

II. The Italianization of Clara

Clara's accelerated transformation from a dependent girl to a vibrant young woman is at once a Boccaccian farce and a fairy tale. As in many farces, the act of passing as something one is not, is instrumental in furthering the plot, but the fairy-tale wish-fulfillment aspect of Clara's metamorphoses leaves readers wondering whether Clara is simply passing or has actually become what she seems to be. The transformation, or the Italianization of Clara, from a perpetually childlike stereotypical mentally retarded young woman to a chic, social, articulate happy young woman in love asks us to suspend our disbelief in the same way fairy tales do. In addition, because most of the third-person narration follows Margaret's perspective, we are unable to see what is going on in Clara's head. Our impression of her is mostly mediated by how others—her mother, Fabrizio, the Naccarellis—view her. Her blankness allows others to project their ideals, desires, anxieties, and preconceptions upon her. Nevertheless, her metamorphosis enables her to lead a life unavailable to her in the United States.

Clara's romance with Fabrizio follows a well-worn path: boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, boy loses girl, boy regains girl, and then finally marries her. Clara, like fairy tale heroines, has problems at home, whether she is conscious of them or not. Owning a Shetland pony (though it kicks her in the head) indicates that her family is well to do, but the stigma that they face for having a disabled daughter causes a rift in her parents' marriage. Margaret's flashbacks to events that occur after Clara's accident reveal how Clara's actions can not conceal the fact that she may be incapable of logical, mature

thought. A disastrous stint at a new school, where Margaret enrolls her without telling the school authorities that Clara is mentally disabled (33) and her later enthusiastic but improper embrace of a grocery boy (11) remind her community that Clara has very little sense of propriety and can not contain her urges. Margaret takes Clara away from this climate so that the institutionalization her father wishes can be postponed for a while. It is clear that in an American context—during a period when anything aberrant was considered something to be purged like communists and whistling young black boys (as in the case of Emmett Till)—a retarded child/woman was also an aberration to be dealt with. In contrast, Italy serves as a place where Clara is free from such condemnation and is able to rise to the level of her competency and beyond.

Spencer's "satire on the empty-headedness of certain well-born youths around Florence" (Phillips 120), the youths being Fabrizio, who never seems to question Clara's mental competence and appears to be well matched with her, as well as his brother Giuseppe, whose English is limited to a few hastily learned phrases spoken "in an accent so middle western as to be absurd" (17), loses some of its potency because Fabrizio is so actively and deliriously in love with Clara that his empty-headedness is explained away by youthful enthusiasm.

His lovesick devotion begins to define Clara as something other than a mentally limited person. From their first meeting in the Piazza Signoria where he retrieves Clara's straw hat for her before it blows too far away, Fabrizio charms and is charmed by Clara. As a tourist, she has no friends in Florence other than her mother, and clearly she is delighted by this young man who treats her with respect and woos her with gifts and flowers and meals (that her mother also

attends). When Margaret decides to break a dinner engagement with Fabrizio by taking Clara to a different piazza (8), Fabrizio finds them and is all apologies for not specifying the piazza; when Margaret takes Clara to the pool, Fabrizio is there, frolicking with Clara who was on the verge of playing so hard that she was about to become hysterical. However, this crisis is averted because, as Spencer writes: "Fabrizio came to her and took her hands down. In one quick motion he stood her straight, and she grew quiet. Something turned over in Mrs. Johnson's breast" (11). His devotion to Clara, Spencer writes, is such that when he finds out that Clara and her mother are off to Rome suddenly, he comes to the station "with this thunderbolt tearing across his heart, clutching a demure mass of wild chrysanthemums and a tin of caramelle" (31) and kisses Clara who says "We are coming back" and throws her arms around him: "When he forced down her arms, he was crying, and there stood her mother" (31).

After Clara and her mother return, Fabrizio is ecstatic. When Margaret and Signor Naccarelli return from a drive during which they sound each other out about their children's relationship, Margaret sees Fabrizio about to enter the salon of the hotel but he is distracted by the sight of Clara at the top of the stairs:

Fabrizio stood looking up at her for so long a moment that Mrs. Johnson's heart had time almost to break. Gilt, wavy mirrors and plush décor seemed washed clean, and all the wrong, hurt years of her daughter's affliction were not proof against the miracle she saw now. (40)

Clearly—as the etymology of Clara’s name implies—Fabrizio adores and worships Clara. This Romeo and Juliet moment highlights their romance, and like most romances, the course of true love for them does not run smooth: Margaret never mentions Clara’s disability to the Naccarellis and is fearful that they may guess Clara’s secret; Signor Naccarelli makes a fuss about Clara’s age and threatens to cancel the nuptials but reconsiders.

As with many fairy tales, this narrative ends with a wedding at which Clara emerges “like a fresh flower out of the antique smell of candle smoke, incense and damp stone . . . in Venetian lace with so deep a look shadowing out the hollow of her cheek, she might have stood double for a Botticelli” (62). And when Clara lifts her veil, “Fabrizio looked at her and love sprang up in his face” (62). Their wedding ends with “Clara stepping into a car, her white skirts dazzling in the sun” and Clara waving to her mother and Fabrizio being made to wave as well (63). The pull of the “happily ever after” ending trumps most of the misgivings we may have about this union.

However, Clara, though we are not privy to her perspective, is not a static character. Despite her disability, she changes during the course of the story so that this is not simply a romantic fairy tale: Clara slowly but surely undergoes a transformation from a meek underconfident confused childlike creature to a vibrant young woman in love who is more in control of her life. From the medical evaluations of her abilities, such a change does not seem possible; however, along with Margaret, we witness how the *tabula rasa* that is Clara is gradually inscribed with Italian customs and the Italian language. In a sense, she goes native.

