Beatrice Rappaccini: A Victim of Male Love and Horror

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Critics have been fascinated by Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," a tale which has proved as elusive, ambiguous, symbolic, and intimidating as Beatrice Rappaccini is in the eyes of Giovanni Guasconti. Roy R. Male sees the story as an allegory, rich in ambiguity, about a conflict between "idealistic" faith "and materialistic skepticism," with Beatrice symbolizing the first, Baglioni the second, and Giovanni caught between the two.¹ Frederick Crews emphasizes the psychosexual elements of the tale, characterizing Giovanni as "another Hawthorne protagonist who regresses to juvenile nausea over female sexuality."² Other scholars view the tale as an allegory of corrupted and pure nature, or emphasize the attack on single-minded scientific inquiry, represented by Doctor Rappaccini. These interpretations have validity, especially Crews's stress on the sexual quality of Beatrice's allure. However, what I find striking is the story's concern with the relationship of three men to a woman, who, though she never deliberately harms any of them, and though the men profess to have her good in mind, is nevertheless destroyed by them.

The tale is a partial allegory; Beatrice's poisonous nature as well as the garden and its contents are to be understood symbolically, and the relationship of the woman with her lover, her father, and to a lesser extent her professional rival, Baglioni, are typical male-female pairings. Yet the characters must exhibit credible attitudes, motives, and responses if the story's ethical content is to have any validity. For this tale, like The Scarlet Letter, "The Birthmark," and "Ethan Brand," concerns the exploitation of one person by another, for love, for revenge, for science, or simply for curiosity.

In "Rappaccini's Daughter" this exploitation is carried on for a

different reason by each of the male characters. All their motives are based on Beatrice's femaleness, although her sexuality is the prime motive only for Giovanni. She becomes a focus for these men's fantasies, fears, and desires, and is credited with (or at least punished for) various evil intentions which in fact spring from within the minds of the three men. In the language of psychology, Giovanni, Rappaccini, and Baglioni "project" upon Beatrice impulses they are unwilling to acknowledge as their own. Ethan Brand finally learns that the greatest sin lies in the human heart, in fact, in his own heart. But neither Giovanni, Rappaccini, nor Baglioni ever gains a similar insight.

The central symbol of the tale is not Beatrice, the garden, or the gorgeous flower, but the poison which pervades all three. Poison usually symbolizes death, but here the effect seems more fearsome because more subtle, rendering the victims contagious to others without killing them. However, the poison causes a death of sorts, since it isolates its victims from most previous or future human relationships. This isolation is precisely what causes Beatrice her greatest sorrow.

Yet the poison itself is introduced by a man, her father; it is not inherent in the woman. This extremely important point is underlined by the tale Baglioni relates to Giovanni of how an Indian prince sent a woman as a gift to Alexander the Great. This beautiful woman had been "nourished with poisons from her birth upward." The prince had expected Alexander to be poisoned when he had relations with the woman. "With that rich perfume of her breath, she blasted the very air. Her love would have been poison!—her embrace death! Is not this a marvellous tale?" (p. 117). The Indian prince, like Rappaccini, is obviously responsible for impregnating the woman's system with poison; yet he is mentioned only once, while Baglioni's retelling dwells on the woman's beauty and deadliness. Although Baglioni knows, and Giovanni eventually learns, who is responsible for Beatrice's envenomed body, their efforts to thwart Rappaccini's power are aimed at his innocent daughter, who stirs their imaginations far more than does her father.

The inclusion of this tale by "an old classic author" (p. 117) also universalizes the significance of Hawthorne's allegory. "Rappaccini's

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3 Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mosses From an Old Manse, Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. William Charvat and others (Columbus, Ohio, 1974), p. 117.
Daughter” is his variation on the “femme fatale” legend, one of the most prevalent myths of literature and folklore. She is the woman whose embrace is death, who destroys, degrades, devours, and enslaves her lovers. But neither Beatrice nor the Indian woman is this kind of female, essentially malignant, deliberately harmful to men.

Let us first look at Giovanni’s behavior, since his relationship with Beatrice forms the main plot of the story. The young man is infatuated with her from the moment he first sees her in the garden below her window. Yet he immediately senses something dangerous about her, especially because of her resemblance and immunity to the purple-flowered plant which her father carefully avoids. “Flower and maiden were different and yet the same, and fraught with some strange peril in either shape” (p. 98). Significantly, this feeling comes to him in a dream, showing how Giovanni’s own fancy begins almost immediately to influence his idea of the woman. Moreover, other imagery suggests that maiden and flower are not only sisters but lovers, adding a sense of perversion to Giovanni’s sexual fear of Beatrice.

