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► **To cite this version:**

Gerald Préher. A Southern Belle in an Italian Setting: Elizabeth Spencer's 'The Light in the Piazza' and its Musical Adaptation. *The South Atlantic Review*, 2009, 74 (2), pp.20-36. hal-03382934

HAL Id: hal-03382934

<https://hal.univ-angers.fr/hal-03382934>

Submitted on 18 Oct 2021

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A SOUTHERN BELLE IN AN ITALIAN SETTING: ELIZABETH SPENCER'S "THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA" AND ITS MUSICAL ADAPTATION

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She might have been some fabled creature whose home was in a beam of light.

— Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (15)

Recently turned into a musical, Elizabeth Spencer's novella "The Light in the Piazza" was born out of her first visit to Italy and of what she, as a young woman from the American South, experienced there. At the time of its publication in the pages of the prestigious magazine *The New Yorker* in 1960, the story attracted the attention of some producers; it was adapted for the screen by Guy Green in 1962 and shortlisted for BAFTA Film Award. Many critics found similarities between Henry James's Italian period and Spencer's text, but Spencer made it clear that she did not have James in mind when she wrote the story: "I wasn't particularly conscious of Henry James (...) In fact, to me that story was more the sort of thing Boccaccio might have done in *The Decameron*, a little tall tale to satirize Florence. 'The Light in the Piazza' is really a comedy."¹

Back in the 1960s, Spencer's novella also attracted the attention of the famous composer Richard Rodgers,² who showed a great deal of interest in the story (see Woods), but it was only in 1998 that the project took a new turn when his grandson, Adam Guettel, decided to adapt it for the stage with Craig Lucas and received Elizabeth Spencer's preference:

The Piazza musical occurred simply because a young composer, Adam Guettel, asked to meet me and subsequently offered to option the novella for development as a musical. Others were after it also, but my agent and I decided to give him the option.³

The musical was developed at the Intiman Theatre in Seattle and at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago before being produced on Broadway

at the Viviam Beaumont Theater of the Lincoln Center, where it ran for no less than 504 shows in a little more than a year.⁴ In 2005, “The Light in the Piazza” was nominated for twenty-two prizes and won six Tony Awards and five Drama Desk Awards, testifying to the good reception of the adaptation, the cast, and the set (Woods). After Broadway, the musical was presented in numerous venues throughout the United States, from San Francisco to Chicago. The last show took place in Chicago on July 22, 2007.

Spencer had already spent long periods of time in Italy⁵ when she decided to establish herself there for a few months in order to write her third novel, *The Voice at the Back Door*, which deals with race relations in the South. She later explained that she felt the need to leave her native region so as to see its negative features from a more objective perspective. Though “The Light in the Piazza” does not address the same specific topic as *The Voice at the Back Door*, it shows Spencer’s concern with the South’s narrow-mindedness and conservatism, at the same time that it reveals her love for Italy. Using a device that recalls E. M. Forster’s in, for example, *A Room with a View*, she transplants two southern women, mother and daughter, into an Italian setting and exposes the ways in which their confrontation with another culture changes the course of their lives. As Michel Bandry says, in Spencer’s fiction, “Most of the time, a foreign place (...) provides the frame inside which the main protagonist is either confronted with a different reality or experiences a sudden revelation that marks a significant stage in his/her life” (99, my translation). Far from the South, the daughter, Clara, proves her parents’ beliefs wrong when she meets and falls in love with a young Italian, Fabrizio; there, in Italy, she is able to blossom and to experience the same emotions as girls her own age in spite of her mental deficiency. Spencer’s novella gives not only a lesson in courage but also proof that dreams can become reality.

