Nicholas Terpstra, *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna*

Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna by Nicholas Terpstra

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What helped move the parity discussion from universalism to essentialism was the intervention of a new and equally contentious political debate. In the mid-1990s, activists and intellectuals began to argue for the recognition of unmarried partners, whether heterosexual or homosexual. The goal was to make such partners eligible for social benefits traditionally reserved for married people and to allow couples to formalize their commitment without going all the way to marriage. Like the parity law, the legislation on unmarried partners, known as PaCS (Pacte Civil de Solidarité), garnered widespread public support, but with one major caveat. A great many people refused to grant gay couples the same rights as heterosexual ones and reserved parenthood for male-female partners alone.

At this point, in 1998, Sylviane Agacinski, a philosopher married to Lionel Jospin, the socialist leader and prime minister (1997–2002), entered the fray. Agacinski argued for parité but against gay marriage and gay families on the grounds that the heterosexual couple constituted the fundamental unit of French society. Men and women, she said, complemented each other, and their egalitarian union ought to structure not just the family but the polity as well. If the family was a fifty-fifty proposition requiring the balanced abilities and attributes of women and men, so the electoral system needed to operate as a fifty-fifty partnership of the two sexes. Scott astutely shows how Agacinski’s interventions became the node around which the parité and PaCS debates became intertwined. If the original paritariistes had tried to strip sex down to its culturally meaningless anatomical core, Agacinski made sexual difference, seen as essence rather than construct, the defining attribute of social and political life. Since, for her, each gender supplied what the other lacked, the family had to be grounded in an egalitarian union of a woman and a man. By analogy, parliaments and city councils did as well.

Agacinski’s argument, Scott suggests, played a major role in the passage of both the law on parité and the PaCS but at the cost of leaving gay couples in the lurch and replacing universalism with essentialism. Even so, Scott judges parité a qualified success. Though its application has been imperfect at best, it has nonetheless enabled a great many women to embark on political careers and gain political experience. It has given them legitimacy not just as alternatives to traditional male politicians or as advocates of “women’s” interests but as full-fledged representatives of republican France.

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in general, these homes—eight in Bologna and ten in Florence—represented a leading wedge of “deliberate” (the author’s favorite word) statist rationalism ultimately victorious over medieval clerical ministrations to the disadvantaged. (On modern rationalism, read Burckhardt.) Terpstra’s book is the most consequential attempt at a history of sixteenth-century confraternal philanthropy. It is archivally based to a fault, tabular whenever appropriate, and well written. It is also interesting from beginning to end. I learned a great deal and read it twice to imbibe all its richness.

Still, the title of the book proves something of a misnomer, since, overwhelmingly, the work deals rather with the homes than with the children themselves, a reflection of the nature of Terpstra’s sources rather than of any intention of the author, who makes every effort to put us in the children’s shoes. This institutional emphasis is revealed in the chapter titles themselves. Chapter 1 is called “Opening a Home,” and the accent there is on the homes’ founders. This is followed by “Entering a Home: Prescriptions and Procedures,” obviously concentrating on the homes’ available statutes. “Making a Home with Girls” and then “Making a Home with Boys” aptly indicate the direction of chapters 3 and 4; they deal with actuality rather than statutory ideals and excellently show how the latter so often had to give way to the former. Chapter 5, “Running a Home,” emphasizes adults’ roles in the homes, while the last chapter, “Leaving Home,” deals with the steps administrators took to put these now-grown adolescents back in society, a little at a time. The subtitle, Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna, points as well to the adult world rather than to the children.

