

## RAPPACCINI'S BAGLIONI

In their concern with more important — as well as, sometimes, more obvious — matters, critics of Nathaniel Hawthorne have for the most part ignored Professor Baglioni and his role in the plot of « Rappaccini's Daughter ». More often than not, plot summaries of the story make no mention of him,<sup>1</sup> the assumption apparently being that he functions as hardly more than a well-meaning friend of Giovanni Guasconti and as the simple mixer of the antidote which brings death to the ambivalent object of that shallow young man's wavering love.

It is true that Leon Howard in 1953 asked the following question: « Did the tragic antidote provided by Professor Baglioni . . . represent the successful revenge of Rappaccini's rival or the misguided kindness of Giovanni's friend? ». But having raised a sound question, Howard added that given « so artificial a story » as « Rappaccini's Daughter » is, « The answer . . . would require an exploration of psychological motives which would be out of place ».<sup>2</sup> A year later Chester E. Eisinger rightly spoke of Baglioni as « animated by professional jealousy » and as one who proposed « to bring Beatrice back ' within the limits of ordinary nature ' » by the administration of his antidote; but then Eisinger curiously described Baglioni, looking down from Guasconti's window upon the dead girl, as

1. See, for three examples, F. O. MATTHIESSEN, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, 1941), p. 256; PHILIP RAHV, « The Dark Lady of Salem », *Partisan Review*, VIII (September-October, 1941), 371; and HARRY LEVIN, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne Melville Poe* (New York, 1958), pp. 60-62.

2. LEON HOWARD, « Hawthorne's Fiction », *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, VII (December, 1952), 242.

« the victor ».<sup>3</sup> But « victor » in what consistent sense? The girl has been brought back, to be sure, but only to die. One of Hawthorne's most astute explicators, Hyatt H. Waggoner, wrote in 1955 of Baglioni's arrival at that window overlooking the garden as accomplished « with rather improbable timeliness ».<sup>4</sup> Finally, in the same year, Arthur L. Scott, agreeing that it is odd that Baglioni should be at the window when he is, persuasively couched grave distrust of the man in an imaginary dialogue between the narrator (supposedly Edgar Allan Poe) and the real Poe's fine detective C. Auguste Dupin, who was made to be of the opinion that Baglioni deliberately murdered Rappaccini's daughter.<sup>5</sup>

It is the purpose of this brief paper to suggest that Professor Baglioni's activities in — or rather near — Rappaccini's garden, far from being minor, not worth analyzing, inconsistent, or improbable, are ascertainable and significant. I concur in the judgment of Scott's Dupin and wish to extend Scott's argument.

In his first speech to Guasconti, Baglioni, like almost every other important character in Hawthorne, demonstrates that he is pulled in two directions. He wants to be honest in describing Dr. Rappaccini's skill; yet he also wants to warn the youth against one who might « hold your life and death in his hands ».<sup>6</sup> And in the same carefully phrased speech, Baglioni adds that Rappaccini is as wise as any physician on the faculty at Padua, « with perhaps one single exception » (p. 1048). I suggest that Professor Baglioni regards himself as that excep-

3. CHESTER E. EISINGER, « Hawthorne as Champion of the Middle Way », *New England Quarterly*, XXVII (March, 1954), 48-49.

4. HYATT H. WAGGONER, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. III.

5. ARTHUR L. SCOTT, « The Case of the Fatal Antidote: ('Rappaccini's Daughter' Reexamined - with Apologies to Edgar Allan Poe) », *Arizona Quarterly*, XI (Spring, 1955), 38-43. Scott's essay is charming and convincing but not academic.

6. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, « Rappaccini's Daughter », in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, The Modern Library (New York, 1937), p. 1048. Subsequent references to this story, in this edition, will be made parenthetically in the text.

tion, and rightly. When he learns that Guasconti seems to have been smitten by the physical charms of Beatrice Rappaccini, Baglioni quickly relays the substance of rumors he has heard about the girl: she is supposed to be young, beautiful, and well tutored in her father's diabolical lore. He then hints that « 'she is already qualified to fill a professor's chair. Perchance her father destines her for mine!' » (p. 1049). Then he abruptly changes the subject.

When Baglioni next talks to Guasconti, he sees that his warning has gone unheeded; he remarks that the young man's appearance has changed for the worse and then points out to Guasconti that a glittering-eyed passerby is none other than Rappaccini himself, who without doubt has singled out the youth for another of his infernal experiments. It is possible that Baglioni decided somewhat before this casual street encounter to watch Guasconti, having heard that love of Beatrice was transforming him; it is even possible that he saw Rappaccini trailing his victim and availed himself of this opportunity to point out the fact to the love-blinded fellow. In any event Baglioni, left alone on the street by the physician and his prey, acts quickly; he says to himself, « 'Perchance, most learned Rappaccini, I may foil you where you little dream of it!' » (p. 1053), and begins to put a plan into action.

