

# The Probable Etymological Roots of Hawthorne's Pietro Baglioni in "Rappaccini's Daughter"

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## Abstract

An examination of the potential etymological roots of Pietro Baglioni's name in "Rappaccini's Daughter" can provide insight into the character's function in the story as well as accommodate opposing interpretations of his role.

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Despite the pivotal role of Pietro Baglioni in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1844 short story "Rappaccini's Daughter," only four scholars have attempted to identify his origins in historical personages. Kent Bales offers "the bloody Baglioni of Perugia" (175), and Carol Marie Bensick suggests the same family as well as four other historical figures: Giovanni Battist Bagolini, Pietro da Bagnolo, Pietro d'Abano, and Bishop Pietro Barozzi (33). None of these persons relate significantly to Hawthorne's creation, however, and their surnames do not correspond to his. These possibilities seem remotely relevant, the last three of which have only the Christian name "Pietro" as the sole link to the fictional character. A third scholar, Burton R. Pollin, offers the Baglioni family of Calvi in Corsica and the name of the river that flows through Padua—the Berchiglione—as possibilities (33). These suggestions also seem unlikely. The fourth attempt is mine, a circumstantial case for an actor named Pietro Bagliani from the *commedia dell'arte* as a likely source (17–19). Unfortunately, little has been done on the etymological roots of this character's name. This essay is an attempt to fill that gap.

Baglioni plays an important supporting role in Hawthorne's story, set in Padua in the distant past. Giovanni Guasconti, a young student, takes a room overlooking an exotic garden, the project of Dr. Giacomo Rappaccini, who has the house opposite. Despite his misgivings and the warnings of Baglioni, another scientist and onetime friend of the young man's father, Giovanni is attracted to Rappaccini's beautiful daughter, Beatrice, who has been raised to be immune to the poisonous plants in the garden but who herself depends on that poison to survive. Giovanni becomes as poisonous as she, and at the

end of the story he attempts to rescue her by giving her a powerful antidote supplied by Baglioni, resulting in her death.

Before examining the probable etymological roots of this character's name, we must reflect on how Hawthorne is likely to have arrived at the name. It is, after all, not a name that would occur randomly to a person. More likely, Hawthorne deliberately chose it because he saw some artistic potential in the name. As John W. Wright points out, Hawthorne "played in limited ways with thematized names in his earlier stories and in his notebooks," for example, with *Bourne*, *Digby*, *Drowne*, *Warland*, and *Chillingworth*. These characters "are all set off approximately as caricatures by their names – the reader is affected by a kind of double vision from the relation of the name in the narrative on the one hand and in the external language system of American culture on the other" (Wright 447–48). As we shall see, in "Rappaccini's Daughter" Hawthorne seems to have had in mind a similar dual vision from an Italian perspective.

How, then, might he have specifically settled on the Italian name *Pietro Baglioni*? It is clear that Hawthorne was involved with the Italian language – evidenced by his exposure to it through the tutoring of Benjamin Lynde Oliver<sup>1</sup> prior to his entering Bowdoin College and the Dante class in Italian held by Sophia Ripley at Brook Farm in 1841, as well as through his wife's study of Italian.<sup>2</sup> I suspect that in the course of reading in an Italian dictionary or grammar, or talking with others who were interested in Italian (e.g., his wife, Oliver, Longfellow, Sophia Ripley, and Emerson), the words and suffix that I suggest below surfaced to his consciousness. They seem to have suited his artistic purposes, so he used them.

Of the four critics mentioned above, including myself, only Pollin has attempted to tap the etymological roots for Pietro Baglioni's name. His two possibilities – *sbagliare* 'to err' and *bagliore* 'a flash of light' – unfortunately, have no relationship to the story and are therefore minimally helpful (Pollin 33). The etymological sources that will be presented below have a definite similarity to Baglioni's name or an exact correspondence, as well as meanings that are consistent with the character in the story. Each of the etymological sources available in Italian dictionaries of the day would have been accessible to Hawthorne at Bowdoin College or at the Boston Athenaeum prior to the publication of the story in December 1844.<sup>3</sup>

