Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna by Nicholas Terpstra
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pect of nuptial oratory. Unlike medieval sermons, humanist wedding orations used ancient Latin and Greek models and were laudatory rather than admonitory in nature. These orations became a fundamental part of increasingly magnificent and complex wedding ceremonies, corresponding to the more chivalric and regal tone of court festivities after 1450 (p. 44). Examples of the extravagant wedding festivities, such as those for Eleanor of Aragon and Ercole d’Este in 1473 and for Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso d’Este in 1502, vividly render the political importance of marriage alliances.

In the third chapter, “Weddings as Propaganda: Rhetoric and Court Culture,” D’Elia considers epithalamia as encomia that reveal how rulers and aristocrats wished to be perceived by a foreign and domestic courtly audience (p. 52). In this vein, some wedding orations included discussions of political philosophy, particularly questions associated with the monarchical form of government that they inevitably favored. In the following chapter, “The Culture of Marriage and Sex in Italian Courts,” D’Elia notes that in reviving the classical epithalamium’s function as an erotic prelude to the wedding night, humanists “celebrated physical beauty, companionship, and the joys of sexual pleasure” (p. 83). In tune with the Epicurean thought of Lorenzo Valla and the chivalric romances popular in the courts, humanist wedding orations defended sexual intercourse along with other pleasures of the material world. In this context, passionate love is no longer viewed as a dangerous and subversive force but rather as the very foundation of the family and thus of social harmony (p. 93).

The final chapter, “Humanist Criticisms of Celibacy and the Reformation,” argues that epithalamia celebrated the married state as “the highest affirmation of... active piety” (p. 131) and that this family-centered civic ethic and antilegitimate discourse paved the way for debates on the topic by Erasmus, Martin Luther, and other reformers. D’Elia notes that Erasmus, although more conservative than Italian humanists, composed at least one humanist wedding oration and cited Italian humanists in his marriage works (pp. 131–132).

The prose is reader friendly and, although sometimes repetitive, engaging throughout. Given that the study itself is limited to only 137 pages, this reviewer would have appreciated more close readings of noteworthy orations, like the ones in which Giovanni Marliani and Ludovico Carbone discuss the Huns and the Ottoman Turks respectively (pp. 66–72). D’Elia completes the volume with a useful tool for further study, a forty-page “Finding-List for Wedding Orations in the Italian Renaissance,” registering 336 extant humanist wedding orations found in manuscripts and incunabula, pamphlets, and printed editions.

In sum, the author argues convincingly that the revived genre of the wedding oration provides a window into Italian Renaissance court culture and at the same time sets forth ideas that would shake up the rest of Europe in the following century. This study should be of interest to a broad range of scholars and students of the Renaissance and Reformation.

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Hospital—shelter—foundling home—orphanage—convent—guild—factory—confraternity: these are protean entities that morph into each other, exchanging organizational models, sharing ideals and vision. Although the orphanage (for boys) and its sibling conservatory (for girls) are the main concern of Nicholas Terpstra’s superbly executed study, author and reader trip over these cognate institutions in pursuit of the quarry. All were self-starting and autonomous, imposed by neither state nor church; they testify to the struggle by conscientious Italian Catholics of the Renaissance to manage social crises. They did so not at all badly, we might conclude from the richly detailed description of their operation that Terpstra provides, mined from the archives of multiple institutions, establishing a pattern for the provision of welfare services that other early modern societies could imitate.

Terpstra’s investigation of the orphanage systems of Florence and Bologna considerably advances the inquiry into abandonment in the Renaissance that has been pursued by Philip Gavitt, Richard Trexler, Volker Hunecke, and Francesco Bianchi, looking at the founding homes of Florence, Milan, and Padua, while Anne E. C. McCants, Thomas Max Saffey, Joan Sherwood, C. K. Manzione, and Ruth McClure have brought the investigation to Amsterdam, Augsburg, Madrid, and London. The book relates as well to the study of youth confraternities by Konrad Eisenbichler and Lorenzo Polizzotto, and of women’s communities by Sherrill Cohen, Jutta Sperling, and Sharon Strochia, as well as to the history of childhood dissected in a stream of books flowing from the spring of Philippe Ariès’s Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of the Family (1962).

After an introductory chapter that admirably sums up what is known about Renaissance demographic crises and their impact on families, Terpstra walks the reader through the many aspects of orphanage creation and operation in Florence and Bologna over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A first chapter on “Opening A Home” shows how, in both cities, outbreaks of plague and accompanying disasters stimulated the creation by the 1550s of a network of multiple forms of houses to accommodate the children left “orphaned”—a term that includes those abandoned by their families, or bereft of one parent, as well as the “true orphans” who had lost both.