The musical differs from the novella in the characterization of the mother, Margaret, which alters the outcome of the plot significantly. Indeed, she is made to be much more outspoken and determined when her daughter’s happiness—and her own—is affected, refusing to have her husband spoil the young lovers’ romance: she flings her opinion in her husband’s face, refuses to listen to his advice concerning their daughter’s future, and hangs up the phone on him.⁶ Her newly-acquired self-assertion even leads her to decide not to return to him. Commenting on this departure from her own plot, Spencer explains:

The few objections I had were slight, but one that I told them about was that I do not think Margaret Johnson would have left her husband in the end. In my book, they had had serious disagreements about the daughter, but on the whole I think she felt she had an enduring relationship with him. They told me they had tried it with both meanings and felt the one they chose made better theatre. So I had to let it go, I felt.⁷

“The Light in the Piazza” appeals to readers because it dramatizes a desire experienced by many: to escape conventions, cast aside one’s fetters, and live life to the full. The process of identification is carried further by the musical as the reader becomes spectator and auditor: the visual and auditory dimensions give shape to, and enhance, the workings of the imagination, while rhythms and tunes draw the viewer further in. Guettel was quick to see that Spencer’s story contained the ‘ingredients’ that would appeal to a large public:

I realized there are certain primary colors about being alive that we all share, and I needed to write something that accessed all of that. I just wanted to make something for everybody. I wanted to write something that would appeal to children as well as adults. And I wanted to write something that had universal appeal. (Guettel qtd. in Zink 4)

In order to assess the potentially universal appeal of the musical, it will be interesting to study the treatment of southern customs in the text and in the musical. Also important is the way Spencer, Lucas and Guettel de-mythify the Southern Belle by assigning Margaret and Clara roles that free them from patriarchal pressure. “The Light in the Piazza” is a reflection on American society which points at the prejudiced behavior of some and the fight of others to see beyond appearances.

DIFFERENT ENDINGS, COMMON PURPOSE: THE SPECTATOR AT THE THEATER, THE SOUTH IN ITALY

Like a play, a musical is a living art and, like a movie, it constitutes a key moment in the personal construct of the spectator as far as his relation to the world is concerned. In his review of Lucas and Guettel’s adaptation of Spencer’s story, Ethan Kanfer comments, “Catherine Zuber’s costumes and Michael Yeagan’s sets combine to create an opulent portrait of the city, with each color chosen as carefully as a stroke of paint on a Renaissance fresco” (61). Colors are of course essential in the creation of a peculiar atmosphere and in order to make

the viewer step into a foreign place; but Kanfer's reference to a specific period in world history is even more pertinent, for the women's stay in Italy is also to be seen as a period of rebirth during which their femininity takes on a whole new dimension. The costumes are intended to reinforce the presence of the actors on stage while pointing at their function within the plot; hence Clara's flashy dresses making it clear that she is the central character and that attention should focus on her. The set is made as true-to-life as possible in order to have the same effect on the spectator as a movie on a screen. In his study of the world of movies, André Bazin observes that cinema, like photography or painting, results "solely from a psychological desire to replace the outside world by its double" and that, thanks to this manipulation of the real world, "the model is transcended by the symbolic dimensions of new shapes" (Bazin 11, my translation). The representation of the world on a screen gives a new meaning to reality because it allows people to see what they ignored in the past and would not see without its agency. The musical fulfils the same function as it delivers a message about the society in which the spectator lives. Sheldon Harnick, who took part in the making of numerous musicals, notes: "When I began writing for the musical theatre, I firmly believed that what I chose to put on stage had the potential of changing people's lives" (Harnick in Jones ix).

The adaptation of Spencer's text is not mere entertainment; it is meant to encourage viewers to reflect on American society. The fact that Clara, who is considered a disabled person in the United States, should turn out to be a perfect fit in an Italian setting takes her mother unawares. Margaret's ejaculation of surprise, "she looked like an Italian!" (SLP 27), suggests that Italy has revealed Clara's true self, which, so far, had been judged shameful and almost abnormal. Indeed, as Kathryn Lee Seidel explains, "If Clara were simple because she had been *taught* to be so, she would be in conformity with the expectations of her father and his milieu" (20). However, Clara's naivety is not the result of a training process but of a trauma that she experienced early in her life. Those critics who compared her to Henry James's Daisy Miller thus missed an important point. Daisy Miller's naivety is acquired; therefore, she looks displaced in Europe and cannot adapt to her new European surroundings. Clara's, on the contrary, has nothing to do with her being uprooted and transplanted in a foreign environment, hence the ease with which she fits in.