The first etymological root that I should like to suggest – taken from Giovanni Torriano's Italian-English dictionary, which Hawthorne had access to at the Boston Athenaeum<sup>4</sup> – is the Italian word *baglio*. The entry for this word is simply "Used for Báilo." Upon checking *báilo*, one finds the following: "a he nurse, a foster-father, also a tutor, a guardian, an overseer, also a Bailiff [sic], also an agent, namely he whom the Venetians entertain at

Constantinople.” *The Oxford English Dictionary* includes *báilo* as a word in English, but indicates that it has not been naturalized.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, an examination of the entry *Bailey* in Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges’ *A Dictionary of Surnames* discloses, as one of the origins of the name, a relevant connotation: “occupational name for a steward or official (or occasionally perhaps an ironic nickname for an officious person)” (27). These meanings of course tie in perfectly with the fictional Pietro Baglioni, who functions as a surrogate father and self-appointed guardian to Giovanni Guasconti, as well as a person who attempts to serve by offering unwanted and unnecessary advice, a meddling and overbearing fellow.

The second etymological root that I offer for consideration is the Italian masculine noun *baglio*, meaning “a nautical beam” (Tedeschi and Fantonetti 27), plus the suffix *-ni* or *-oni*, which can signal several meanings: (a) an ancestor’s trade, (b) appearance or characteristic, or (c) the plural of the augmentative<sup>6</sup> suffix *-one*. This would have been both interesting to Hawthorne and more relevant to his story than either of the possibilities put forth by Pollin. The nautical term would likely have been engaging to Hawthorne, especially considering the interest he took in the adventurous life of his seaman father.<sup>7</sup>

Hawthorne would in all probability have found the possibilities of the word and its suffix fascinating. I suspect that he deliberately employed the name to capitalize on the duality that it contains. It is likely that he used the Christian name *Pietro* to convey the stability associated with *Peter* (Latin *petrus* and Greek *petros* ‘a rock’: “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16.18, King James Version). And the surname *Baglioni*, taken in light of the Italian *baglio*, not only conveys the idea of support that a nautical beam would provide, but also contains a double dose of seeming reliability. Edifices or values based on such foundations, however, may be suspect. When the connotations of both of Pietro Baglioni’s names are measured against his instrumental role in destroying the worlds of Beatrice, Rappaccini, and Giovanni, both names assume a heavily ironic dimension.

The suffix also accentuates and solidifies the ironic possibilities. By using it, Hawthorne could simultaneously suggest multiple options. The first — that it can represent an ancestor’s trade or occupation — would enable Hawthorne to intimate a person descended from those who craft or shape beams that provide support. As such, Baglioni is merely the present example of the traits (dominated by craftiness) the man exhibits, in the same way that Young Goodman Brown simply represents the current member of the family to be initiated into the ways of evil as his forefathers had before him.

Baglioni can thereby assume an allegorical dimension by typifying the person who provides (or seems to provide) support. Second, the idea of the suffix's suggesting appearance or characteristic would tie in closely with Hawthorne's frequent theme of reality versus illusion. Baglioni may not be who he seems. The solidity that a nautical beam could be expected to have might then be an illusion. In the third place, the plural of the augmentative can suggest a member of a family that makes large (and presumably more reliable) beams, thereby intimating exaggeration of that trait. Hawthorne seems to have found the magnification of certain traits psychologically or artistically useful; in *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, Hester sees the scarlet *A* magnified in Governor Bellingham's highly polished breastplate. The third etymological root that I offer is the Italian masculine noun *abbaglio*, which means "a mistake, dazzling [figurative sense]" and its verb form *abbagliare* meaning "to dazzle, blind; to charm" (Tedeschi and Fantonetti 1). In the Torriano dictionary that Hawthorne had access to, the word is spelled *abagliare*, meaning "to blinde ... but properly with or by the Sun, or by the fire." In that same dictionary *bagliare* is defined as "a glimmering or a dazeling [sic], also a sudden flashing, glaring or lightning." Although the word partially relates to Pollin's "*sbagliare*," I wish to stress the idea that Baglioni dazzles, blinds, or charms Giovanni, for example, with his story-within-a-story about an Indian prince. The choice of that particular story as opposed to the countless others that Baglioni presumably could have selected intimates a deliberate intent to make an impression on Giovanni. Hawthorne is thereby able to suggest Baglioni's virtually irresistible powers over the gullible young student.