The next chapter explains how a child entered one of these homes, a process that often involved filling out an
application and being interviewed by the board for clients were not foundlings abandoned at birth but in their middle or later childhood. The next two chapters survey the experience respectively of girls and boys in their different settings. The fifth chapter explores how these homes were managed, and the sixth considers to what destinies the former orphans were released, at around fourteen for boys and sixteen for girls (not a few died in the orphanage still young, while others stayed through old age), into the world.

Across this gracefully written and well-developed narrative, some key points emerge. The first concerns gender. Girls entered orphanages later—generally at the onset of puberty—than did boys, who were enrolled in middle childhood (seven, eight, or nine). The principal mission in rearing orphan girls was preparation for marriage or, failing that, domestic service; only a few entered a formal convent (the preserve of the daughters of patricians and professionals). The goal in rearing boys was to release them, with gradually diminishing levels of supervision, in full adolescence, into the world. During their stay in the orphanage, moreover, boys were schooled, in some cases up through the secondary curriculum, to the extent that an orphan boy had a greater chance of gaining an education than poor boys outside the orphanage. Girls, in contrast, were trained in religious observances, domestic tasks, and textile skills, to the extent that some orphanages became factories reputed for specialized textile production—lace, for instance, or brocaded.

Class is another prominent theme. The multiple forms of orphan homes that evolved were generally class-specific: certain kinds of institutions were designated for the unfortunate (but legitimate) children of respectable parents; others for the poor, others still for the offspring of beggars. Bologna was fussier about social origin than Florence, whose grand duke coaxed the various organizations that supervised orphanages to serve all of his subjects, and not just the inner circle of Florentines.

This difference between the two cities in terms of stratification by class is seen elsewhere as well: Bolognese caretakers supervised their charges more closely than did the Florentines, while the charitable outreach of the Florentines was more systematic and comprehensive. In both cities, it was assumed that the whole community was responsible for the welfare of vulnerable children, and both cities, by the early seventeenth century, had developed massive, complex, and largely successful systems for executing that responsibility.

These Renaissance welfare systems are striking for their pluralism and fungibility. There were not only homes for boys and for girls, for rich and for poor, but also small homes and large ones; homes run by women, by clerics, and by whole fraternities; homes that looked a lot like convents or like factories. They were scattered across the landscape: distributed fairly evenly through all the sectors of Bologna, arrayed in a wheel around the central core of Florence. Their origin was religious, their motive compassion, but their function was political, especially in Florence, an absolutist state that outsourced its welfare obligations to a free market of faith-based organizations.

The story of the Florentine and Bolognese orphanages continue to stir up the question that has been raised about foundling homes in general: does institutionalization create the behavior that is then accommodated by increasingly complex and expensive institutions? Do foundling homes create foundlings? The number of exposti seems to increase with the multiplication of homes to receive them. Do orphanages create orphans, by providing an incentive for parents to abandon their children to institutional care, thus relieving themselves of cost and anxiety? Terpstra presents some evidence that this is the case.

On the whole, we must admire the achievement of these two Renaissance cities in meeting the needs of vulnerable children, especially when the current U.S. foster care system fares unevenly in preparing our own abbandonati to be responsible and productive adults.

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This book’s central argument is that the ghetto of Florence is to be perceived as an instrument of early modern state building. This squares with the argument already made that the Roman ghetto responded to both the civic and religious needs of the papal domains. Yet, as presented by Stefanie B. Siegmund, the thesis linking ghetto and state is forcefully articulated and thus merits careful attention.

The problem sixteenth-century rulers faced, as has been explained with respect to the Roman ghetto, is that the old medieval structures no longer worked. In a unified Catholic world, it had been possible “to retain and restrain” Jews by applying canon law without isolating them physically. The new, divided, post-Lutheran world, where religious lines had become commensurate with political ones, required a more radical solution. In the papal state, this was as part of a policy that perceived the ghetto as a limbo until the Jews converted. But Florence was not the papal state, and Cosimo de Medici, this new book argues, had no need fully to identify with papal aims, allowing him to bend papal policies to suit political ends. In Venice, fears of divine retribution, and the perception of the state as a religious body, were more evident in the decision, in 1516, to use the locale long known as the “ghetto” as a holding space.

Yet Siegmund admits that religious issues shaped the early modern state. Although she cogently presses her case about the civil state, her argument hesitates to say exactly how religious elements fit in. Similarly, the chal-