Clara’s transformation is charted through the ease with which

she appropriates both the language and the look of the Italians. Early in the relationship, after mother and daughter promise to meet Fabrizio Naccarelli, Clara is insistent about keeping the appointment and declares: "But we have to meet Fabrizio" (7). The narrator's comment which follows hints at an unusual facility with the language that Margaret and others who knew Clara would not have predicted: "The odd name came naturally to her tongue" (7). Indeed, two pages later, we see the situation through Margaret's eyes: "It was an advantage that Clara knew no Italian. She smiled sweetly and laughed innocently, so how was Fabrizio to know her dreary secret?" (9). But by time the Johnsons are introduced to the Naccarellis and not only visit their home but also attend a festival with them, Clara's linguistic improvement is noticeable: "Her Italian was sounding more clearly every day" (20).

In Florence, Clara is free from the stereotypes that brand her as a stupid disabled girl and begins to pass as normal. One of the reasons why she can pass is that because she is as articulate as (or even more articulate than) other tongue-tied tourists. Her childlike expressions, both linguistic and physical, can be explained away by both the fact that she is a sweet sheltered American girl who can not speak much Italian and the realization by the Italians that they can neither speak nor understand English as well as they wish. In some ways, being a tourist, or not speaking the language of the natives is a disability because one does not know the rules of the language and the society. However, Clara is able to effect an education in Florence, enough for her to develop into the kind of woman who might in the context of Florence, be able to marry and have children.

Though Margaret strives for some peace of mind as she watches

her daughter fall in love, in the process, she becomes more and more American; in contrast, Clara not only masters Italian but also assumes an Italian air and look. At first this is a kind of mimicking; early on in the novella we see that “Clara had learned to put out her hand quite prettily in the European fashion and she liked to do it” (14). She also assumes a quiet manner that suggests that she is more confident than she was at home in the United States. Spencer writes: “Clara sat with her hand folded and smiled at everyone. She had more and more nowadays a rapt air of not listening to anything” (17). But it is only after an unsatisfying session with a Scottish Presbyterian minister who counsels her to consult with her husband about Clara’s budding affair with Fabrizio does Margaret notice Clara’s remarkable metamorphosis. Margaret is on her way back to the hotel and sees a policeman directing traffic when she glimpses an Italianized Clara:

There, with a nod to him, came Clara! He bowed; she smiled. Why, she looked like an Italian!

. . . But Clara could wear almost everything she admired. Stepping along now in her hand-woven Italian skirt and sleeveless cotton blouse, with leather sandals, smart straw bag, dark glasses and the glint of earrings against her cheek, she would fool any tourist into thinking her a native . . . (27)

This passage, and its stage version compelled the costume designer for the musical, Catherine Zuber, to dress Clara in a style “inspired in part by the starlets of Hollywood and Cinecittà, meant to represent her emotional journey to womanhood” (*La Ferla* 9). Visually, this reminds us of the transformation of another American Girl Abroad from the

1950s: the chauffeur's daughter Sabrina Fairchild, in the 1954 film *Sabrina* (adapted from the Broadway play of the same name), who returns home to the United States transformed into a chic and sophisticated woman after studying at a culinary school in Paris. It also recalls another heroine from a Broadway hit, Eliza Doolittle who changes her speech, clothes, and manners from that of a Cockney flower girl to a genteel lady in *My Fair Lady* (1956). Unlike Eliza Dolittle, Clara's acquiring new speech and manners is represented as natural and unproblematic; hence unlike Eliza, Clara does not seem tormented by her new self.

Margaret's realization of Clara's transformation into a being who more or less looks and acts her age jolts her in more ways than one. She "felt she was being fooled by Clara in a far graver way, found in her daughter's very attractiveness an added sense of displeasure, almost disgust" (27). This displeasure indicates Margaret's ambivalence toward her daughter: after years of telling herself that she wants a normal life for the daughter who she will probably have to care for the rest of her life, now that that same daughter is about to assert her own individuality and love for another, Margaret can not accept that change because it means that she will have to assume the role of matchmaker.

This scene is also important in that it highlights again the nature of Clara's role in Margaret's life: Clara must pass for normal to lead a normal life but when she passes without parental supervision, Margaret feels slighted, bereft, and annoyed. Margaret can not pass as Italian: her Italian is accented and she does not have the figure and spirit that Clara has to pull off wearing Italian clothes with *élan* (27). Margaret's disdain for Italians extends for a moment to her daughter,

who manages to look like one, but it is the illusion that Clara perhaps has been faking mental retardation for over a dozen years that triggers the pang of displeasure and disgust—otherwise, how could Clara pass so effortlessly as a young Italian woman? This is, from Margaret’s perspective, an unreasonable reaction but a telling one that reveals the resentment that she has harbored over the years as she continued to protect her daughter.

By the middle of the novella, Clara is the one who knows what to do in everyday situations in Italy. When a beggar child comes to their table, it is Margaret who follows Clara’s lead, not the other way around:

Clara hardly noticed the child at all; exactly like an Italian, she took a ten-lire piece out of the change on the table and dropped it in his palm. And Mrs. Johnson, in the same way that people crossed themselves with a dabble of holy water in the churches, found herself doing the same thing. (32)

The naturalized Italianisms suggest that Clara has developed rather than simply learned how to pass. This gives rise to questions of how competent the doctors in the United States were to evaluate Clara’s abilities and intelligence. Margaret also wonders about the differences in standards in Italy; she muses: the Italians “did not *think*, after all, in terms of IQ, ‘retarded mentality’ and ‘adult capabilities.’ And . . . since she, too, loved Clara for herself, should anyone think of another human being in the light of a set of terms?” (45).