The etymological possibilities of Pietro Baglioni's name, then, are particularly inviting because of their multiple suggestions and their ability to accommodate diametrically opposed readings of the story. The reader who wishes to see Baglioni as serving a favorable role in that he prevents Giovanni from being poisoned by Beatrice can find reinforcement in the above etymological roots. Baglioni from this perspective is a "rock," "foster- father," "guardian," "nautical beam" (of support), and "dazzling" for his apparent erudition. At the other extreme, the reader who wishes to see him as "vindictive" (Bales 175), "paranoic" (Moss 151), "diabolical" (Cuddy 40), "Iagolike" (Crews 410), and "one of Hawthorne's craftiest and most diabolical villains" (Chappell 56) can relish the ironic possibilities. Such is the engaging essence of Hawthorne's art: to interweave opposing threads of thought into a seamless garment.

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## Notes

1. For details about this fascinating man, see Cantwell 54ff.

2. See Pollin 33. Mathews notes that Hawthorne “could have read Dante in the original, for he had a sound knowledge of Latin, and read Italian easily enough, although he never attained any proficiency in speaking it.” He goes on to assert, citing Julian Hawthorne (1: 61ff), that “Sophia Peabody ... studied Italian in 1828 or a little later, even though she did not learn to speak it” (157). Just when Hawthorne gained proficiency is unclear, however. It is likely that Sophia and he shared a love of the Italian language and read Dante either in translation, in the original, or both. See excerpts of letters from Hawthorne’s wife Sophia to her mother, dated 12 January 1843 and from Sophia to Hawthorne’s sister Louisa, dated 5 March 1843 (quoted in Cowles 56). Finally, the memorial gift to Bowdoin College from the family of the late Julian C. Smyth in February 1970 contained F. Bottarelli’s 1822 *Exercises of Italian Speech*, signed five times by Sophia Peabody and randomly marked within. This fact of course suggests that Sophia was at least dabbling in Italian, possibly as early as 1822.

3. *The Catalogue of the Library of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine*, for example, lists Joseph Baretta’s two-volume *Dictionary of the English and Italian Languages, with an Italian and English Grammar*, published in London in 1800. Of course, other dictionaries would also have been available to Hawthorne. *The Catalogue of the Library of the Boston Athenaeum: 1807-1871* lists Italian dictionaries by G. Baretta (London, 1839), J. Florio (London, 1598), G. A. Graglia (Paris, 1836), G. Torriano (London, 1688), Alberti di Villanuova (Lucca, 1797–1805), P. Costa et al. (Bologna, 1819–26), Florence (Verona, 1804–06), M. Mambelli (Milano, 1809–13), and A. Lissoni (Milano, 1835–39).

4. I examined the 1659 edition of this book, which was a successor to the dictionary compiled by John Florio in 1598.

5. The *OED* traces the word to the Italian *bilo* or *balio*, from medieval Latin *bailus* or *balius*, from Latin *bājulus*, in which its original meaning was “carrier, bearer of burdens,” later “tutor, governor, administrator, magistrate, bailiff.” The *OED* has three citations, from 1682, 1705, and 1832, the last, using the spelling *baile*, a translation of *Sismondo’s Italian Report* XI.254: “A baile who was to be ... its ambassador there, and the judge of all the Venetian subjects in the Levant.”

6. An augmentative is a word or suffix that produces an increase in size or intensity of the original word. In Italian, *libro* is “book”; *librone* is “big book.”

7. See Labaree and Cohen 305. Hawthorne also checked out from the Salem Athenaeum volume 2 of John Campbell’s *Lives of the Admirals and Other Eminent British Seamen*, on 15 March 1831, and many travel books, like John N. Reynolds’ *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac During the Circumnavigation of the Globe*, on 1 June 1836 (Kesselring 176, 189).

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