Since Giovanni’s imagination is provoked by his very first observance of Beatrice and her surroundings, it is difficult for him to focus on the reality of who and what she is. In the following passage, notice how his thoughts quickly move away from the actuality of Beatrice to metaphors created by his mind.

“Here am I, my father! What would you?” cried a rich and youthful voice from the window of the opposite house; a voice as rich as a tropical sunset, and which made Giovanni, though he knew not why, think of deep hues of purple or crimson, and of perfumes heavily delectable.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Soon there emerged from under a sculptured portal the figure of a young girl, arrayed with as much richness of taste as the most splendid of the flowers . . . with a bloom so deep and vivid that one shade more would have been too much. . . . the impression which the fair stranger made upon him was as if here were another flower, the human sister of those vegetable ones, as beautiful as they . . . but still to be touched only with a glove, nor to be approached without a mask. (pp. 96–97)

The association of Beatrice with the plant is only partially correct. Although both are beautiful, rich, and perilous, Beatrice has human qualities which make her more than Giovanni’s fantasies. She loves beautiful things, she wants to love, she is able to laugh, to think, and
to sacrifice herself, as the reader later discovers. The two words used most frequently to describe her are “rich” and “deep,” both indicating an abundance of character, beauty, and knowledge, not all of which, however, may be apparent on first view.

The next time Giovanni watches Beatrice, he notices with horror that an insect buzzing near her suddenly falls dead, and that a bouquet he tosses her seems to wither as soon as she catches it. Giovanni avoids the window for several days, yet cannot bring himself to vacate his chambers or get used to Beatrice’s daily routine. Hawthorne brilliantly describes the emotions she has aroused in the young man.

Whether or no Beatrice possessed those terrible attributes—that fatal breath—the affinity with those so beautiful and deadly flowers—which were indicated by what Giovanni had witnessed, she had at least instilled a fierce and subtle poison into his system. It was not love, although her rich beauty was a madness to him; nor horror, even while he fancied her spirit to be imbued with the same baneful essence that seemed to pervade her physical frame; but a wild offspring of both love and horror that had each parent in it, and burned like one and shivered like the other. Giovanni knew not what to dread; still less did he know what to hope; . . . Blessed are all simple emotions, be they dark or bright! It is the lurid intermixture of the two that produces the illuminating blaze of the infernal regions. (p. 105)

Giovanni’s dreads are indefinable, yet potent and monstrous; his “love and horror” are reactions to the “embrace” and the “death” he associates with the sexuality of Beatrice. The passage makes it clear Beatrice is not trying to seduce Giovanni in any sense. He “fancies” her spirit is full of a “baneful essence” because the vague evidences of her poisonous system are seized upon and magnified by fears already present in his psyche.

Giovanni’s first meeting with Beatrice, which occurs after he has admired her for some time, shows his continual difficulty in separating his image of her from reality. His two talks with Baglioni have also contributed to his feeling that there is something sinister about Rappaccini and his daughter, without giving him much of a clue as to why they are threatening. Significantly, Beatrice warns him almost at once to “‘Believe nothing of me save what you see with your own eyes’” (p. 111). Since what Giovanni has seen with his own eyes has only confused him, he responds with “‘Bid me
believe nothing, save what comes from your own lips’” (p. 112). Her
reply goes straight to the heart of the story: “‘I do so bid you,
Signor!’ she replied, ‘Forget whatever you may have fancied in
regard to me. If true to the outward senses, still it may be false in its
essence. But the words of Beatrice Rappaccini’s lips are true from
the depths of the heart outward. Those you may believe!’” (p. 112).
Giovanni is deeply impressed by this statement. “He seemed to gaze
through the beautiful girl’s eyes into her transparent soul, and felt
no more doubt or fear” (p. 112). For a moment, her mystery, on
which his imagination feeds, disappears, although she does not seem
thereby shallow or less intriguing. As they talk, Giovanni notes that
her thoughts seems to come “from a deep source”; the young man
is surprised that the woman “whom he had idealized in such
hues of terror” should turn out to be “so human and so maiden-
like. . . . the effect of her character was too real, not to make itself
familiar at once” (p. 113).