Just like Martha Ingram in “Knights and Dragons,” a novella Spencer sees as the dark counterpoint to “The Light in the Piazza,” Margaret has come to Italy to escape from a predicament.⁸ Her choice seems to have been motivated by her vision of that country as a place propitious to oblivion: “she looked at the splendid old palace and forgot her feet hurt. More than that: here she could almost lose her sorrow that for so many years had been a constant in her life” (SLP 4). The beauty of the surroundings helps Margaret put aside her worries; Florence casts a spell on both her and Clara. A key episode, narrated from the mother’s point of view and clarifying her watchfulness over her daughter, has been omitted in the plot of the musical, in spite of the fact that it accounted for her sometimes paradoxical attitude:

The truth was that when Clara was fourteen and had been removed from school two years previously, Mrs Johnson had decided to believe that there was not anything the matter with her. It was September, and Noel Johnson was away on a business trip and conference that would last a month. Their son was already away at college. The 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. With other mothers, she sat waiting in her car at the curb until the bright crowd came breasting across the campus: Clara’s new red tam was the sign to watch for. At night the two of them got supper in the kitchen while Clara told all her stories... (SLP 34).

Thanks to this passage the reader gets a better idea of the lengths to which Margaret has gone to give her daughter a chance to live a normal life. The above passage also makes the weight of patriarchy clear: it is only once the men are gone (the repetition of the verbal form “be away” reinforces the association between father and son) that Margaret can throw aside the stranglehold in which her daughter is caught in spite of herself; were her husband around, she would have to fall in with his views and consider her daughter an invalid who is unable to live with other people. The new school experience lights up the lives of both mother and daughter. Unfortunately, the schoolmaster soon finds out about the deception and asks Margaret to remove Clara from school.

In the musical, Margaret understands the Italian idyll in the light of

this episode, so that her actions are guided by her fear of having her daughter rejected once again. Several asides give the spectator access to Margaret's thoughts and thus enable him to understand the reasons for her odd attitude. Soon after Clara and Fabrizio's first encounter, she explains to the audience:

Anyone meeting Clara for the first time usually finds this incredible, but ... Well, Clara is not ... She's not quite as she seems. She's very young for her age. Is ... And, oh, I have managed in many tactful ways over the years to explain her and her situation to young men without wounding them. But ... Well, none of that should be necessary here, one would certainly hope. Never mind.⁹

The use of aposiopesis shows that Margaret is at a loss for words, while the structure "but... well," repeated twice, insists on an internal conflict that is never explicitly stated and on the self-imposed censorship under which she labours. She is caught between her desire to disclose Clara's handicap and her hopes to see her happy, and thus ends up lying several times in order to protect her daughter. It is only when the marriage proposal has been formulated that Margaret dares express her apprehensions. Once again, aposiopesis is used to transcribe her hesitation:

It's always so difficult... Roy and I don't even discuss it anymore, it's just a fact of life, like the weather... When Clara was twelve, we rented a Shetland pony for her birthday party, and ... the pony kicked ... her ...

The doctor told us that she would... her mental and emotional capacities would not develop normally, and, but her body would continue to develop, so ... (LPM 47)

Margaret's difficulty in recounting her painful memories of Clara's accident shows that she is re-living the events; it is rendered in the text of the libretto through the numerous reformulations and broken sentences ("she would... her body would" and "and, but her body..."), and in the musical score by a syncopated rhythm. The reasons for their leaving the United States, implicit in this aside, are confirmed at the end of the musical when Margaret, having Clara's well-being in mind, metaphorically severs the link that united her to her husband, Roy. By that stage, Margaret has also understood that she must relinquish her hold on her daughter—in other words cut the umbilical cord before it

turns from a lifeline into a tether. Mothering is not just about protection; it also means letting one's children go so that they can build a world of their own.

