

Although more of a pamphlet than a booklet, this small contribution and the documents (not to mention images) it brings to our attention enrich our storehouse of resources and help us map out the ever growing field of confraternity studies by highlighting documents that, often, are unknown outside the walls of the fortunate city that holds them.

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Terpstra, Nicholas. *Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance. Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. xii, 349 pp., 20 tables, 6 graphs, 6 illustrations. ISBN 0-8018-8184-6 US.\$50

This book analyses the situation of abandoned children both in Florence and Bologna in the period between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries. The starting point is a detailed analysis of the social situation in which, for many different reasons, children could find themselves suddenly alone: the death of their mother, that of their father (this could be really the beginning of the end) and the subsequent remarriage of their mother, the plague, famines. To all these causes, Terpstra adds the abandonment of newborns for yet another set of reasons, among which illegitimate birth and violence take the lion's share.

The cities of Bologna and Florence both had a long experience in providing assistance to abandoned newborns. During the early modern period, however, in the wake of recurrent famines and plagues, both cities began of necessity to provide assistance for older children, starting from four or five years of age. This was a critical age, both physically and morally, for raising children.

A wide social network helped, or aimed to help, the children: from the *famiglia di latte* (or 'milk-family') to the godparents, from guilds to confraternities to hospitals, the relatives of the children could count on much external help in education, apprenticeship, paying dowries. In many cases, however, all these networks were not sufficient. Having suffered from a series of frequent plagues and famines, both Bologna and Florence needed to set up, very quickly, a network of assistance to take care of their infants and children.

The major differences between the two cities are explained by Terpstra through their different assistential and charitable politics. While Bologna, the second most important city of the papal states, concentrated on supporting and assisting a lay charitable organization charged with the care of infants, Florence, moved by suspicion that charitable associations could be used against the government, was generally against such organizations and often exercised rigid control through a bureaucratic staff closely tied to the ducal family.

Briefly, we can note how the Bolognese situation shows a background of assistance to the children founded, at least in the beginning, on groups of voluntaries, usually widows, who took care of a small number of children left alone and living

in the streets. In Florence, by comparison, the organization of assistance was run by a small number of people who took care of large houses and hostels under the supervision of an external paid staff. In Bologna those born within the city and those living there for a certain number of years had priority over others in receiving assistance, while in Florence, at least theoretically, no limits were imposed on the provenance of the children.

In time, most *orfanotrofi* (for orphaned boys) and *conservatori* (for orphaned girls) became very selective, allowing entrance only to a small number of children who answered to precise social and economic qualifications, while all others were re-assigned to temporary structures offering only food and shelter.

Terpstra pays careful attention to the differences inherent in assisting boys and girls and in the organization of shelters managed by women and by men. Terpstra finds that in the case of assistance to girls the major difference between the two cities is that in Bologna girls were sheltered in the *conservatori*, they worked to build up a dowry for themselves, and they were helped in finding a suitable husband. For Bolognese girls marriages were very much a possibility thanks to private dowry funds, parish funds, the Monte del Matrimonio, and funds provided by confraternities and guilds. Compared to Florence, in Bologna it was easier, even for abandoned girls, to find a dowry to start conjugal life.

In Florence, on the other hand, girls did not receive this kind of help, unless in some exceptional cases it was offered by the *conservatorio* of Santa Caterina, and they usually ended up in the shelters: only voluntary flight could modify a personal situation already marked. Also, the Florentine *conservatori* slowly transformed into convents. In the first years of the seventeenth century, women who had no alternatives began to take the veil. In Florence there was a clear ‘culture of enclosure’ for girls that was not present in Bologna. In the seventeenth century almost half of Florentine girls belonging to the upper classes did not get married but took the veil instead (p. 279).

The different approaches taken by women and men are also of interest. In both cities, shelters managed by men, who are more accustomed to dealing with public administration, have a theoretical approach to assistance, while shelters managed by women show a more practical approach. Terpstra points out how, in spite of the engagement of women belonging to the upper classes (women used to giving orders) and in spite of the engagement of women belonging to lower classes, soon male administrators replaced women both in Bologna and in Florence, suggesting an unlikely inability of women for efficient economic and administrative management.

Vividly written, Terpstra’s book lets us ‘imagine’ what could be the life of those children from their entrance into one of the shelters to their departure, often on account of death at a very young age.

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