In terms of language acquisition, Clara surpasses her mother

easily as she melds into the Naccarelli family. Soon after the Johnsons return to Florence and the parents start to negotiate the marriage, we see that “Clara had learned so much Italian that Mrs. Johnson could no longer understand her” (46). Though Margaret is ambivalent about her daughter’s growing up and becoming someone who is alien to her, she also understands the importance of this development if only to make sure that her husband understands how Clara functions in Florence as a young woman who has adapted and thrives and is capable of a whole happy life with her husband-to-be and his extended family. In a letter to her husband Noel, Margaret writes:

The thing that impresses me most, Noel, . . . is that nothing beyond Clara ever seems to be required of her here. . . . Young married girls her age, with one or two children, always seem to have a nurse for them; a maid does all the cooking. There are mothers and mothers-in-law competing to keep the little ones at odd hours. I doubt if these young wives ever plan a single meal.

Clara is able to pass every day here, as she does at home, doing simple things that please her. But the difference is that here, instead of being always alone or with the family, she has all of Florence for company, and seems no different from the rest. (41)

Though Margaret uses the word “pass” here to mean “spend time,” she is effectively saying in this letter that Clara passes as a non-mentally handicapped person here since she “seems no different from the rest.” Margaret provides a snapshot of how well Clara has

assimilated in the following description:

You would be amazed how like them she has become. She looks more Italian every day. They prattle. About what? Well, as far as I can follow—Clara's Italian is so much better than mine—about movie stars, pet dogs, some kind of car called Alfa Romeo and what man is handsomer than what other man. (41)

Florence allows Clara the clarity to reinvent herself and the United States is what renders Clara invalid again. When she and her mother encounter two neighbors from Winston-Salem, Clara, who moments before had been a chic Italian woman, becomes “again her old familiar little lost self, oblivious, searching through her purse, leafing for pictures in the guidebooks on the tea table, only looking up to say, ‘Yes, ma’am,’ and ‘No, ma’am’” (28); when Margaret, confused by this renewal of Winston-Salem ties as well as by the developments in Clara's love life, takes her daughter away to Rome despite Clara and Fabrizio's unhappiness at being separated, Clara relapses into the docile sad child she was when she was in the United States. “Day by day, Clara followed Mrs. Johnson's decisive heels, always at the same silent distance, like a good little dog” (31), writes Spencer, indicating Clara's loss of personality, adulthood and indeed, humanity.

It is only after losing sight of Clara in the Roman Forum that Margaret realizes the extent of her infantilization of her daughter and recognizes her as a woman who deserves to have a life of her own. Margaret comes upon her daughter who never complains about

being separated suddenly from her suitor Fabrizio, as she rounds a corner:

[Clara] was bent forward and weeping. The angle of head and shoulders, her gathered limbs, though pained was not pitiful. And arrested by this, Mrs. Johnson did not call again, but stood observing how something of a warm, classic dignity had come to this girl, and no matter whether she could do long division or not, she was a woman. (32)

Clara is finally perceived by her mother as an adult, but this observation is not without ironic reference to a common but juvenile yardstick based on basic math skills. Nonetheless, this episode convinces Margaret to return to Florence with Clara.

Once back from Rome, the romance is sanctioned by both Margaret and the Naccarelli family and the speech of the young lovers becomes more intimate. When Margaret and Mr. Naccarelli return to the Grand Hotel from a drive to conduct some negotiations, “[t]hey were soon able to see Clara above stairs—she had promised to go no farther—leaning over, her hair falling softly past her happy face. “*Ciao,*” she said finally, “*come stai?*” (39). Clara uses the familiar here and recognizes Fabrizio as someone who is soon to be family. When Margaret asks Clara what she would say if she were to see her father, she replies, “I would have said, ‘*Ciao. Come stai?*’” (43), repeating the same phrase with a forlornness that suggests that her father, though loving, does not give her the attention that she craves. That she would address him in Italian implies how their usual conversation in English does not allow her to communicate with

him easily; that she would address him using the words she just uttered to her beloved indicate that though distant, her father is beloved to her as well.

By the time Clara marries, her transformation is almost complete. In addition to the Hollywood and the Cinecittà starlet look, as Clara and Fabrizio's relationship develops, Clara begins to resemble Italian paintings. Early in this relationship, "the minute the girl fell beneath the eye of Fabrizio, her rapt, transported Madonna look came over her, and she sat still and gentle, docile as a saint, beautiful as an angel" (20). And at her wedding, Clara is so lovely that she "might have stood double for a Botticelli" (62). Unlike the film, which shows the young lovers in an embrace behind closed doors, and the musical, which places them in bed together, the novella maintains the image of a picture-pretty young woman who is not only sexually innocent but also not particularly knowledgeable about sex, having only "gotten it into her little head recently that Fabrizio and babies were somehow connected" (19). There is Signora Naccarelli's wish for grandchildren that will need to be fulfilled and one suspects that despite her transformation, there is the slight chance that Clara will run into difficulties because of her limited mental capabilities. But the "happily ever after" ending prevails: Clara gets her wish and the Naccarellis, absurdly enough, seem none the wiser. As Peggy Whitman Prenshaw notes, "It is supremely ironic—and nearly comic—that from all the evidence that Margaret can gather, the wifedom that awaits Clara is perfectly suited to a ten-year-old's mentality" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 71). It is also ironic that Clara, by marrying into an Italian family that will provide help with housework and childrearing, will not be overwhelmed by the pressures facing her American contemporaries

who must perfect their homemaking within nuclear families in the 1950s.

III. Margaret's Rebirth

Margaret's narrative serves as a counterpoint to that of her daughter's. Though the bulk of the action takes place in Florence where Clara and Fabrizio are falling in love, for Margaret, events in the United States as well as people who are there instead of in Florence, dominate her thoughts and dictate how she behaves in Italy. Spencer portrays her as a woman of the 1950s who has restrictions placed around her (much as the women of the nineteenth century were supposed to conform to the Cult of True Womanhood) but has the inner resources to transcend those restrictions during her sojourn in Italy.

