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Hawthorne's *Allegory of Science: "Rappaccini's Daughter"*

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RAPPACCINI'S DAUGHTER" is one of the major unsolved enigmas in Hawthorne's work. The problem, difficult as it has been to solve, is easy to define. The knowledgeable reader looks for a clear pattern of second meanings in a Hawthorne story. In this one, as if to ensure the expectation, Hawthorne made prefatory remarks about his "inveterate love of allegory" and the fact that if his tales are not taken "in precisely the proper point of view . . . they can hardly fail to look excessively like nonsense." Few readers would reject "Rappaccini's Daughter" as nonsense; on the other hand, none has seemed to find "precisely the proper point of view" to unravel its mysteries. Many of the best analyses of the tale hang fire on uncertainties or discrepancies in likely allegorical patterns, and as a result critics have disagreed whether it is "below its author's highest art" or "one of Hawthorne's greatest tales."¹ The purpose of this essay is to contribute to a clearer reading and more settled estimate of the story by proposing a consistent allegory underlying its admittedly complex narrative.

The interpretation to be developed here is grounded on two assumptions about Hawthorne's *donnée*. First, the title establishes the center of meaning in Beatrice Rappaccini, and specifically in her capacity as her father's child. Second, the opening sentence establishes the narrative point of view in Giovanni Guasconti, and specifically in his capacity as a student.² The focal point and the frame

¹ The judgments belong respectively to Austin Warren, ed., *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Representative Selections* (New York, 1934), p. 367, and Mark Van Doren, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, 1957), p. 131. Some of the frustrations in good recent studies may be seen in Richard Harter Fogle, *Hawthorne's Fiction: the Light and the Dark* (Norman, Okla., 1952), p. 92; Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne, a Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 115-116; Roy R. Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (Austin, Texas, 1957), p. 55.

² Critical differences about the story are generally reducible to divergence on these fundamental points. Traditional interpretation has placed central emphasis on Rappaccini (e.g., Warren, *loc. cit.*). More recent critics favor Beatrice (e.g., Fogle, Waggoner, and Male), or sometimes Giovanni (F. L. Gwynn, "Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter,'"

of the picture thus defined, the vital elements of the setting and their figurative suggestions take shape with reasonable clarity of outline.

The opening tableau of Giovanni at his window, gazing with kindled interest upon the exotic garden of Dr. Rappaccini, is plainly enough the picture of an impressionable young student discovering in his traditional and somewhat boring educational world an exciting laboratory of experimental science. The waters that nourish this garden and the ruined fountain from which they flow are identified for us as "immortal spirit" and "perishable garniture" respectively; or, in terms of a strictly academic symbolism, intellectual energy, the spirit of learning, as opposed to its transitory uses, forms, and disciplines. The meaning of the great central shrub with gem-like purple blossoms follows from context. In its position with respect to the garden as a whole and the symbolic fountain, this plant represents the crowning product of a potent but lawless force of mind. In its physical character, it suggests a marvelous new source of energy, expressed to the visual observer in terms of light: "a show so resplendent that it seemed enough to illuminate the garden even had there been no sunshine." In the midst of the symbolic laboratory appears Rappaccini, the standard Hawthorne man of science, conveying, as he moves among his flowers, a sinister impression of not loving his plants but fearing them, as "one walking among malignant influences . . . which, should he allow them one moment of license, would wreak upon him some terrible fatality." He works with gloves and a mask and a wary "perception of harm in what his own hands caused to grow." This is Hawthorne's "Adam" in his "Eden of the present world." It is an ironical but not otherwise distorted picture of science seen from the gloomiest point of view—a picture which has been rushing rapidly enough toward reality in the intervening century to justify the author's irony and gloom.

