

Locations for Children: school and orphanages in Bergamo and Bologna in the 16th and 17th centuries

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Abstract

This essay briefly reviews the essential historiography of the history of childhood, especially that in the English language, before turning to examples of schools and orphanages in Bergamo and Bologna. The Caspi Academy of Bergamo, founded 1547 as a private elementary boarding school, and a pedagogical treatise published by schoolmaster Giovita Ravizza in Venice in 1551, represent two brief case studies that show the surprising range of education in sixteenth-century northern Italy. For orphanages, the Orphanage of S. Martino in Bergamo, founded 1532 by the Venetian patrician Girolamo Miani, provided destitute children with housing, education, and career training. A second example is the Collegio Panolini of Bologna, endowed in 1585 by a wealthy silk merchant, named Francesco Panolini, and realized in 1632. This small residential college was created specifically for orphans, and offered sixteen years of training, culminating in a university degree and/or an ecclesiastical position with the Catholic Church. Children faced a multitude of dangers and obstacles in early modern Italy; while schools and orphanages were far from perfect, they did offer a safe haven to keep children off the streets and out of danger.

Questo saggio racconta brevemente la storiografia essenziale, soprattutto anglo-americana, della storia dell'infanzia, con un particolare interesse ai casi di scuole e orfanotrofi nelle città di Bergamo e Bologna. L'Accademia Caspi di Bergamo, fondata nel 1547 come scuola residenziale di livello elementare, e un trattato pedagogico pubblicato da Giovita Ravizza a Venezia nel 1551, sono due casi che mostrano la sorprendente varietà di possibilità istruttive nell'Italia del Cinquecento. L'Orfanotrofio di S. Martino fu fondato nel 1532 dal patrizio veneziano Girolamo Miani, allo scopo di fornire alloggio, istruzione e addestramento di carriera a bambini senza genitori. Un secondo esempio è quello del Collegio Panolini di Bologna, ideato nel 1585 da un ricco mercante di seta, Francesco Panolini, e realizzato nel 1632. Questo piccolo orfanotrofio residenziale fu fondato specificamente per gli orfani. Offriva sedici anni di istruzione che terminavano con una laurea o con la possibilità di accesso a un ruolo ecclesiastico. I bambini di quest'epoca dovevano affrontare molti pericoli e superare diversi ostacoli. Se da un lato le scuole e i brefotrofi non erano certo luoghi ideali, dall'altro però offrivano un porto sicuro in cui i bambini potevano rifugiarsi, lontani dalla strada e dal pericolo.

Keywords: schools, orphans, Bergamo, Bologna, history of childhood

Parole chiave: scuole, orfani, Bergamo, Bologna, storia dell'infanzia

Introduction

According to one estimate, half of the population in 17th century Italian cities was less than fifteen years old, and one-third was under eight; as the historian Nicholas Terpstra (2005) observed in the opening sentence of his book on Italian orphans: “Renaissance cities swarmed with children” (p. 1). A similar idea – albeit from northern Europe rather than Italy – is evident in Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s 1559/60 painting “Children’s Games”, now held at the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna. It shows hundreds of children, involved in more than eighty clearly-defined games and activities: the children in Brueghel’s oil-on-panel roll hoops, walk on stilts, clutch dolls and toys, swim in the river, and much more. Few adults are present – the scene is dominated by toddlers and adolescents.

With rare exceptions, children in Italy would not have dominated public spaces as depicted by Brueghel; instead, most children would have been found in schools, orphanages, conservatories, workplaces, monasteries, and convents. The home is the obvious place to look first, and children were often crammed into houses in great numbers, particularly in the houses belonging to the middle class and nobility. Despite a death rate that sometimes approached 50%, particularly during years of plague or famine, children were omnipresent. In the mid-sixteenth century in Bologna, for example, the population had increased by about 40% compared to the late medieval period three hundred years earlier. The structure of European families varied widely by location, social class, and economic status; thus an Italian aristocratic “family” might look very different from a German peasant farmer family, in terms of size, leadership, mobility, and so forth. The number of children in a family was directly proportional to the resources available to support them. Urban middle-class families had an average size of 6-7 people per family.