In a discussion about how she comes up with characters, Spencer explains how impressions of people converge to create a particular character and how that process worked when she created Margaret so that she is familiar:

The mother in *The Light in the Piazza*—I know I've seen her somewhere before. I can see her in my mind's eye in navy blue with that kind of short blond hair that women have when they get rinses, walking off down the street. I can't place that woman, but I can see every detail about her. It was out of that impression that the whole character developed.
(Haley 12)

Margaret, as played by Olivia de Havilland in the film version of *The Light in the Piazza* and by Victoria Clark in the musical, is an elegant woman of indeterminate age. Both the film and the musical date the

action of this work to 1953; since Clara is twenty-six, has an older brother who is four to eight years older than she is (he is away at college when Clara is fourteen), and because the median age at first marriage for women between the years 1890 and 1925 was twenty-one to twenty-two years of age (May xii), one can surmise that Margaret is in her early to mid-fifties in this novella and probably married in the 1920s.

As a woman born at the turn into the twentieth century, Margaret is almost a generation older than the women who suffered from the problem that had no name until Betty Friedan dubbed it “the feminine mystique.” Though she is older than the women Friedan and scholars such as Elaine Tyler May and Joanne Meyerowitz write about in their studies of women in post-World War II American culture—in fact, it is Clara who fits that demographic since she is only a handful of years younger than Friedan—Margaret is not immune to the forces that confine and constrain women. Margaret, after all, is the wife of a tobacco executive, a “busy American housewife, mother, hostess, cook and civic leader who paid attention to her looks” (10).

At first, because of Clara’s arrested mental development, Margaret seems like the embodiment of the typical 1950s motherhood Meyerowitz describes: “Popular since the 1950s, this tenacious stereotype conjures mythic images of cultural icons— [television mothers and wives] June Cleaver, Donna Reed, Harriet Nelson—the quintessential white middle-class housewives who stayed at home to rear children, clean house, and bake cookies” (“Women and Gender” 1). Meyerowitz goes on to explain how this image is misleading:

For some, this postwar story is a romance steeped in nostalgic longing for an allegedly simpler, happier, and more prosperous time. For others, it is an ironic story of declension, in which the housewife finds herself trapped in a domestic cage after spreading her wings during World War II. In either case, it flattens the history of women, reducing the multidimensional complexity of the past to a snapshot of middle-class women in suburban homes. ("Women and Gender" 1-2)

The sweet romance we find in Clara's narrative speaks to that "nostalgic longing for an allegedly simpler, happier, and more prosperous time" whereas, though we do not know how World War II affected Margaret specifically—it is mentioned in the same breath as the depression and the New Deal and is referred to simply as "the war" (49) as Margaret contemplates her husband's priorities in life—it is important to note that while her son was fighting in World War II, on the homefront, Margaret was fighting her own war: the struggle to have her community and her husband acknowledge Clara as a whole human being.

It is a losing battle while she is in the United States but Margaret rallies, and wages a victorious battle in Florence, not without anxiety and misgivings. Margaret's campaign in Florence and the realism of her awakening and rebirth tempers Clara's fairy tale. She, unlike Wharton's backstabbing matrons who suffer for years because of past transgressions, is capable of action and of taking charge of her daughter's life as well as her own. As a capable mother and Baedeker-wielding tourist, she represents postwar America by embodying the contradictions of 1950s womanhood: her transformation from a

typical housewife to an anxious but cool negotiator is accelerated by her experiences in Florence.

In Meyerowitz's book, *Not June Cleaver*, we can see how the stereotype of the domestic woman who Betty Friedan articulated in her book *The Feminine Mystique* as a happy wife and mother, was necessary but also took on a life of its own, obscuring the lives and work that many women in the 1950s did that went against this stereotype.⁷ Meyerowitz, in her own essay for this book entitled "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," notes that though the fiction Friedan read to come to her conclusions did focus on the ideal of a happy housewife, the non-fiction articles in those same magazines showcased women of accomplishments who were not necessarily domestic. Meyerowitz "reexamines the middle-class popular discourse on women by surveying mass-circulation monthly magazines of the postwar era (1946-1958)"⁸ and comes to a conclusion different from that of Friedan's: after acknowledging that Friedan's work constituted one piece of the postwar cultural puzzle, Meyerowitz concludes that in the popular literature she sampled, "domestic ideals coexisted in ongoing tension with an ethos of individual achievement that celebrated nondomestic activity, individual striving, public service, and public success" (230, 231). And as Susan Lynn argues in her essay entitled "Gender and Progressive Politics: A Bridge to Social Activism of the 1960s,"

the most strident messages about a return to domesticity represented only the conservative edge of public discourse. A strikingly different view appeared in many popular magazines

of the period; many experts urged women to combine domestic duties with paid work, community and political activities, or both. (104)

Margaret Johnson fits this profile. She is no stranger to public service since “belonged to various clubs, and campaigns to clean up this or raise the standards of that were frequently turned over to committees headed by her. She believed that women in their way could accomplish a great deal” (35).

In contrast to the blithe innocence of Clara, Margaret is characterized as someone who is knowing, experienced, and has a carefully constructed public persona. That she has a euphemistic spiel she spouts to express her relationship with Clara reveals her 1950s motherly social tact though it is a wistful and sad statement. Margaret says: “Every mother in some way wants a little girl who never grows up. Taken in that light, I do often feel fortunate. She is remarkably sweet, you see, and I find her a great satisfaction” (6).

The success of her campaign to get Clara married in Florence lies in the fact that she had a practice run in an earlier effort to improve Clara’s situation. Margaret had enrolled Clara in an ordinary school two years after her accident while her husband was on a business trip. Spencer writes:

Mrs. Johnson had decided to believe that there was not anything the matter with [Clara]. It was September . . . [t]he opportunity was too good to be missed. She chose a school in an entirely new section of town; she told a charming pack of lies and got Clara enrolled there under most favorable

conditions. The next two weeks were probably the happiest of her life. (33)

Margaret's delight in Clara achieving this semblance of normalcy was short lived. After managing to persuade Clara's puzzled teachers to be patient, Margaret is found out by the principal who notes that she has "undertaken this—ah—experiment entirely on [her] own" (34). His relegating Clara's education to an "experiment" is damning enough but he adds to Margaret's humiliation by hinting that she is not an able parent because she goes behind her husband's back to achieve this illusory happiness. When Margaret argues "I know that in so many ways she is as well as you and I" (34) and continues, "Everyone sees that she behaves normally most of the time. Do I have to let the few ways she is slow to stand in the way of all the others to keep her from being a whole person, from having a whole life?" (34-35), the principal points out patiently the deceit inherent in her actions, saying that those "few ways" were what mattered (35).