The reflection on motherhood is present in the novella as well, though it hits a different key, that of the courage mothers are able to muster when it comes to their children. In Margaret's case, courage means refusing the doctor's diagnosis and relying on her own perception and sensitivity to remedy her daughter's problem. Her rebellion against male authority now goes a step further: she had previously seized the opportunity afforded by the absence of her husband and son to enroll Clara in a new school, but now she dares to oppose and reject masculine discourse on women, driven by a new faith in herself: "Courage, she thought now, in a still more foreign landscape, riding the train back to Florence. *Coraggio*. The Italian word came easily to mind (...) She believed that women in their way could accomplish a great deal" (SLP 36). The repetition of the word "courage" in the two languages stresses Margaret's determination and suggests that Italy has offered her a new angle of vision on her life as a woman. Spencer recently explained that for her Margaret "displays the true spirit of a Scarlett O'Hara" (Spencer quoted in Keuffel 1), a woman freed from patriarchal tyranny. Although she does not develop this idea any further, the comparison with Scarlett O'Hara might account for the new ending Lucas and Guettel opted for, as it gives Margaret the will that Spencer only presented in an embryonic way in her story.

The lyrics of the first title in the musical, "Statues and Stories," reinforce the idea that the escape from the South is constructive for both women, who sing in unison:

WE'RE ON VACATION
 FROM AN AGE TO AN AGE
 /.../
 IT STARTED THEN AND THERE
 AND HERE WE ARE
 IT'S A NEW WORLD TO ME
 IT'S A NEW WORLD AND
 WE ARE HERE (LPM 6, 9)

Self-discovery and fulfillment are at the core of the musical, which plays around the novella's key idea that "in Italy there is the sense that everything is clear and visible, that nothing is withheld" (SLP 56). Only in Italy could Clara be given a re-entry into the world of the living and

the opportunity to be herself. Although her appearance remains that of an innocent young woman, a Southern Belle¹⁰ with refined manners who is happy to be courted, her behavior shows that repressed elements of her personality have begun surfacing. Tension between the inside and the outside is developing: the time has come for Clara to be liberated from southern conventions.

A HARD TIME FOR THE SOUTHERN BELLE: LIBIDO AND SEXUALITY EXPOSED

In the musical, Fabrizio's family instantly fall for Clara's good manners when they first meet. The "voice of the musical," to borrow from Scott McMillin's terminology,¹¹ indicates that "*Clara holds out her hand to be kissed. The Naccarelli family finds this utterly charming*" (LPM 32). Furthermore, Fabrizio's mother finds her "*more traditional, from a good family, well-mannered*" (LPM 37). Clara thus appears as a Southern Belle transplanted in another South – yet a closer look at her behavior shows that she is not the usual type of Belle. As is expected (and as propriety requires), she is amazed at the statues of naked men, which expose features she has never seen before ("Statues and Stories"); but the straightforward way she scrutinizes those bodies is not what one would expect from a Belle, and the stage directions in the libretto make Clara's attitude clear: "*Clara's gaze wanders to the naked torso of a male with genitals intact. She wanders up to the statue, stares intently at the headless man's penis, then touches it before looking out at us*" (LPM 14). In the song she then starts singing, Clara puts the emphasis on Florence's exotic side:

THESE ARE VERY POPULAR IN ITALY
IT'S THE LAND OF NAKED MARBLE BOYS
SOMETHING WE DON'T SEE A LOT IN WINSTON-
SALEM
THAT'S THE LAND OF CORDUROYS

I'M JUST A SOMEONE IN AN OLD MUSEUM
FAR AWAY FROM HOME AS SOMEONE CAN GO
AND THE BEAUTY IS I STILL MEET PEOPLE I KNOW
(LPM 14)

Clara's tone sounds almost taunting over a musical background that leaves no doubt as to her mischievousness. As for the lyrics, in which she opposes her native Carolina¹² to Italy, they have 'naked boys' rhyme with 'corduroys,' which points out the liberating and initiatory quality

of the statues. Being displaced has not only reinforced Clara's curiosity but also brought her libido to the fore.