Beyond the household, children were also present in other institutions designed to respond to the academic, charitable, religious, and labor needs of society. Some of these institutions offered academic instruction, while others offered places for children to work, and still others focused on moral or religious training. In another essay in this volume, Didier Lett describes the dangers that awaited children in 15th-century Italy. It seems appropriate therefore to describe some of the places in the following two centuries where children might find refuge. My essay concentrates on two specific institutions – schools and orphanages – and on the way(s) in which they looked after children in Italy in the early modern period.

Historiography

The modern historiography of childhood begins with the seminal book of the medievalist Phillippe Ariès, written in 1960: *L'enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (*Centuries of Childhood* in the English translation, and *Padri e Figli nell'Europa medievale e moderna* in the Italian version). Ariès claimed that childhood was a social construct, not a biological given, and that the concept of “modern” childhood was born in the 18th century. Thus, said Aries, in the most infamous passage in the English version of his book, “in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist”. This point of view was supported by some historians such as Edward Shorter (1975) or Lawrence Stone (1977), but roundly criticized by others including Geoffrey Elton, Linda Pollock (1983), Shulamith Shahar (1990), Harry Hendrick (1992), Barbara Hanawalt (1993), Steven Ozment (2001), and Nicholas Orme (2001). Those historians – both medievalists and early modernists – argued that Aries used visual evidence selectively, confused prescription with practice, and ignored contradictory evidence. For the past 25 years, historians like Hugh Cunningham (1995), Colin Heywood (2001) and Margaret King (2004), together with art historians and literary scholars, have compiled evidence to show that medieval and early modern parents did love their children; they did see childhood as a distinct phase of human existence; and that there was a “culture of childhood” in Europe prior to the 17th century.

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Although the claims of Ariès have been challenged, and sometimes discarded, he deserves credit for establishing the field of childhood history as a serious enterprise, with its own methodology, historiography, and controversies. His ideas have led (more indirectly) to the creation of dedicated courses, a flagship journal (*Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, founded 2008), regular conferences, a professional society (Society for the History of Childhood and Youth-SHCY), and other signs of a healthy professional academic discipline. Aries examined written texts (especially normative ones) as well as portraits of children and families. Subsequent historians of childhood and family in the 1970s and 1980s relied more upon archival sources and quantitative data, studying a variety of serial records such as tax records, baptismal records, death records, and notarial documents of all kinds. The joint project of Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber with the *catasto* of Florence from 1427 remains a classic example of an early effort to quantify archival records. Despite the fact that these “cliometric” historians were interested primarily in the history and structure of the family, and not so much in childhood *per se*, their research taught us about household organization, family configurations, and the multiple functions of families. In essence, these and other scholars employed the methods of social historians by focusing on the experience of those who did not normally have a voice, and by presenting their story based upon demographic data (King, 2004, pp. 373-375).

In a superb review essay published in 2007 in the journal *Renaissance Quarterly*, historian Margaret King summarized many of the key works in the history of childhood in early modern Europe. She pointed out that the field has moved beyond the Ariesian debate, and she suggested several of the main questions that historians of pre-modern childhood have pursued, including childbirth, midwifery, wet nursing, infanticide, and birth control (King, 2007, pp. 382-386). She noted that several historians have written broad syntheses of the history of childhood, including those of John Somerville (1982), Shulamith Shahar (1990), Hugh Cunningham (1995), and Colin Heywood (2001), all of which attempt to cover a millennium of children’s history beginning in 1000 AD. Most of those syntheses, however, are primarily interested in the modern period, where sources about children are more plentiful. A happy exception is the work of Didier Lett (1999), as translated by Jody Gladding, which offers numerous compelling details and anecdotes of children in the Middle Ages (5th-15th centuries).