This was a failed campaign, a debacle. Not only does Margaret have to admit to husband what she did, but she also traumatizes Clara who, when Margaret is talking to the principal, has "trivial, painful things" happen to her in another part of the school building (35). Noel Johnson thinks that his wife has "gone out of her mind" and Margaret admits to herself, "I was out of my mind, insane" (35).

One of the reasons Margaret did not prevail was because Noel's vision dominates their life. Noel Johnson is very much a representative of his generation and of American industry and of conventional wisdom. A veteran of World War I who is a successful businessman with a wife and two children, his prosperous life has also been

disrupted by Clara's accident. He is a devoted father, but Margaret understands that his instinct is to get rid of anything that is defective and erase mistakes:

[A] chance accident had turned into a persisting and delicate matter, affecting his own pretty daughter in this final way. An ugly finality and no decent way of disposing of it. A fact that he had to live with, day after day. An abnormality; hence, to a man like himself, a source of horror. For wasn't he dedicated, in his very nature, to "doing something about" whatever was not right? (47)

Noel craves normality and believes that it is possible to fix errors to improve the quality of his life. Unfortunately, Clara is unrepairable in Noel's eyes and he is more engaged in looking after his business because "he had found business to be a thing he could at least handle successfully, as he could not, in common with all mankind (poor Noel!), ultimately 'handle' life" since "business was, after all, so 'normal'" (49).

Noel's business is what keeps him from joining his wife and daughter in Italy. Even when letters and transatlantic phone calls keep him abreast of the events concerning Clara's romance and cause him concern, Noel has pressing business that would keep him in Washington for at least three weeks:

One of the entertainers employed to advertise the world's finest smoke on a national network had been called up by the Un-American Activities Committee. The finest brains in the

company were being exercised far into the night. It would not do for the American public to conclude they were inhaling Communism with every puff on a well-known brand. This could happen; it could ruin them. (43)

It is important that “no Communist crooner should leave a pink smear on so American an outfit as their tobacco company” (47); as a capable and responsible businessman, his prerogative is to take charge and sort out this mess. At the same time, as a capable and responsible father and husband, he is compelled to sort out the mess that is happening in Florence. He informs Margaret that once he arrives in Florence, “well, she could leave the decision up to him. If it involved bringing Clara home with them, he would take the responsibility of it on himself” (43).

Margaret also intuitively feels that her husband had, “in some mysterious way already, at what point she did not know, separated his own life from that of his daughter’s” since he acted upon the principle that “[a] defective thing must go” often enough in the past (64). An example of this was when Noel wanted to institutionalize Clara. Margaret remembers that the rift between them: though it had been smoothed over, it suggested that “Noel Johnson might still not be averse to putting distances between his daughter and him” (42) and Margaret uses this knowledge to justify her own actions. The rift between the Johnsons is a severe one: it pits Noel’s view and desire for normality and his surgical approach to defects (locate them and get rid of them) against Margaret’s desire to find a society that would embrace her daughter, defects and all.

Margaret places great stock in the restorative powers of Italy

though she understands that those powers are dangerous in that the greater her hope, the greater her disappointment may be when plans go awry. Spencer writes: "Nobody with a dream should come to Italy. No matter how dead and buried the dream is thought to be, in Italy it will rise and walk again" (33). Margaret's dream is that "Clara would one day be perfectly well" (33); what "perfectly well" means to Margaret—or to Clara—may be fuzzy, but when she discovers that her daughter and Fabrizio have strong feelings for each other, instead of acting "as most Anglo-Saxons do, . . . logically and to the best of her ability on whatever she knew to be true . . . now she found this quality immobilized and all her actions taken over by the simple drift of the days" (12). Margaret connects this attitude change to the Latin temperament which is different from hers and concludes that she had, "in fact, come face to face with Italy" (12).

In this, it is not only Italy and the Naccarellis that she faces; in the process, she comes face to face with herself, her husband, and the United States as well. It is in "the simple drift of days" that she monitors Clara's romance instead of "explaining her daughter to young men without wounding them" (6) as is usually the case. In Florence, Fabrizio, and the Naccarellis, Margaret finds what she has been looking for: a society that will accept and cherish her daughter as she is.

Margaret comes to this conclusion not without struggle. Her disdain for Italians is evident: she thinks all Italian young men are carbon copies of one another (4), she is upset by having a *carrozza* driver force her to pay more than the usual fee and not getting any help from bystanders (23), she thinks the Naccarellis are making demands and pressuring her in a roundabout way (30), and along with

her husband, she does not think that Italians have much sense (46).

However, once she makes up her mind that the strengths of the Naccarellis outshine their shortcomings, Margaret starts her second campaign to improve Clara's lot in life: this time, it is through marriage. Here, the combative metaphors become pronounced as she gears up for a battle: "As the train drew into the station, she felt her blood race, her whole being straighten and poise to the fine alertness of a drawn bow. Whether Florence knew it or not, she invaded it" (35).