When Rappaccini finds his work at last too perilous and calls his daughter to help, the action of the allegory may properly be said to begin. Three things are at once stressed about the new and all-important figure of Beatrice: she is young, she is attractive, and she is almost horribly at ease with plants her father is in mortal fear of. As he gives the great purple shrub into her care, she welcomes the

Nineteenth Century Fiction, VII, 217-219, Dec., 1952; Bernard McCabe, "Narrative Technique in 'Rappaccini's Daughter,'" *Modern Language Notes*, LXXIV, 213-217, March, 1959), but do not define and relate their roles in the way that is suggested here.

charge with a mystical fervor in striking contrast to her father's dread. What is the meaning of this crucial symbolic act? Evidently the old scientist is passing the torch to the next generation. Both narrative and allegorical contexts seem to say this. But they say it in different ways; Hawthorne here requires the native ambivalence of symbolism, which no one has seen fit to grant him on this point. Beatrice is an old man's child so long as he remains an old man. But in his allegorical incarnation as Scientist, Rappaccini has no physical offspring, only spiritual or intellectual. To the man of learning, "the next generation" can only be those he teaches, the children of his intellect, the inheritors and habitual possessors of objects and ideas which he has, often fearfully, brought into being. It is an old but vital story that Hawthorne is telling here: how the adventure of one age is the custom of the next, and how long familiarity can make a safe and stable haven of the very brink of disaster.

In addition to being young and unafraid, Beatrice is extremely attractive. Hawthorne has given this fact all the emphasis in his power by making her the first of a famous gallery of his heroines remarkable for a darkly voluptuous sexual magnetism. So successful is he that the reader brings himself with some difficulty to translate her literal charms into the necessary symbolic causes of Giovanni's intellectual infatuation. The young man is about to be captivated by the glamor of Science. Of course, he will be entranced, too, by a ravishing young woman, because this is a story and that is what happens in it; but to read Beatrice as woman on the allegorical level of the tale is to deny her essential duality as a symbol. Having established, then, the figurative sex appeal which Science exerts on Giovanni, Hawthorne provides a hedge against quick disillusionment by having the student check his dreamy twilight experience "in the light of morning," which "brought everything within the limits of ordinary experience, so that he was inclined to take a most rational view of the whole matter." Both head and heart are now enthralled, and our freshman is ripe for his fateful academic heresy.

At this point Hawthorne introduces the fourth and last major element into his human equation, the professor to whom Giovanni's father (orthodox intellectual tradition?) has sent the young man. Professor Baglioni has given readers of the tale more trouble, if possible, than Beatrice has. In the excitement of measuring him for

some strictly ethical equivalence, it is easy to forget that Baglioni is a professor, as Giovanni is a student, and that his entire role in the story is devoted to representing an academic philosophy diametrically opposed to that of his rival, Rappaccini. If he does so ineffectually, at times pettily, the manner will of course qualify the role, but it will in no sense define or alter it. What are the facts as Hawthorne gives them?

Baglioni is, first, "of genial nature." Unlike Rappaccini, he is a sociable man, a drinker, and a talker. His opinion of his dehumanized colleague is colored by enough prejudice and professional jealousy to make his character humorously human; but it fairly reflects the basic irreconcilability of their positions. To an uninfected mind Baglioni's indictment of the pure scientist, for all its asperity, must be decisive. But Giovanni, like the rest of us, wonders whether "so spiritual a love of science" may not be rather a "noble" thing. Here speaks the Romance of the Laboratory, an epidemic and durable mode of hero-worship. What is the humanitarian to say to this? Indignant, and frustrated by his loss of ground in this "warfare of long continuance," Baglioni grows sarcastic. With a conservative's disdain, he dismisses the radical methods of his rival, deprecates his professional successes, and hints waspishly at dark designs to place his learned daughter in Baglioni's own chair. These are not heroic sentiments. They are most appropriately human ones. And they are significantly in tune with the views of his creator. One of the plainest attitudes in Hawthorne's writings is a contemptuous distrust of science, which he personified in villain after villain of Rappaccini's stamp: Cacaphodel, Aylmer, Brand, Chillingworth—even the mild and sagacious Dr. Heidegger, whose fiancée "had swallowed one of her lover's prescriptions, and died on the bridal evening." If Baglioni seems at times contemptible himself, perhaps it is because he, too, was a Hawthorne physician. In any event, his antagonism toward two scientists of another camp, and his somewhat officious unwillingness to surrender Giovanni into their hands, are hardly symptomatic of any real or symbolic depravity. The professor's tribute of jealousy and resentment is, after all, only another form of the student's tribute of adoration.