The lyrics emphasize the cultural gap between the two continents and suggest that Clara is beginning to understand confusedly that Italy is about to become (or has now become) the stage for her encounter with the other sex. The straightforward manner with which the young woman approaches the statue is a daring transposition of something Spencer deals with more subtly in the novella through the exposition of Margaret's reflections. For instance, when she sees Clara and Fabrizio, Margaret cannot help thinking: "Endlessly energetic, they flitted like butterflies through the sunlight. Except that butterflies (...) do not really think much about sex" (SLP 11). She perceives sexual overtones in other instances, as when Fabrizio offers a bouquet to Clara; to her,

They were remarkable flowers (...) a species of lily apparently highly regarded here, though with their enormous naked stamen, based in a back-curling, waxen petal, they had always struck her as being rather blatantly phallic. (...) It had come to her to wonder then if Italians took sex so much for granted that they hardly thought about it at all..." (SLP 29-30).

In her wish to shelter Clara, Margaret involuntarily reveals her prudery and, paradoxically, her attraction for the men she comes upon.

If such scenes provide good illustrations of what Betina Entzminger has called "the Southern Belle gone bad," Lucas and Guettel go much further by having the Belle propose:

Clara: Will you marry me?

Fabrizio: No, no, no. It must be mine to ask it.

Clara: Decide. Decide!

Fabrizio: Will you --?

Clara: Yes!

Fabrizio: -- Marry me?

Clara: Yes, yes, yes! (LPM 49)

The exchange shows that Clara is so impatient that she cannot wait for him to propose and therefore casts propriety to the winds. Her behavior spurs the young man into action: after returning her question, Fabrizio toughens up and moves closer to Clara in preparation for more intimate contact. Unfortunately Margaret's arrival into the room makes the lovers part (LPM 49). The Belle's honor is safe, but the young man's words still echo in Clara's mind:

Fabrizio: *The world was empty*

*The shadows filled it
The light never shined*

*Clara, the light in the piazza
Clara, my light, my heart
Now that I am awake
I don't want to go back to the shadow*

*I never felt myself to be lonely
Missing the essence of being alive
That's how it was
/.../
The essence I was missing
Is you
Your light inundates me
But she cannot love me
Not like this
She won't love a little boy!
She cannot love a little boy (LPM 16-17)*

Once again, the musical uses Spencer's text as a basis and 'expands' it through the lyrics, which provide insights into the characters' psyche.¹⁵ For instance, Fabrizio's song is built around the story's title, with Clara as the embodiment of light, but it stretches the metaphor until she becomes life incarnate and the depth of Fabrizio's love is revealed. The extent of the change wrought in Fabrizio's life by Clara's appearance is made clear in the radical opposition between the first two stanzas: emptiness, shadows and darkness seem to be instantaneously dispelled by Clara, whose very name is connected with light. Although she illuminates only a small part of the world, the light she radiates is like a shaft that enters straight into Fabrizio's heart: the definite article (line 1, stanza 2) becomes the possessive 'my' in the next line. Clara is more than light, she is life itself: "the essence of being alive (...) The essence I was missing / Is you." The dark world Fabrizio has inhabited before is implicitly assimilated to death, or to limbo, a place in which he was asleep or in some cataleptic state (he claims that he is now 'awake'). The repetition of 'missing' proves Fabrizio's awareness of exactly what place Clara occupies in his life and of how difficult it would now be for him to live without her.