Instead of waging a conventional war, Margaret models her campaign after an advertising campaign where her product is Clara. This consumerist model reminds us of her husband in Washington, trying to salvage his tobacco ad campaign. Kathryn Lee Seidel, in her essay, "Madonna of the Marketplace: Art and Economics in *The Light in the Piazza*" points out the connection between Noel's work and Clara:

It is no accident that the product which he sells for his company is tobacco. . . . Indeed, one may read the novel as suggesting a striking parallel between the selling of Clara as a product of glamour whose innate substance is flawed, and the selling of tobacco similarly conceived as a product bringing glamorous attributes to its readers. (18)⁹

Despite this parallel, in order to run a victorious campaign, Margaret decides that she must do this alone, without her husband. Spencer writes about the nature of making such a momentous decision:

What is it, to reach a decision? It is like walking down a long Florentine street where, at the very end, a dim shape is waiting until you get there. When Mrs. Johnson finally reached this street and saw what was ahead, she moved steadily forward to see it at long last up close. What was it? Well, nothing monstrous, it seemed, but human, with a face much like her own, that of a woman who loved her daughter and longed for her happiness.

“I’m going to do it,” she thought. “Without Noel.”(50)

Her campaign is not ruthless; rather, she is always conscious of the “face much like her own” and wishes to negotiate a deal in Clara’s best interest. In the process, Margaret also experiences a romance and a sexual awakening of her own. As Terry Roberts explains:

[Margaret] has to distract and inspire her, a complex relationship with Signor Naccarelli . . . an attractive blend of cynical romanticism. They engage in a season of flirtation mixed inextricably with negotiation . . . [T]hey are each attracted to the other and each seeks to use the attraction to gain an advantage in deciding Clara’s dowry. (54)

Compared to the chaste and chaperoned encounters between Clara and Fabrizio, the meetings between Margaret and Signor Naccarelli, who speaks fluent English and used to work with Americans during and after the war, are private, intimate, and take place at all hours of the day and night. Signor Naccarelli enjoys talking about his past and his family to put Margaret at ease. However, Margaret can not

reciprocate because though she sings Clara's praises, she also can not disclose that her husband knows little about the marriage negotiations and furthermore, she does not tell him about Clara's disability.

This major lie is, in Margaret's mind, not a lie but an omission. She looks for the right moment when she attends a festival with Signor Naccarelli, but the sudden misfiring of a cannon during a ceremony drowns out her voice just when she thought she could elicit his assistance to end "this ridiculous dragging on into deeper and deeper complications. She believed that he would understand, even help her to handle things in the right way" (16) but once the moment is past, Margaret can not bring herself to broach the subject again.

Margaret also skirts around the truth when her husband, alarmed by letters about the romance between his daughter and an Italian, makes a transatlantic call; he accuses her of not telling the Naccarellis about Clara's disability. Margaret assures him that she "tried to explain everything fully" and persuades herself that she did by thinking to herself, "Was it her fault a cannon had gone off just when she meant to explain?" (42).

Signor Naccarelli's suspicions about Noel's consent or lack thereof forces Margaret to use money to convert her disadvantage into an advantage. Margaret protests the insinuation that Noel does not know about Clara's romance and says, "But I write to him constantly! . . . He knows everything. I have told him about you, about Fabrizio, the signora, Florence, all these things" (38). To gain the upper hand, she blurts out that she has reason to believe that her husband will give the newlyweds a check for five thousand dollars (38).

Margaret also has a scare when close to the wedding date, Signor Naccarelli accuses her of deception. Margaret has flashbacks to her

failed campaign in the United States:

Stricken silent, she walked on beside him. Somehow, then, he had found out. Certain dreary, familiar feelings returned to her. Meeting Noel at the airport, Clara behind in the car, wronged again, poor little victim of her own or her mother's impulses. Well, if Signor Naccarelli was to be substituted for Noel, she thought with relief that anyway she could at last confess. (56)

That Noel and Signor Naccarelli are interchangeable here show how she is waging a campaign against patriarchy both in the United States and Italy. What is comical and ironic about Signor Naccarelli's outburst is that he is protesting the age difference between Clara who is twenty-six and his son who he thinks is twenty (Fabrizio later corrects his father and tells him that he is twenty-three) while Margaret is dreading a confrontation about her concealing Clara's mental retardation from him. When Signor Naccarelli seems implacable, Margaret again uses money to sway him. She says: "I received a letter from my husband today. Instead of five thousand dollars, he want to make Clara and Fabrizio a present of fifteen thousand dollars" (58). Signor Naccarelli relents.

The irony of this situation is that in a previous transatlantic phone call, Margaret patiently refutes Noel's claims that the Naccarellis are after Clara's money: "No, Noel—I wrote to you about that. They *have* money. . . . And nobody wants to come to America, either" (42). However, she is the one who is offering this dowry to the Naccarellis and justifies it by thinking that it will come from a legacy invested in

her name and that a lawyer who is a family friend will discreetly help her acquire the necessary sum (58).

During her outings with Signor Naccarelli which are punctuated with frequent aperitifs, Margaret experiences a sexual awakening through one of his kisses. After she returns to her room after midnight, “[w]ith one finger, she touched her mouth where there lingered an Italian kiss” (59). She continues:

How had she maneuvered herself out of further, more prolonged and more intimately staged embraces without giving the least impression that she hadn’t enjoyed the one he had surprised her with? . . . how, oh, how, had she managed to manage it well? Out of practice in having to for, she shuddered to think, how many years. Nor could anything erase, remove from her the estimable flash of his eye, so near her own, so near. (59)

What is unusual about this encounter is that as she remembers it, Clara calls out to her and Margaret switches gears. Signor Naccarelli’s estimable flash reminds her that she is a sexual being but her daughter’s voice takes her back into campaign mode to analyze this episode: “If he lets me out so easily, it means he doesn’t want to risk anything. It means he wants this wedding too” (59).

Margaret manages to get Clara married before Noel Johnson arrives. She knows that her husband will think that “she had bought this marriage, the way American heiresses used to engage obliging titled gentlemen as husbands. No use telling him that sort of thing was out of date. Was money ever out of date? he would want to know”

(64). Noel and Signor Naccarelli agree on this last point and because they do, Margaret is able to use money to cement the marriage negotiations. Some of the faces of Italy then are strangely familiar to Margaret because they mirror American views of money and wedded bliss.