« Meanwhile » — we read — « Giovanni had pursued a circuitous route, and at length found himself at the door of his lodgings », where he encounters Lisabetta, his landlady, whose face is so contorted by a smile that it is « not unlike a grotesque carving in wood, darkened by centuries » (p. 1053). When Hawthorne has a character smile, especially so wierdly as to evoke a simile, we usually are in the presence of a signal that the plot is taking a significant turn. Why should Lisabetta now offer Guasconti an entrée into the erotic garden of Rappaccini's daughter? Perhaps Rappaccini for his own malevolent reasons has bribed her to do so; perhaps Baglioni followed him back to Guasconti's apartment and saw him engage the woman in conversation on the score and even cross her palm with gold.

At any rate, after some weeks of work Baglioni, armed with a little silver vase containing what amounts to an elixir of death for the poison-nourished Beatrice, calls on Guasconti at his rooms, makes him see the truth concerning the girl, and leaves the exquisite but deadly vial behind. While on the stairs going out, Baglioni chuckles to himself — another signal of a gothic turn in the plot<sup>7</sup> — and calls his rival « 'a vile empiric ... not to be tolerated by those who respect the good old rules of the medical profession' » (p. 1060). At this point, two interpretations are open to us. Baglioni may genuinely feel that his antidote, which he says « 'would have rendered the most virulent poisons of the Borgias innocuous' » (p. 1060), may cleanse the polluted veins of Beatrice and make her inner being as unsullied as her appearance and hence snatch her from her father and give her over to her lover. Or, if he is indeed wiser than Rappaccini — and is that « 'one single exception' » on the faculty — perhaps he is planning to fight that vile empiric's fire with fire, and poison with poison, knowing that Beatrice will die. In so doing, he would save Guasconti, thwart his professional enemy Rappaccini, and eliminate a potential academic rival in the learned daughter. It is even possible that after the street altercation and while Guasconti was circuitously wandering home, it was Baglioni who rushed on ahead, bribed Lisabetta, and thus brought all of these events to just this conclusion.

Be all that as it may, the next and final time we see Baglioni he is peeping down through Guasconti's window upon the garden tableau; he calls to his rival in a tone in which triumph is more obvious than the admittedly included horror: « '... is *this* the upshot of your experiment!' » (p. 1065). By my reading, he might legitimately have added, « It is the upshot of *mine* as well! » Baglioni turned up at the scene by no accident. He had planned to cure or kill his rival's daughter. If

7. See ROY R. MALE, JR., « The Dual Aspects of Evil in 'Rappaccini's Daughter' », *PMLA*, LXIX (March, 1954), 100-101. Male's treatment here of Baglioni, which is tangential to his larger thesis, is the best I have read.

the antidote worked, then Beatrice would become a merely beautiful woman, no longer one of poisonous breath and touch, and hence no longer a walking proof of Rappaccini's skill; if it did not, why then, at least Rappaccini's tamperings with the common course of mortality would go no further and in addition young Guasconti would be spared a mithridated paramour<sup>8</sup> and Baglioni a potential rival for his Paduan chair. Such an interpretation does no violence to the title of the story, which still is seen to focus upon the daughter, victim still of a scientific father but also of his academic peer. The reading if valid does require some adjusting of one's attitude toward the possible religious symbolism of the tale; but my Baglioni plays the devil no less convincingly than your Rappaccini.<sup>9</sup> We can surely agree that Guasconti is no Faust. The traditionally accepted theme of the contrast of appearance and reality remains unviolated: Baglioni appears to want to do good, while in reality he strongly suspects that his drug will operate successfully while the patient dies.<sup>10</sup> And the other theme — that of *libido sciendi* — remains undisturbed, even re-enforced: Baglioni out-Rappaccinis Rappaccini himself, and thus proves to be an exceptionally learned scientist.

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8. Half of the phrase comes from LEVIN, *The Power of Blackness*, pag. 61.

9. See RAY B. WEST, Jr., and ROBERT WOOSTER STALLMAN, *The Art of Modern Fiction* (New York, 1949), pp. 30-32; and WAGGONER, *Hawthorne*, pp. 115-116.

10. Recall the climax of Hawthorne's short story entitled «The Birthmark».