The plot now thickens. Giovanni, observing Beatrice a second time in her garden, is struck with a new aspect of her beauty, **most**

important to the total tale in view. This is an "expression of simplicity and sweetness,—qualities that had not entered into his idea of her character, and which made him ask anew what manner of mortal she might be." Her moral innocence becomes at once a part of her fatal attraction for Giovanni; but neither he nor the reader for him can anticipate at this point that it will become in time the principal irony of the drama and a key to Beatrice's meaning in the allegory. To add to his perplexity, Giovanni notices (or fancies) that the girl and the flower she so mysteriously resembles have a lethal effect on small, normal plants and animals. But here Hawthorne takes immediate pains to ensure that the reader will not share Giovanni's mystification. "Beatrice," he tells us, "observed this remarkable phenomenon, and crossed herself, sadly, but without surprise; nor did she therefore hesitate to arrange the fatal flower in her bosom." The episode may, characteristically, speak too softly of Hawthorne's symbolic thinking in the story; but its imagery surely does all that imagery can do to portray both the awful power of modern science and the moral insulation of the youthful manipulator of its deadly marvels, to whom attendant death and desolation are sincerely regrettable but for whom there is no other way of life than that which assumes for its own high purposes the tragic risks of technological progress. Perhaps no fact about the allegorical Beatrice is more significant than that "her experience of life had been confined within the limits of that garden." How could she know what her father had not taught her? How should she, the "sister" of his dreadful inventions, see them with the eye of an *homme moyen sensuel*? To the innocent Beatrice, her wizard parent is a benevolent Prospero, as her admirer is a Ferdinand, and she herself a Miranda, deriving "a pure delight from her communion with the youth not unlike what the maiden of a lonely island might have felt conversing with a voyager from the civilized world." She is, of course, a tragic Miranda, for, as she must discover to her destruction, her father lacks humanity and her lover lacks purpose and understanding.

While the story must be told from Giovanni's point of view, he plays a part at least as villainous as Dr. Rappaccini's. His demerits are less spectacular but far more devastating to the simple soul whose knowledge of the world is so fantastically circumscribed. From first

to last, his manner to Beatrice is selfish and disingenuous. Attracted by curiosity and vanity rather than by any valid interest in science, he bribes his way into her world through a back door, flatly disregarding an all but certain apprehension of its diabolical character, and sweeps poor Beatrice off her feet with his Grecian beauty and his Latin charm. His ultimate disillusionment and rejection of her are inevitable. His love is mere fascination; and his intelligence, apt enough to see the satanic meaning of Rappaccini's botanical creations, is blind to the kindred nature of the daughter. It is the paradox of their relationship that Beatrice, the unwitting agent of death, is a "heavenly angel" in her capacity for love, while Giovanni, though grounded in humane tradition, proves a vain and shallow adventurer. No wonder she asks with her final breath, "Was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?" As the only true murderer in the story, Giovanni changes, in effect, from a moth at a flame to a bull in a china shop. Difficult as the change must have been for Hawthorne to manage, it was the one structural device that enabled him finally to establish Beatrice as the tragic center between the opposing emotional forces of Giovanni and her father without sacrificing the initial advantage of Giovanni's suspension between the contending intellectual forces of the Rappaccinis and Baglioni.

If Baglioni has fared badly at the hands of the story's interpreters, it is probably because his jarringly Chaucerian personality has overshadowed the moral importance of two acts which his author gave him to perform. First, he tells Giovanni the old legend out of Sir Thomas Browne on which the tale is based and which effectively defines the danger of an intimacy with Beatrice Rappaccini. Second, he provides Giovanni with the antidote intended to counteract the poison in Beatrice's system and thus bring her back, in Hawthorne's oft-repeated phrase, "within the limits of ordinary nature." It is true that Baglioni lacks the fine conscience of a Hawthorne or a Henry James hero. But Hawthorne could hardly have intended him for either hero or villain, and it would seem a distortion of the author's aim to assess Baglioni's irascibility and sentimentality as "ignoble motives" which his creator held in significant contempt.³ In the same way, the point of the tale is shifted or obscured if we

³ Chester E. Eisinger, "Hawthorne as Champion of the Middle Way," *New England Quarterly*, XXVII, 48-49 (March, 1954).

suppose that Baglioni's antidote was placed in a Cellini vase in order to suggest that to him Giovanni's affair is "on the same level as Cellini's amorous adventures"; or if we read Baglioni's concluding taunt to his stunned rival as "the revenge of the mediocre over the exceptional."⁴ Such interpretations cannot fail to drive one to Arvin's conclusion that "Rappaccini's Daughter" represents a "disparagement of the intellect."⁵