During the wedding, no one notices Margaret but she does not mind because she has accomplished her mission. And the satisfaction that gives her also convinces her that this successful campaign may help her in its aftermath to repair her relationship with her husband. She foresees that Noel will rage, but she believes he will not interrupt the honeymoon or tell the Naccarellis the truth: "He would grow quiet at last, and in the quiet, even Margaret Johnson had not yet dared to imagine what sort of life, what degree of delight in it, they might not be able to discover (rediscover?) together" (64).

Margaret is not without anxiety for the future. She will miss her daughter, and though her small dalliance with Signor Naccarelli may serve as practice for a more engaged relationship with her husband, she has yet to work through that new campaign. This anxiety manifests itself in her dizziness outside the church. Though she says to no one in particular, "I did the right thing . . . I know I did," the narrator asks, "'The right thing': what was it?" (65). The difference between Margaret of her first failed campaign and this successful one is that this time, not only can she say that she did the right thing, but now she has the means and strength to try to make it so.

Conclusion

Spencer herself comments on the multifaceted nature of *The Light in the Piazza* by comparing it to the experience of viewing Florence and its sculptures from many directions:

You can walk around *The Light in the Piazza*; you can look at it from this angle, from that angle, and it never completely gives up its final answer; you know, "Was she right; was she wrong?" You get all this sort of effect without ever really getting an answer, but it gives off a certain solidity just the same. (Bunting 28)

Reading this novella in conjunction with the role of women in the 1950s underscores the ambivalence of the ending which implies what the consequences of such a daring and assertive campaign may be. This reading disagrees with Elizabeth Janeway's review of the novella in *The New York Times* in which she points to what she considers the major flaw of the novel: an ending that she thinks is too happy and optimistic. Janeway points out that Henry James as well as E. M. Forster (in his novel *Where Angels Fear to Tread* which features an Anglo-Saxon girl who marries an Italian) would have identified how problematic this ending was. Janeway writes:

More important, how can Mrs. Johnson believe? Of course she *needs* to believe it desperately; this marriage is her wish-fulfillment dream for Clara. But why does no bell toll for a moment in the background, no magpie fly the wrong way

across the road, to hint that life never freezes into simplicity and that “a happy ending” is only the beginning of something else, some long and confused story that may bore us and puzzle us, but will never give us that nasty little pinch of contrivance, of things happening as they should instead of as they do? (18)

Janeway’s reading is wrong, I think, for at least two reasons: first, heavy handed imagery in the form of bells tolling and magpies flying is clichéd and contrived and would ruin the subtlety of this novella; and secondly, Spencer does understand what the perils of such a happy ending are and that is why there are hints at what might be on the other side of it. As I hope my reading has shown, Margaret Johnson is very much aware that this may not be a success: the vertigo she experiences after the wedding ceremony concludes and the harshness of the light of the piazza bear witness to the imagined difficulties of the life Clara will have to lead as well as the conflicts she must confront when she sees her husband again.

As Mary Suzanne Schriber explains in her book, *Writing Home: American Women Abroad, 1830-1920*, “Writing home from abroad entails seeing ‘home’ in a new light and writing *about* home from a new vantage point. It sometimes means securing ‘home’ as conventionally understood and valued by a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant middle class: as the space occupied by a biological family in which women hold a special place” (9). Schriber talks about travel writing here, but the same dynamics work in *The Light in the Piazza* but on at least two different levels. On one level we witness Margaret’s communications with her husband as she rewrites her

daughter's life in order to secure for her a home that is safe and loving while planning to address the problems in her own marriage in order to reimagine a home of her own; on another level, we read Spencer's examination of what she must consider untenable and restrictive about American culture in the 1950s as she writes about home while still abroad in Canada.

This exercise in writing home and revising home is possible because of the distance—geographical and emotional—travel affords both the characters and their writer. In addition, the light in the Piazza della Signoria where this work begins and ends, literally and figuratively assist Margaret in her search for how to solve her problems at home. In the first scene, Margaret and Clara are sitting at a café in the piazza across from the Palazzo Vecchio. This is Margaret's favorite spot in Florence:

[I]n the clear evening light that all the shadows had gone from—the sun being blocked away by the tight bulk of the city—she looked at the splendid old palace and forgot that her feet hurt. More than that: here she could almost lose the sorrow that for so many years had been a constant in her life. (3)

As the wishful thinking starts to become reality, the quality of light changes as Margaret's enlightenment about Clara's situation increases: "Everything stood strongly exposed in sunlight and cast its appropriate shadow: in Italy there is the sense that everything is clear and visible, that nothing is withheld" (55). And at the end of the story, the light attains an unusual harshness:

[Margaret] was swept by a strange weakness. Signor Naccarelli was offering her his arm, but she could not move to take it. Her head was spinning and she leaned, instead, against the cool stone column. She did not feel able to move. Beyond them, the group of tourists were trying to take a picture, but were unable to shield their cameras from the light's terrible strength. A scarf was tried, a coat; would some person cast a shadow? (65)

The terrible strength of the light here signifies the ominousness Janeway demands and adds strong note of uneasiness to what Janeway thinks is a happy ending.

In addition to the light in the piazza that frames the novella, Benvenuto Cellini's famous bronze statue of *Perseus with the Head of the Medusa*, which sits under one of the arches of the Loggia dei Lanzi, an open arcaded hall that runs along one side of the Piazza della Signoria, appears on the first and last pages of *The Light in the Piazza*. On the first page, it is simply a sculpture at whose foot a couple of tired German tourists with cameras slump (3) but by the end, when Margaret has a flashback to the cannon misfiring at the festival and a man being injured, "Cellini's *Perseus*, in the calm repose of triumph, held aloft the Medusa's head" (65). Spencer states that the reference to this statue at the end "underscores Margaret Johnson's moment of triumph. She, too, conquered her Medusa and got those children married. And she doesn't underestimate her accomplishment" (Broadwell 68).