For Beatrice the conversation is also a milestone, since Giovanni’s
presence makes her forget the shrub with purple blossoms for the
first time. Despite her many virtues, her personality is incomplete,
since her love has been directed towards a plant, not a human being.
She immediately demonstrates her concern for Giovanni’s welfare;
when he reaches to pluck one of the purple flowers, she warns him
away: “‘Touch it not!’ exclaimed she, in a voice of agony. ‘Not for
thy life! It is fatal!’” (p. 114). Giovanni later forgets this concern
for his safety.

After he returns to his room, Giovanni’s thoughts of Beatrice are a
mingling of his imaginings with the reality he has experienced.

The image of Beatrice came back to his passionate musings, invested with
all the witchery that had been gathering around it ever since his first
glimpse of her, and now likewise imbued with a tender warmth of girlish
womanhood. She was human: her nature was endowed with all gentle
and feminine qualities; she was worthiest to be worshipped; she was
capable, surely, on her part, of the height and heroism of love. Those
tokens, which he had hitherto considered as proofs of a frightful peculiarity
in her physical and moral system, were now either forgotten, or, by the
subtle sophistry of passion, transmuted into a golden crown of enchant-
ment. (p. 114)

Now Giovanni idealizes her, and his idealization ignores the real,
though not willful, perils in her "physical system." Swinging between the two classic extremes of viewing woman as demon or as saint, he never finds a basis in reality for his feelings about Beatrice. Hawthorne hints that Giovanni feels only a "cunning semblance of love which flourishes in the imagination, but finds no depth of root into the heart" (p. 115).

Giovanni continues to meet Beatrice, now with her full approval, and even at her insistence. All "appreciable signs," such as their looks and words, indicate they are in love. Yet there is a distance between them; their love has no sexual dimension, "no seal of lips, no clasp of hands, nor any slightest caress, such as love claims and hallows" (p. 116). Giovanni wants this physical intimacy, yet when he seeks it, Beatrice gives him "such a look of desolate separation" (p. 116) that he gives up his attempts. If we understand the story literally, Beatrice avoids this contact because she fears contaminating him. But is there a deeper meaning behind her avoidance of physical contact?

Giovanni's reactions provide a clue. Beatrice's reluctance causes "horrible suspicions that rose, monster-like, out of the caverns of his heart, and stared him in the face; his love grew thin and faint as the morning-mist . . ." (p. 116). Giovanni has not really shed his mistrust of Beatrice. The strength of his love decreases when she appears sad and increases when she appears happy; it has no firm roots in his heart. Love may "hallow" kisses, caresses, and deeper sexual contact, but Giovanni's love is limited and unhallowed. Unless he can free himself from the "horrible suspicions" which arise when Beatrice avoids his touches (suspicions which indicate his inability to look past her "physical system" to her "moral system") he is not prepared for the risks and commitments of sexual love.

His "horrible suspicions" seem related to fear of the "embrace of death," symbolized by the poison in Beatrice's system. There is no suggestion that Giovanni feels "castrated" or inadequate because she has rejected his sexual advances. Rather, he seems to desire sexual union, while fearing its dangers. Ironically, Beatrice's reluctance itself brings about his suspicions that there must be something deadly in her, which could be unleashed upon him if he has relations with her. For Giovanni, sexual commitment to Beatrice means "death" in the sense of being dominated by a woman, being robbed of his
independence, and having his personality swallowed up. Beatrice actually makes no attempt to bind him to her; actually, she professes to want "'only to love thee, and be with thee a little time, and so to let thee pass away, leaving but thine image in mine heart'" (p. 125). It is hard to believe this statement could reflect Beatrice's deepest feelings, of which she may be unaware. "Pass away" may also have two meanings, although I doubt we should assume Beatrice expects Giovanni's death. In this matter, his insight seems deeper than hers; he knows his involvement with Beatrice must be permanent, while she, ignorant of the power of her sexuality, underestimates the difficulties of separating her destiny from Giovanni's. In fact, Giovanni has a real compulsion to possess Beatrice, to change and control her, a compulsion revealed by his attempts to know her sexually, and by his persistent desire to shape her into his personal image of the divine woman.