The most daring aspect of this book is surely its comparative nature; and in a world awash with books about Florence or Venice, it matters how well Terpstra succeeds in his comparisons. Certainly, the work shows the result of intense and thoughtful work at the two state archives over extended periods of time. But to the point: the author paints a picture of Bolognese philanthropy as driven by the participation of large numbers of confratelli, who made a sustained effort to make the homes function correctly—for example, by interviewing many individual candidates who wished to marry their girls—whereas Florence is shown to have used many fewer employees to make the Arno houses work. It is Terpstra’s view that Florence fostered a “culture of enclosure,” that is, of monachation, whereas the Bolognese exerted themselves to place their charges back in society, so that they would reproduce. Only the future will show if these comparisons prove to be well grounded; I, for one, found the parameters of the comparisons at times so strained as to make any summary conclusions about such complex comparisons seem hasty. This results, on the one hand, from the author’s occasional readiness to suppress evidence that contradicts his arguments. Thus, Terpstra does not tell the reader that Orbatello, the important Florentine widows’ home, which he mentions only in passing (276), existed precisely so that the women in it could raise their fatherless children to maturity around a family hearth and then marry them off, thereby producing new and continuing legitimate families. By not so informing the reader, the author can then maintain that the Florentines, unlike the Bolognese, did not attach much importance to creating new legitimate families from the stock of these disadvantaged youngsters. On the other hand, these doubts arise from the author’s inevitable lack of surety in dealing with Florence, which he came to study as an afterthought. Thus the influence of the dead Savonarola over certain Florentines (but apparently not that of Cardinal Paleotti over the Bolognese) leads Terpstra to claim that in matters of philanthropy, the Florentines from the beginning followed their priests more than the Bolognese did theirs. Softness on this scale, for which the author presents no evidence, makes me hesitant to completely endorse this challenging, serious work.

An awkward characteristic of Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance de-
serves particular mention, and that is the author’s perplexing relabeling of the language of his sources. Thus, the homes for girls, which in the sources are labeled *spedali* for girls, become “conservatories,” while the homes for boys, which in the sources are labeled *spedali* for boys, become under Terpstra’s hand “orphanages,” with the curious result that only boys are said to be in orphanages. Indeed, this matter of language again shows how institutionally anchored Terpstra’s effort is. In fact, as the author well shows and despite the book’s title, the young people in these homes were often not really abandoned at all but placed in the home by their widowed mothers, leaving behind an extended family to whom they often returned once the widow got her feet on the ground. Children whose relatives paid to place them in the homes and support them there—with the best accommodations!—are not at all uncommon. In short, these “orphans” have often lost their father but not their mother, in keeping with the Mediterranean practice of calling an orphan one bereft only of his or her father.

The Mediterranean reach of this religious (or caritative) institution did escape the author, often despite his best efforts. Thus he does a good job of describing the two distinct types of confraternities of the fifteenth century: the flag-bearing, upper-class *larga* and the flagellating lower-class *stretta* groups. This is an important subject that very much needs a Europe-wide dissertation. But misled by his penchant for Emilian and Tuscan Italy as the *autostrada della modernità*, Terpstra describes this institution in Bologna as if it came from Bologna, whereas in fact the two types of confraternities were widespread—for instance, in Sicily and in Vincent Ferrer’s Spain at the same time—and were thought by Castilians to stem from a Genoese model.

Terpstra insists till the end upon the “deliberate”—that is to say, rational—character of these Italian homes, which he claims inspired much of Europe toward modern social welfare. Still, he problematizes that argument so as to be true to his sources. In fact, he admits, the original thrust of any given home often died with the founder, and the seeming connections between the homes, rather than being institutionalized, actually existed only through informal strands of cooperation. In short, there was no unmoved statist mover. The contradiction in these views feeds my own uncertainty in judging the author’s resulting arguments. But it does not compromise my admiration for this important contribution to the history of early modern Europe.

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Thomas Allison Kirk’s book fills a noticeable gap in the English-language historiography of early modern Italy by reconstructing the intricate and quite extraordinary story of the Republic of Genoa—a town of some sixty thousand inhabitants, with a small and poor hinterland, that came to dominate the finances of Spain and its vast empire only to fade away from the international arena in the mid-seventeenth century. Kirk revisits Braudel’s “century of the Genoese” but expands beyond Braudel’s focus on international finance. The author looks at Genoa’s maritime policies, and especially the arming of state galleys, as a prism through which to analyze the nexus of fiscal policies,