Thus we know much more than we did a generation ago about childhood in pre-modern Europe. Let us return to the question posed at the outset: in an early modern Italian city, where would one see children and what activities would they be engaged in?

Schools

The school is the most sensible place to begin looking for children. In the late Middle Ages, the few children who received an education did so in “cathedral schools” or (for the elites) via private tutors. Beginning in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, Italian humanists transformed the content and pedagogy of instruction. Such humanists, including Vittorino da Feltre, Guarino Guarini, Maffeo Veglio, and Pier Paolo Vergerio, championed the close study of Greek and Roman sources. They created new boarding schools (*contubernia*) offering an elite and secular education targeted at the rich, even if, as in the case of the schools run by Vittorino da Feltre, students of humble origins who possessed the necessary intellectual skills were also admitted (Grendler, 1989; Black, 2001).

Not everyone went to school, of course – there was no compulsory education in early modern Europe. But it is clear that children had many more options in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries than previously. In the mainland cities of the Venetian Republic, such as Bergamo, Brescia, Verona, and Vicenza, schooling was sponsored by the commune, by confraternities, by the bishop, and by parents. This produced an array of academies, schools, and other institutions dedicated to instruction; they opened and closed with some frequency, as these institutions and associates struggled to find a balance between lay and religious schooling.

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The Catholic Church sponsored additional options for schooling too, such as diocesan seminaries and Schools of Christian Doctrine; and of course there were the efforts of various religious orders such as Jesuits, Somaschans, Theatines, Scolopians, Ursulines, and so forth. Thus children – mostly boys – had a “network” of schools available to them in early modern urban Italy that had not previously existed (Carlsmith, 2010).

Where were these schools? In brief: all over the city. Public schools used the town hall or other civic buildings, but equally often classes met in the teacher’s own house. Confraternities offered their own buildings to house lessons, which often included the parish church. Schools of Christian Doctrine most often met in local churches and chapels, with boys and girls segregated by gender. A seminary might be located within the grounds of the episcopal palace but often was located elsewhere if a suitable palazzo or villa could be identified. Who were the students, what did they study, and how was the material taught? Although virtually no students or children kept diaries or detailed records of schooling in the sixteenth century, adult teachers and administrators and bishops did keep such records. Rather than provide generalizations, instead I offer two brief case studies.

The Caspi Academy was a private boys’ boarding school founded in 1547 in Bergamo by a group of parents who wished to have their young boys receive a classical education from a maestro and his assistant. Located in the *domus Casporum* (Caspi House) outside the city walls, this school existed for several decades and enrolled about 18-25 boys per year. Thus it was small compared to the grand seminaries and colleges that would soon sprout in Milan, Padua, and Naples; and short-lived compared to the *scuole dei rioni* (neighborhood schools) in Rome or the Schools of Christian Doctrine in all cities. Nevertheless, the Caspi Academy documents offer rich detail about the experiences of an urban elite child going to school: the documents include teacher orations, administrative correspondence, book lists, furniture inventories, contracts and budgets.

The boys received instruction in Greek language, Latin literature and grammar, religion, and proper behavior. They read works by Cicero, Virgil, Terence, Horace, and Homer, as well as the letters of St. Paul, and the Gospel of St. Luke; two months after the school had opened, the boys recited passages from the *Elogues* of Giovanni Pontano. One boy wrote that he had a *carta greca* for instructional purposes, while several others listed the *Regulae Grammaticales* by Guarino Guarini or the venerable *Ars Donatis*. The boys were organized by skill level rather than by age (a concept adopted by the Jesuits in the following decade), and regularly engaged in disputationes and translation exercises (also adapted by the Jesuits). The boys started as young as five years old, and continued until they were about fourteen. A number of them graduated from the University of Padua. Virtually all came from noble families in Bergamo, and many later held jobs in town government. Oddly, the school year always began in June, rather than the traditional mid-October date. Inventories show that the kitchen was amply-stocked, and a teacher’s letter declares that the boys’ sleeping quarters were healthy, quiet, and secure.