The great proof of the instability of Giovanni's love and of his wish to possess Beatrice comes when he decides to test her by observing whether her breath wilts a bouquet he plans to give her. His third conversation with Baglioni has driven him to this trial, since Baglioni has warned him that he may be the subject of an experiment conducted by Rappaccini, with his daughter's unwitting assistance. "'The fair and learned Signora Beatrice would minister to her patients with draughts as sweet as a maiden's breath. But wo to him that sips them!'" (p. 118). Baglioni gives Giovanni an antidote which he maintains will cure Beatrice's poisonous nature and foil Rappaccini's schemes. Giovanni, whose latent suspicions are once again aroused "like so many demons," defends Beatrice's honesty and virtue, but he cannot refute Baglioni's claim that she is "poisonous as she is beautiful!" (p. 118). Therefore, he buys the flowers for the test, and also accepts the antidote. In doing so, he ignores Beatrice's earlier instructions not to believe what he sees, but only what she tells him.

Just before Giovanni leaves to test Beatrice, he looks vainly in his mirror, an action displaying "a certain shallowness of feeling and insincerity of character" (p. 121). His shallowness contrasts with earlier descriptions of Beatrice's depth. Unsuspecting, he admires his overhealthy complexion, and thinks "'her poison has not yet insinuated itself into my system. I am no flower to perish in her grasp!'" (p. 121). Immediately thereafter, he discovers that the
flowers have withered in his own hand, apparently from the poison in his own breath. With his worst fears confirmed, he hears Beatrice calling him, and mutters, “‘She is the only being whom my breath may not slay! Would that it might!’” (p. 122). Here is proof that the deadly intent he attributes to her is within himself as well.

Although Giovanni has been repeatedly warned that Rappaccini is using Beatrice to harm him, and although he has continually observed Rappaccini spying on him and his daughter, still the young man’s fascination and fear are always focused on Beatrice, not on her father. In their last meeting Giovanni accuses her: “‘Yes, poisonous thing! . . . Thou hast done it! Thou hast blasted me! Thou hast filled my veins with poison! Thou hast made me as hateful, as ugly, as loathsome and deadly a creature as thyself . . . . let us join our lips in one kiss of unutterable hatred, and so die!’” (p. 124). The motives he attributes to her are really his own, as noted previously. Giving her the antidote is his attempt to remake her into his ideal woman. Only he feels “unutterable hatred.” More generous than he, Beatrice tells him to wait before drinking the antidote, so he can first observe the effects on her body. Although she is willing to sacrifice her life for him, he is willing to sacrifice nothing for her. Giovanni has respect neither for what little independence Beatrice has, nor for her personal integrity, where both virtues and faults are inextricably entangled, as they are in everyone. His “love” requires a woman who will gratify his ego and conform to his fantasies. Beatrice makes no such demands on him and is unaware until their last meeting that he has become poisoned. Therefore, she is entirely correct when she asks him, “Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?” (p. 127). The poison in her “physical system” is far less deadly than the venom in his “moral system.”

Although Baglioni acts with more deliberation than does Giovanni, his attitudes and behavior resemble those of the young man. Superficially, Baglioni appears a benevolent character, concerned with the welfare of his old friend’s son, and intent on exposing and frustrating the schemes of Rappaccini. Yet although Baglioni realizes Rappaccini is the source of the evil, Beatrice is the target of his attempts to combat this evil. In fact, he sees her as a real danger to his position at the University, telling Giovanni, “‘she is already qualified to fill a professor’s chair. Perchance her father destines her for mine!’” (p.
101). That this fear is groundless is proved by Beatrice's subsequent denial. "Do people say that I am skilled in my father's science of plants? . . . No; though I have grown up among these flowers, I know no more of them than their hues and perfume; and sometimes, methinks I would fain rid myself of even that small knowledge'" (p. 111). Clearly, she is not happy with the life her father has forced upon her.