In Act I, scene 3, the only one that does not feature Clara, Fabrizio

repeats the same lines, making them sound like an incantation that might bring the young woman back to him. His attitude is reminiscent of Edith Wharton's Ralph in *The Custom of the Country* who is also so much under the spell of the one he loves, Undine, that the narrator comments: "When she shone on him like that what did it matter what nonsense she talked" (Wharton 102). A Belle is expected to have looks, not brains, her aim being to make men admire and desire her. That is something Clara manages to do perfectly well in the novella, as for instance when she is described "absorbed in being adored by the policeman" (SLP 27). She has become an enticing body on display, a mere object. Lucas and Guettel have not taken up that lead in the musical; they chose instead to show Clara's real face in a row with Franca, Fabrizio's sister-in-law, whom she witnessed kissing him. Her fury knows no bounds and her good manners desert her: she throws the contents of her glass into Franca's face and reminds her that she has a husband (LPM 64). Franca apologizes and comments, "We should *all* fight for our love. I should – I *would* fight for Giuseppe" (LPM 64). Love is essential for Clara because thanks to it, she has become "the light in the piazza"; both love and the character are metaphors for the light that now illuminates her path—and, as seen before, Fabrizio's. By exposing what normally remains hidden or unmentioned, Spencer, Lucas and Guettel subvert usual stereotypes, in particular that of the Southern Belle, and present a comedy that goes beyond the limits of the time when it was initially written. Though it premiered in 1960, it has none of the old-fashioned quaintness that is often the hallmark of a specific epoch, most likely because the story tackles important issues such as exclusion and prejudice and puts the stress on the importance of dreams.

ITALY: A PLACE WHERE DREAMS COME TRUE

Spencer's novella includes several warnings for the prospective visitor to Italy: "To the traveler coming down from Florence to Rome in the summertime, the larger, more ancient city is bound to be a disappointment. It is bunglesome; nothing is orderly or planned..." (SLP 31). The place is presented as chaotic; it has none of the orderliness that Margaret has been trying to imprint on her life, none of the characteristics of the puritan tradition on which she has been raised: "She believed, as most Anglo-Saxons do, that she always acted logically and to the best of her ability on whatever she knew to be true"

(SLP 12). The association of the verb ‘know’ and the adjective ‘true’ stresses the ironic turn events take, for everything that Margaret wishes to avoid eventually comes to pass. When she took Clara away to Italy in order to protect her, she never imagined that her daughter’s dreams would develop and take concrete shape. Margaret reflects: “And now she found this quality immobilized and all her actions taken over by the simple drift of the days” (SLP 12). Indeed, everything that happens after their arrival in Italy is unexpected; a gust of wind changes Clara’s life—as well as her mother’s—forever: “*A sudden breeze steals the bat from Clara’s head; it rises up and away, in slow motion, and she turns to chase it. The bat continues to elude her. And, as if an unseen hand were manipulating it all, Fabrizio catches the bat mid-air*” (LPM 10). Whereas in Spencer’s text the man’s action is described as “heroic” (SLP 4), Lucas and Guettel have chosen to link the events to the characters’ destinies. The Fabrizio of the musical closely resembles a puppet that is being manipulated by a higher order.

Another significant element is Italy’s power to make the dreams of those who encounter her come true. In the musical, as in the novella, Margaret worries about that particular power: “No one with a dream should come to Italy, no matter how dead and buried you think it is – Italy – this is where Italy will get you” (LPM 68). At this precise moment the past once again invades the present and the mother remembers the accident that changed the course of her life irrevocably:

It’s all happening again, I am doing it again, I’ve done it, the same as that day ... Clara and her friends were leading the pony around the backyard, I was there, and the phone rang, I ran to get it, and then, I heard, I turned, the pony ... kicked her ...” (LPM 68-69).

After this jerky speech, Margaret sings about her distress in “The Beauty Is (Reprise)”: interestingly, the musical score reproduces the ups and downs of the character’s life, accelerating whenever Margaret tells about unfulfilled hopes and slowing down when she voices her regrets. Margaret finds that she is unable to rid herself of the past completely and frequently looks back upon it, as the use of anaphora suggests:

HERE ...

SHE FELL ...

IT SEEMED TO TAKE FOREVER ... HER TO FALL

YOU KNOW IN THOSE MOMENTS THINGS HAPPEN

SO SLOWLY ...

/.../
 SO MUCH WANTING SOMETHING
 SO MUCH REACHING FOR IT
 SO MUCH WISHING JUST TO HAVE ONE MOMENT
 BACK
 SO MUCH BLIND ACCEPTANCE
 I KNOW,
 NO, I DON'T KNOW (LPM 69)

This song contains all of Margaret's frustrations as a wife and mother and echoes the character's words in the novella: "The dream was that Clara would one day be perfectly well" (SLP 34). Her strength is undeniably grounded in her lucidity: "she knew already that the person who undertakes to believe in a dream pursues a course that is dangerous and lonely" (SLP 34). The lyrics of "The Beauty Is" give the spectator a glimpse of the predicament that makes Margaret's life impossible: she knows that making her daughter happy is a difficult goal to achieve.