Both Baglioni and his mental superior, Rappaccini, demonstrate a tragic intellectual fallibility as they stand aghast before a catastrophe which they could neither anticipate nor avert; and surely this common failure of mind, whether pragmatic or empirical, speaks critically enough of two major camps of modern intellectualism. Yet the point of the story does not lie wholly in this weakness, nor in the equal and opposite emotional weakness of Giovanni, nor in the conflict of the two.⁶ It does not even lie in the destructive impact of these forces on Beatrice, though this is clearly a part of what Hawthorne has to say—is, indeed, precisely what he means in referring to her, finally, as "the poor victim of man's ingenuity and of thwarted nature, and of the fatality that attends all such efforts of perverted wisdom." Had Hawthorne ended the story there he would have had a point, but no further point than the one he had already made more cogently in "The Birthmark."

In the earlier tale, as in this one, innocent humanity in the guise of a beautiful girl is beguiled by the scientist-who-would-be-God into a state of unquestioning and finally self-destructive discipleship. In "The Birthmark" the idea behind this pattern was to dramatize the tragedy of cabalistic hubris and public hero-worship in a civilization in which science has become a religion.⁷ Georgiana was Aylmer's wife, bound to him by romantic love and contractual fealty, and her conscious sacrifice to his fanaticism takes its meaning from analogy with martyrdom. Beatrice, on the other hand, is conceived as the daughter of the god-scientist because only the filial relationship could dramatize the split personality of science itself: the scientist as villain and as victim, at once the sorcerer and the sorcerer's

⁴ Male, p. 66; Fogle, p. 100.

⁵ Newton Arvin, *Hawthorne* (Boston, 1929), p. 139.

⁶ S. R. Price, "The Head, the Heart, and 'Rappaccini's Daughter,'" *New England Quarterly*, XXVII, 399-403 (Sept., 1954).

⁷ Robert B. Heilman, "Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark': Science as Religion," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XLVIII, 575-583 (Oct., 1949).

apprentice. In "The Birthmark" these figures in the pattern were totally discrete and somehow oversimplified—the arrogant Aylmer, the ethereal Georgiana, the gross Aminadab. There, too, the tale is wholly concerned with the scientist's operations upon the girl to change her nature, and when the change is complete the tale is done. In this sense, "Rappaccini's Daughter" takes up where "The Birthmark" leaves off. The crucial change in the girl's nature is quite complete before the story begins. For this reason, the ultimate fatality of that change can hardly be considered the sole, or even the chief, point of the story.

Hyatt Waggoner, in pointing out the subordinate role of Rappaccini, concludes that it is not the original poisoning, but "present evil, a woman poisoned, that is the chief subject of the story."⁸ My extension of his view might be defined, if not quite defended, by a more literal translation of the French title Hawthorne gave the story in his whimsical preface—"Beatrice; ou la Belle Empoisonneuse." To the extent to which Beatrice is merely a woman *poisoned* her story has nothing to say, since she lives in her deadly garden, like Housman's Mithridates, "easy, smiling, seasoned sound." It is only when she becomes "the fair *poisoner*"—when her father's experiment, that is, becomes political rather than simply botanical—that there can be tragic meaning in her death and in the final cry of Baglioni with which the tale concludes: "Rappaccini! Rappaccini! And is *this* the upshot of your experiment!"

Beatrice is more than the innocent victim of Rappaccini's experiments; she is, without the least loss of personal innocence, the transmitter of them to a foolish and unwary society to which her training has made her effectively a stranger. Randall Stewart has correctly placed this tale in the first rank of those embodying Hawthorne's obsessive theme of social estrangement.⁹ By virtue of its unique symbolic multiplication of the personality, it also stands high among his studies of the scientist as an ethical being and of the ambiguous warfare of guilt and innocence in the human soul. Perhaps in no other tale did Hawthorne attempt so ambitious a program, and its extraordinary complexity has made for interpretive difficulty proportional to its richness of texture and variety of esthetic rewards.

⁸Hawthorne, p. 107.

⁹*The American Notebooks of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New Haven, 1932), p. lxxi.