Baglioni, not Beatrice, seeks academic triumph and status. He wants to discredit Rappaccini, about whom he has mixed feelings; he fears and envies, yet also admires the doctor. Perhaps Baglioni suspects that Rappaccini possesses a greater knowledge of medicine and botany than he himself does. He acknowledges only grudgingly that Rappaccini has had success treating the sick with his medicines, whose "virtues are comprised within those substances which we term vegetable poisons" (p. 100). Later, Baglioni warns Giovanni that "for some purpose or other, this man of science is making a study of you. I know that look of his! It is the same that coldly illuminates his face, as he bends over a bird, a mouse, or a butterfly, which, in pursuance of some experiment, he has killed by the perfume of a flower;—a look as deep as Nature itself, but without Nature's warmth of love'" (p. 107). Baglioni's callous manipulation of Giovanni and Beatrice later on shows how well he fits his own description of Rappaccini. That his hatred of the doctor is mixed with genuine admiration is shown by his remarks after he gives Giovanni the antidote (itself a poison). "Let us confess the truth of him, he is a wonderful man!—a wonderful man indeed! A vile empiric, however, in his practice, and therefore not to be tolerated by those who respect the good old rules of the medical profession'" (p. 120).

After their first meeting, Giovanni avoids Baglioni, afraid that the professor may detect his secret passion for Beatrice. However, Baglioni stops him in the street, warning him that Rappaccini has taken a sinister interest in him. When Giovanni leaves, we discover Baglioni's motives are not simply benevolent, but are instead a complex mixture of friendship, envy, professional rivalry, and fear of Beatrice's threat to his academic chair: "This must not be. . . . The youth is the son of my old friend, and shall not come to any harm from which the arcana of medical science can preserve him. Besides, it is too insufferable an impertinence in Rappaccini, thus to snatch the lad out of my own hands, as I may say, and make use of
him for his infernal experiments. This daughter of his! It shall be looked to. Perchance, most learned Rappaccini, I may foil you where you little dream of it!” (pp. 107-108). Possessive of Giovanni, Baglioni observes and fears the same possessiveness in Rappaccini. The young man’s instincts are correct in making him avoid Baglioni, for the latter makes Giovanni his tool for destroying the Rappaccinis. If Baglioni feels threatened by Rappaccini, then the thought of a woman being his intellectual superior and displacing him from his position must be doubly frightening. To be outdone by Rappaccini would be “insufferable”; to be outdone by Beatrice would be utterly disgraceful.

Thus, Baglioni’s self-righteous denunciation of the doctor at the very end of the tale is not really a moral judgment, but primarily the gloating satisfaction of an academician exposing the error of a colleague. “Baglioni . . . called loudly, in a tone of triumph mixed with horror, . . . ‘Rappaccini! Rappaccini! And is this the upshot of your experiment?’” (p. 128). Why “mixed with horror”? Perhaps we are to believe Baglioni has not anticipated that Beatrice would die, only that the antidote would thwart Rappaccini by disenvenom-ing his daughter, thus releasing her from her father’s control. If Baglioni has miscalculated the drug’s effect, perhaps his knowledge is not as great as he pretends. Or perhaps Baglioni, like Rappaccini, is conducting an experiment, testing on Beatrice a drug of whose effect he is unsure. Thus, the horror may be inner-directed, since Baglioni’s final question could be asked of himself as well as of Rappaccini. And if Baglioni knows the antidote will be fatal, he is a murderer.

When considering Rappaccini’s relationship with his daughter, it is important to look first of all at the story’s title. While apparently merely descriptive, it emphasizes that Beatrice is her father’s creation; she springs from him. She is dependent on him, and is his unwitting tool. We cannot judge the daughter without looking past her to her father.

Rappaccini is a difficult man to judge, however, since so much of our information about him comes through the deeply biased Baglioni. Nevertheless, Baglioni is right about certain things. Rappaccini is a schemer; he does have sinister plans for Giovanni. He is also arrogant, ruthless, and cunning, but above all he is obsessed with power, the power to intimidate and the power to control. True,
Baglioni accuses him of sacrificing “‘human life, his own among the rest, or whatever else was dearest to him, for the sake of adding so much as a grain of mustard-seed to the great heap of his accumulated knowledge’” (pp. 99–100). Yet Rappaccini’s statements at the end of the tale show clearly that this quest for knowledge is in turn subservient to his need for power. The exact nature of his schemes is unclear; are Giovanni and Beatrice to be his agents in a play for some sort of social or even political power? However, Rappaccini is a plotter and activator, not a doer. Therefore he needs Beatrice as his instrument.