When in the last minutes of the musical Margaret breaks the news of Clara's wedding to her husband, she does not give him any opportunity to express his opposition: "I'm not asking you, Roy, I'm telling you" (LPM 76). The father's argument against the wedding is preposterous and based on grotesque prejudice: "She's a handicapped person, Margaret, Jesus, I thought we were through with this" (LPM 76). According to Roy, Clara is not like other people and should not pretend to be. The ultimate goal of "The Light in the Piazza" is to debunk this kind of reasoning by exaggerating it. The musical puts Flannery O'Connor's dictum into practice: "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (O'Connor 34). Margaret's answer to Roy is unequivocal and confirms that when she is far from her husband she is much more open-minded: "Just because she isn't normal, Roy, doesn't mean she's consigned to a life of loneliness. She mustn't be made to accept less from life just because she isn't like you or me" (LPM 76). The "line" (Deleuze's term) that is drawn between Margaret's American self and her Italian self is here perceptible; as the philosopher explains: "To escape is not to renounce taking action at all, for nothing is more active than an escape" (Deleuze in Deleuze and Parnet 1996: 47, my translation). Margaret eventually detaches herself from her husband completely, having realized that her own marriage was built on sand: "They have something

precious, the two of them, a deep well of feeling, something we never had” (LPM 76). The forceful negation, ‘never,’ proves that Margaret’s accusations are final. She won’t let Roy appeal to her, for he not only failed miserably at his fatherly duties in wanting to condemn Clara to solitude but he also neglected his wife and lost the little capacity for communication he had.

Margaret’s feelings are summed up in the song she sings to Clara at the end of the musical:

IF YOU FIND IN THE WORLD
IN THE WIDE WIDE WORLD
THAT SOMEONE SEES
THAT SOMEONE KNOWS YOU
LOVE!
LOVE!
LOVE, IF YOU CAN, OH MY CLARA,
LOVE IF YOU CAN AND BE LOVED ...
MAY IT LAST FOREVER.

Clara ...

THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA (LPM 80-81)

In giving her blessing to the young couple, more particularly to Clara, Margaret allows her daughter to shine in Fabrizio’s life the way she has shone in hers. The lyrics combine exhortation and wishes for happiness and, if one reads between the lines, sadness and regret for what she did not get out of life. Lucas and Guettel obviously wanted to stress the happy ending, for in the novella Margaret’s sadness filters through quite clearly:

I will not be needed anymore, thought Margaret Johnson, with something like a sigh, for before her eyes the strongest maternal forces in the world were taking her daughter to themselves. I have stepped out of the picture forever, she thought, and as if to bear her out, as the ceremony ended and everyone started moving toward the church door, no one noticed Margaret Johnson at all. (SLP 64)

The fact that Spencer chose to mention Margaret’s family name twice at that stage of the novella shows that her own marriage is the only thing the mother has left now that Clara has married Fabrizio. Margaret must relinquish her claim on her daughter and entrust her to another

family, one that will welcome her and enable her to live the life she has been dreaming of. That Margaret should recede into the background at the end of the story is all the more understandable as she is the one who made it possible for Clara to become the ‘light’ in the novella’s title. Spencer’s text has a timeless quality about it because it debunks the false impressions and prejudices people might have when they meet handicapped persons. In giving life to a character such as Clara, Spencer confirms Paul Ricoeur’s statement: “We tell stories because in the end our human lives need to be told” (Ricoeur 115, my translation).