A second case study comes from a treatise written by the schoolmaster Giovita Ravizza (1476-1553), published in Venice in 1551: *De liberis publice ad humanitatem informandis* (On public education of children toward the humanities). Ravizza taught in the cities of Chiari, Bergamo, Vicenza, and Venice; his treatise draws upon his experience in all four urban centers. For Ravizza, the physical building where children had school was vitally important; he declared that it must be spacious, sunny, free of drafts, and equipped with fresh water, a toilet (*locus, quo ad secreta naturae secedere liceat*). It must also have an auditorium large enough to hold all students simultaneously, a library well-stocked with Greek and Latin texts, eight classrooms and a school office. The curriculum and suggested texts were quite similar to those in the Caspi Academy and in other humanist schools. For pedagogy, Ravizza advocated prizes rather than punishment; top students were chosen to present their work to other students, or to engage in scholastic disputation on the weekends. On Saturday students were expected to arise early so that the time for bathing did not interfere with the literary competition. Victors were rewarded with pens or paper, purchased with the income derived from fines levied against students who had failed to speak only Latin. Holidays were spelled out, as was a curfew. Much additional detail is contained in Ravizza’s treatise, about holidays, clothing, after-school activities, and the like (Carlsmith, 1998b).

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Orphanages

A second institution that looked after children in early modern Europe was the orphanage. The Italian language draws a distinction between an *orfanotrofio* (orphanage) for children missing one or both parents, and a *brefotrofio* (foundling home) intended for abandoned or illegitimate infants. The primary sources consulted for this study regularly use the term *orfanotrofio* so I follow that terminology here. Every Renaissance city had at least one orphanage, and often more than one – Florence had six orphanages, Bologna had eight. Naples was famous for the orphanage at the Santissima Annuziata, as Venice was noted for the Ospedale della Pietà (where between 1703 and 1740 the musician and composer Antonio Vivaldi taught). The famous *ruota* (wheel) by which children were received into orphanages, and the depiction of swaddled infants on the façade of Brunelleschi's building at the Florentine orphanage, are perhaps two of the most famous representations of early modern orphanages (Gavitt, 1990).

Thirty years ago John Boswell's book *The Kindness of Strangers: Child Abandonment in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (1985) documented the various ways that European society tried to care for abandoned children. For Italy we have the excellent work of Nicholas Terpstra (2005, 2010) and Phillip Gavitt (1990), as well as the studies by Daniela Lombardi (1988) and Ottavia Niccoli (1995). Outside of Italy there are fine books by Thomas Safley on Augsburg (1997, 2005), by Anne McCants on Amsterdam (1997), and by Timothy Miller on the Byzantine Empire (1985). Below I describe two lesser-known examples drawn from the archives: an orphanage in Bergamo, and a college in Bologna designed exclusively for orphans, the Collegio Panolini.

Orphans in Bergamo

In 1532, the Venetian patrician and eventual founder of the Somaschan Order, Girolamo Miani¹, recruited local laypeople and religious to provide instruction in reading, writing, catechism, “Christian living”, and vocational training to male and female orphans (Carlsmith, 2010, pp. 193-201; Crucitti, 2001). Miani immediately received the enthusiastic support of Bergamo's bishop, Pietro Lippomano, who sent a circular letter to the diocese to announce Miani's intention to provide “instruction, training, and tutelage, as well as spiritual and corporal nourishment to any poor, sick, or desperate person, male or female, and especially for orphans” (Camozzi, 1982, pp. 41-46). Bergamo's Hospital of San Marco provided the wood necessary to construct twenty beds for the orphans, and three years later offered space in its own building to the male orphans at a rent of twenty-nine lire per year.