Because she wins at what is usually considered a man's game, Margaret's associating her accomplishment with that of a male figure

is not surprising. But there is another sculpture in front of the Palazzo Vecchio which borders the Piazza della Signoria that also symbolizes Margaret's triumph: Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes*. As an emissary of her people, the Jewish widow Judith charms the Assyrian general Holofernes and plies him with wine; when he falls asleep, she decapitates him and takes his head back to her hometown of Bethulia where the townspeople gain the courage to vanquish the invading army. Usually read as an allegory of the triumph of Judaism over pagans, in the context of *The Light in the Piazza*, Judith may stand for Margaret's liberation from patriarchal values and her action to secure safe and comfortable homes for herself and her daughter. Unlike Cellini's *Perseus* which immortalizes Perseus after he decapitates the Medusa, Judith is captured in bronze still in the process of cutting off Holofernes' head. This echoes the ongoing struggles Margaret, and by extension Clara, may experience as they brave the strong light in the piazza.

In any case, Spencer's representation of two American women face to face with Italy delineates how the problems on the home front are present even when traveling abroad. Using fairy tale plots, irony, as well as realism, Spencer deftly rewrites the American Girl Abroad story with wit and humor to reflect the realities of women of the 1950s; in composing angular refractions of James's work, Spencer succeeds in creating women who have the courage to reassess and reimagine home.

NOTES

1. The Tony Award-winning costumes designed by Catherine Zuber exhibit “a fetching expression of the buoyancy of those postwar years” and are colored by a “similarly optimistic spirit” just as Christian Dior’s New Look “expressed extravagance and sensuality.” Zuber facilitates Margaret’s “stylistic metamorphosis [by mirroring] her inner transformation from provincial matron to citizen of the world” and comments, “I like to think her mother has dressed her to keep Clara in a state of permanent adolescence” and styles Clara to “resemble a contemporary Alice in Wonderland” (9).
2. The “play-themed cocktails dreamed up by [Sweet Concessions’s] ‘creative director,’ Brett Stasiewicz” cost ten dollars each and are tailored to the show currently running in the theater where his company has concession stands. For Lincoln Center’s *The Light in the Piazza*, he read the book and came up with the following recipe:

The Light in the Piazza

2 ounces citron vodka

1 ounce limocello liqueur

1 teaspoon superfine sugar, plus more for rimming the glass

A dash of lemon juice (optional)

1 ounce sparkling wine

1 thin slice of lemon

Combine the vodka, limoncello and teaspoon of sugar, adding lemon juice, if desired, in a chilled cocktail shaker. Shake with ice until very cold. Strain into a sugar-rimmed glass and top off with sparkling wine. Garnish with lemon slice. Yield: One cocktail. (4)

3. Elizabeth Spencer's Italian stories are collected in one volume entitled *The Light in the Piazza and Other Italian Tales*. It includes *The Light in the Piazza* and *Knights and Dragons* (both published previously in book form) as well as "The White Azalea," "The Visit," "The Pincian Gate," "Wisteria," and "The Cousins." Robert Phillips, in his introduction to this volume, states: "With the exception of a portion of the novel *No Place for an Angel* (1967), which is hard to excerpt, this book includes all her Italian works" (xi). All quotations from *The Light in the Piazza* refer to this text.
4. Works such as Percy Adams's *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (1983), James Buzard's *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1910* (1993), William Stowe's *Going Abroad: European Travel in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (1994), Terry Caesar's *Forgiving the Boundaries: Home as Abroad in American Travel Writing* (1995) and Mary Suzanne Schriber's *Writing Home: American Women Abroad, 1830-1920* (1997) take a variety of approaches to charting how American literature depends and is informed by the discoveries of travelers.
5. See Van Wyck Brooks's *The Dream of Arcadia* (1958), Nathalia Wright's *American Novelists in Italy* (1965), and Paul R. Baker, *The Fortunate Pilgrims: Americans in Italy, 1800-1860* (1964) as well as Theodore Stebbins's *The Lure of Italy: American Artists and the Italian Experience* (1992), Leonardo Buonomo's *Backward Glances: Exploring Italy, Reinterpreting America* (1996) and Annamaria Formichella Elsdén's *Roman Fever: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (2004).
6. Hilton Anderson, in his essay which also provides a good overview of *The Light in the Piazza's* initial reception, notes that the theme of

- this novella “is certainly in the tradition of Henry James and, one might add, of Edith Wharton: the pursuit and marriage of a beautiful rich American female by a young Italian male” (25).
7. The happy housewife stereotype chronicled in Friedan’s book reverberated throughout American culture and the book itself was instrumental in fueling women’s movements for change. In his best-selling novel *The Stepford Wives*, Ira Levin uses a visit by Betty Friedan to a progressive women’s club in Stepford, Connecticut as the trigger for the men in that community to conspire to replace their wives with robots. Margaret rejects the Stepfordization of her own life as well as that of her daughter.
 8. Meyerowitz continues: “The systematic sample includes nonfiction articles on women in “middle-brow” magazines (*Reader’s Digest* and *Coronet*), “highbrow” magazines (*Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*), magazines aimed at African Americans (*Ebony* and *Negro Digest*), and those aimed at women (*Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Woman’s Home Companion*). The sample includes 489 nonfiction articles, ranging from Hollywood gossip to serious considerations of gender. In 1955 these magazines had a combined circulation of over 22 million. Taken together, the magazines reached readers from all classes, races, and genders, but the articles seem to represent the work of middle-class journalists, and articles written by women seem to outnumber ones by men” (230).
 9. Seidel’s tightly argued excellent essay unpacks the relationship between consumerism and marketing as they pertain to the Johnsons as well as women in the 1950s. Her analysis of Clara as “the perfect product of her culture, the southern belle, the most important work of art of her culture” (20) is on the mark, but does not account for Clara’s Italianization.

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