Just like Rome for James, Florence for Spencer is the place where time vanishes, “a global space where past and present, Old World and New come together” (Foeller-Pituch 291). The adaptation of “The Light in the Piazza” proves that Spencer has achieved the goal she had assigned herself when she became a writer: “I wish, not myself, but the story to do well, to rise and shine” (Spencer 1970: 71). The number of shows played at the Lincoln Center makes it clear that the musical met the public’s enthusiastic approval and that the story does meet Spencer’s set goals, for in the words of John Bush Jones, “what makes a musical succeed is simple (if vague) enough: something about a show captures the public imagination, and people swarm to see it” (4). According to Gilles Deleuze, “In the act of writing there is an attempt to make life something more than a personal matter, to free life from what imprisons it” (Deleuze 1990: 196, my translation). With “The Light in the Piazza,” Elizabeth Spencer proceeds in her study of the South, though this time the portrait is not of a traditional, stereotyped Belle, but of one who grows into an independent-minded woman and manages to divest herself of the shackles that had kept her locked her up in a confined space: Clara the light in the piazza, the light that shows the way.

NOTES

¹ Elizabeth Spencer in Elizabeth Pell Broadwell and Ronald Wesley Hoag, “A Conversation with Elizabeth Spencer” (1982), in Prenshaw 1991: 67.

² In *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*, Alec Wilder observes: “Rodgers[’s songs] show the highest degree of consistent excellence, inventiveness, and sophistication” (163). Rodgers still belongs to the pantheon of the greatest composers of musicals and is especially renowned for his association with Lorenz Hart (“The Garrick Gaities,” “Pal Joey”) and Oscar Hammerstein II (“Carousel,” “South Pacific”).

³ Elizabeth Spencer, personal correspondence with GP, 13/10/2007. Courtesy of Ms. Spencer.

⁴ Source: Internet Broadway Database, <http://www.ibdb.com/production.asp?ID=390706> (11/11/07). The musical opened on April 18, 2005 (after a month of previews) and went on until July 2, 2006. Also see “The Broadway Musical Home” at <http://www.broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/light.htm> (11/11/2007), which also contains promotional clippings.

⁵ In a recent letter, she wrote: “I went to Italy and was in Florence briefly in 1949, but a few years later having received a Guggenheim Fellowship, I went back to spend a year. I met my future husband while living in Rome and was in Italy not for a brief period but off and on for five years. The story was written after a considerable period among Italians, partly in Florence where I lived as a boarder with an Italian family in order to learn the language” (Correspondence with GP, 26/05/2008). Courtesy of Ms. Spencer.

⁶ In the novella, Margaret does not stand up to her husband, though she is aware that, should he interfere with the love story, “he would spoil everything.” Elizabeth Spencer, “The Light in the Piazza,” in *The Light in the Piazza* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1986), p. 50. All the references to this version of the story will be abbreviated to SLP in the body of the text.

⁷ Elizabeth Spencer, personal correspondence with GP, 02/06/07. Courtesy of Ms. Spencer.

⁸ Elizabeth Spencer, “Knights and Dragons,” *The Light in the Piazza*, p. 71.

⁹ Craig Lucas and Adam Guettel, *The Light in the Piazza* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2007), p. 12. All the references to this text will be abbreviated to LPM.

¹⁰ In her essay, Kathryn Lee Seidel describes Clara as “the perfect product of her culture, the southern belle, the most important work of art of her culture” (20).

¹¹ McMillin uses this expression which he draws from Carolyn Abbate’s “voice of the opera”: such a voice replaces what would be an omniscient narrator in literary texts. It provides a broader context to the musical and, more importantly, a key to better understand what is going on.

¹² Elizabeth Spencer explains that she chose North Carolina because for her it is “a good escape route” (quoted in Keuffel 1).

¹³ In *The Musical as Drama*, McMillin discusses the differences between “book time” and “lyric time.” He argues that there is a suspension of the action in the musical portions whereas the spoken parts set the plot in motion. This approach is pertinent in a comparison of the original text and its adaptation and is especially pregnant with meaning in the case of *The Light in the Piazza*.

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Editor's Note: Due to errors in the original printing of this essay in the Spring 2009 issue of *South Atlantic Review*, the editorial staff has corrected and finalized this version of "A Southern Belle in an Italian Setting: Elizabeth Spencer's 'The Light in the Piazza' and its Musical Adaptation" to reflect the essay as originally submitted by its author.