The orphanages founded by Miani were intended to equip young boys and girls of modest (or unknown) social background, with the skills necessary to be productive members of society. As the 1776 *Regole* (Rules) of Bergamo's orphanage put it, orphans have “training in religion and in other necessary skills provided to them, all in an effort to make them useful to themselves, to their homeland, and to the State” (p. 7). Recognizing that each child had different aptitudes, the Somaschans allowed and even encouraged orphans to pursue different types of training according to the ability of the individual child, as evident in the *Ordini dei signori protettori* (Orders of the Trustees) of 1563: “when the orphan has reached adulthood, and one knows his character and intended vocation, let the judgement of the trustees, but above all those who have trained him, be the guide of which field he is most suited to: religion, or letters, or hard work, wherever he can make a living” (p. 45).

Religious instruction was one of three primary foci within the orphanage (academic instruction and labor were the other two). In these decades of the Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), it is little surprise that Miani insisted upon daily prayer, catechetical instruction, and an assembly (*udienza*) in which the orphans were lectured about morality and virtue. Silence was required at meals so that the reader of the orphanage might read excerpts from religious texts. Orphans were required to recite a prayer upon arising from

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bed in the morning and just before going to sleep at night. Miani drilled his orphans so that they might visit the Bergamasque countryside to instruct peasants about the life of Jesus Christ. All members of the orphanage participated in daily lessons of Christian Doctrine, in which students repeated their lessons aloud to each other or recited dialogues by rote (Carlsmith, 2010, pp. 196-99).

A second fundamental aspect of Miani's philosophy was his insistence upon hard work. Vocational education was an integral part of his vision for improving the life of his orphans. Miani castigated his colleagues who appeared to be loafing, and introduced the simple rule (following St. Paul) that those who did not work should not eat. Orphans who did not work quietly, carefully, and productively were to be sent to the hospital or expelled from the orphanage. Each orphanage emphasized a different type of work, depending upon local industries, available materials, and the abilities of the orphans. In Venice, for example, the orphans produced iron pitchers, in Brescia they sewed berets, and in Bergamo they teased wool and plaited straw to make hats. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, when the boys' orphanage was forced to move several times, the Somaschans specifically looked for a house where the local artisans would be willing to accept apprentices from the orphanage. When the orphans reached eighteen years of age and were ready to leave the Somaschans, they frequently accepted one-month trial contracts with these local merchants.

A third cornerstone of the orphans' training consisted of reading, writing, and arithmetic. In a letter of 1536 to Messer Ludovico Viscardi in Bergamo, Miani exhorted his companions to be vigilant in teaching the boys to read. He wrote, "Do not trust the boys to read by themselves: supervise them, interrogate them, examine them, and pay careful attention to how often they read and recite"²². In the same letter Miani instructed Viscardi to identify boys who excelled at Latin grammar, presumably so that such boys could be tutored at a more advanced level. This letter underscores the importance of reading in the orphanage, as does Miani's injunction in the *Regola per il pio luogo degli orfani di S. Martino di Bergamo* (Rules for the Orphanage of St. Martin in Bergamo) that the designated rector of the orphanage "furthermore shall teach, or supervise others who shall teach reading, writing, and arithmetic at convenient times, and [he] shall also provide to the best students additional instruction to develop their talent and abilities" (p. 14). This strong emphasis upon the acquisition of literacy suggests that such a skill was not a luxury in early modern Italy, but rather a necessity. Miani and the Somaschans understood that some of their orphans would be limited to a career of manual labor, but they clearly saw the potential for others to use reading and writing to advance themselves. From such limited evidence we cannot draw conclusions about literacy rates or social mobility; but it is significant that even penniless orphans in sixteenth-century Bergamo had an opportunity for education.

Orphans in Bologna

A second example comes from Bologna. Instead of considering the half a dozen orphanages within the city already studied by Nick Terpstra (2005), I examine the Collegio Panolini (also Pannolini, Pannolino), a residential institution in Palazzo Panolini, n. 18 via Zamboni (previously via San Donato), a large building that stretched to via Valdonica; the Collegio Panolini sought to turn orphans into scholars (Toniolo, 1989, 1990). In contrast to the increasingly hierarchical tendency of post-Tridentine Italy, the Panolini college sought to be a vehicle for social mobility: not just to rehabilitate the offspring of noble families that had fallen on hard times, but to create new members of the Bolognese elite *ex novo*.