Rappaccini is gratified when he learns Giovanni is also envenomed, so that he and Beatrice can pass “‘through the world, most dear to one another, and dreadful to all besides!’” (p. 127). Suspicious and isolated himself, he cannot understand why his daughter mourns her loneliness and spurns the power his science has given her. Like Giovanni and Baglioni, he projects his own selfish desires onto Beatrice, and therefore blames her, not himself, when she refuses to go along with his scheme. “‘What mean you, foolish girl? Dost thou deem it misery to be endowed with marvellous gifts, against which no power nor strength could avail an enemy? Misery, to be able to quell the mightiest with a breath? . . . Wouldst thou, then, have preferred the condition of a weak woman, exposed to all evil, and capable of none?’ ‘I would fain have been loved, not feared,’ murmured Beatrice” (p. 127).

Supremely ironic is Rappaccini’s rhetorical question about whether Beatrice would prefer to be a “weak woman.” By isolating her, he has kept her ignorant, dependent on him, and therefore weak. He needs a weak daughter, weak enough to let him experiment on and through her. Moreover, although Rappaccini claims the poison will benefit Beatrice, it is really a punishment. He does not expose himself to it, after all. We may assume that if he approaches the plant with a mask and heavy gloves, he must also approach Beatrice in the same cautious manner. His experiments have created a daughter towards whom his attitude, like Giovanni’s, must be essentially fear, covered by only a “cunning semblance” of love. The power Rappaccini has given his daughter is ultimately for his own use, not for her protection. Ironically, her poison makes her vulnerable to the power of the outside world in a way Rappaccini has not anticipated. Beatrice most needs protection from her father, who is
her worst enemy, and the one person whom his science cannot prevent from harming her.

Ultimately, the poison in the natures of Giovanni, Baglioni, and Rappaccini represents their own fears, obsessions, ambitions, and unhealthy desires. The poison they see (and fear) in Beatrice is actually the evil they cannot admit is in themselves. This idea is dramatized by Rappaccini’s deliberate poisoning of his daughter, an act which makes her dangerous to himself and others. Having poisoned her, they cannot bear the thought that she may poison (control, displace, rebel against) them. Even though each man knows, intellectually, that she is an unwitting tool, each has psychological needs which must find a victim, a target, or a vehicle.

Giovanni has a destructive need to dominate and possess Beatrice; this is precisely the quality he finds most threatening in his idea of her. Baglioni imagines Beatrice is about to make a conquest of his academic chair; in fact, he desires to score a triumph over Rappaccini by neutralizing his daughter. He plans to discredit Rappaccini’s experiments by performing equally reprehensible experiments himself. Her father, whose experiments with poisons are intended to make others fear him, assumes Beatrice is also moved by a wish to be feared. The poison he loves and fears in her is really the destructive impulse in his own being. All three men are right, of course, in mistrusting each other and even fearing Beatrice. But their sin lies in taking their revenge on Beatrice, instead of directing their enmity at each other or better still, trying to heal themselves.

As I have said, the men’s motives and the story’s meaning depend on Beatrice’s femaleness. Each man represents a typical male role, and the story examines how men playing each role might find a woman threatening, and might therefore try to destroy her. Giovanni, her lover and almost-husband, desires her sexuality, yet fears its power to dominate and destroy him. Baglioni, her professional rival, feeling insecure about his university position, tries to neutralize her by diverting her energies to woman’s proper sphere, marriage. Her father wants her beautiful enough to win a husband, dependent enough to remain in his home, obedient enough to do his bidding, and compliant enough to be molded to his standards. None of these men could have been portrayed as feeling these same fears, with the same intensity, about a man. Notice, for example, that Baglioni
views his struggles with Rappaccini almost as a game, with a rather gentlemanly tone. Only with Beatrice does he play for keeps.

And the fate of Beatrice anticipates the fates of later women in literature, in *The Awakening*, *The Bell Jar*, even in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Educated for a life of sacrifice, Beatrice can respond to the irrational fears of men only with one more sacrifice. It is unclear whether she knows that drinking the antidote will be fatal, but the “peculiar emphasis” she puts on the words “‘I will drink—but do thou await the result’” (p. 126) indicates that she suspects it will be deadly and accepts her death quite happily while saving Giovanni’s life at the same time. The final irony is the reversal of Baglioni’s story of the Indian woman. As Hawthorne suggests, one must look beyond such femmes fatales to the hommes fatals who make them deadly. Giovanni, Rappaccini, even Baglioni, have professed a desire to help Beatrice, while secretly fearing her “embrace of death.” Consequently, they have embraced her—offered her help—in their own selfish, vengeful, scientific ways, and for her their embrace has meant—death.