The founder and chief benefactor of this unusual college was Francesco Panolini, a cloth merchant who had built up his family's traditional rural wool holdings by expanding into the silk trade. Panolini's testament of 1585 specified that a group of twenty young boys were to be chosen from three local hospitals or orphanages. He insisted that the boys be of good appearance, good speech, and good prospects ("buon aspetto, buona loquela, buona appettatione e riuscita"), and in return they would be rewarded with sixteen years of support. In addition to food, clothing, and housing, the will promised grammar lessons in Greek and Latin with a private

instructor as well as payment for all university-related expenses (Testamento, 1585). Panolini was very clear that a university degree was the ultimate goal; as we shall see, his goal was only partially realized. With the death of his son Curzio in 1617, this concept of a college became a reality and the trustees of the estate moved promptly in 1619 to elect the first ten pupils.

In 1632 the trustees produced a set of statutes known as the “Capitoli”. These statutes – reflecting the orthodoxy of the era – declared that the pupils must “acquire Christian virtues, grow up in the fear of God, adopt proper manners, and improve themselves through the good arts and knowledge, which render a man more prudent, learned, and upright” (Capitoli del Collegio, 1632, p. 1). Such rhetoric is to be expected, of course, and frequently appears in other testaments, wills, and charters. Nevertheless, the statutes of the Panolini college go on to lay out a quite austere vision of education for these twenty boys. It included regular and extraordinary confession; monthly communion; nightly lockdowns; and prohibitions against speaking to servants, visiting each other’s rooms, or raiding the kitchen. The schedule might vary by season (e.g., recess time was extended in the summer to take advantage of additional daylight) but the use of assigned seats at meals and Mass, or the close supervision of any outing or family visits, did not.

Chapter IV, “Degli Studi” (On Studies), emphasizes yet again the importance of education so that students would be prepared to go on to university:

Everyone must think carefully about the benefits that are enjoyed in this place, which are offered so that each person can increase in skills and virtue; therefore everyone must attend to their studies with all energy and learn with all diligence, just as shall be ordered by the teachers. First of all, while they are in school, they shall always speak Latin, so that they can acquire greater familiarity with this language. In writing they shall use every effort to imitate the example of the teacher, and they will practice making good letters, and similarly in other subjects (Capitoli del Collegio, 1632, pp. 4-5)

It was not all work and no play, of course. The statutes noted that Thursday was the students’ day out to get some fresh air, and certain kinds of ball games or “trucchi” were permitted during the times allotted for recreation. Still, in many ways the interior of the Panolini College resembled a secular version of a monastery full of young novices.

Was the Panolini College successful in its mission? Did it rescue orphans and transform them into prosperous citizens? In brief: yes....and no. Of 146 boys who were enrolled at the Collegio Panolini between 1619 and 1745 about one-third did not complete their studies on account of expulsion, death, or other unspecified problems (Tonolo, 1989, p. 111). We are fortunate indeed to have a list of alumni, created in the mid-18th century, that records the academic results and/or the career choices of many of the other students. From this list, we know that about 45 obtained a university degree, and about the same number joined the Catholic Church. Given that the vast majority of these boys were very unlikely to have achieved such prestigious positions on their own, we would have to say that the Panolini college was a success. On the other hand, Panolini’s will specified that only four students at any time could study theology, with all of the others studying law. Furthermore, Panolini strongly encouraged the trustees to keep students in the college until they finished their degree. In Panolini’s eyes, then, one-third of the student dropping out of college, and half of the remaining graduates choosing a career in the Church, would have to be seen as a failure.

Conclusion

The children and adolescents of 16th and 17th century Italy constituted a dynamic and important aspect of that society. Their schooling, their labor, and their religious instruction were all critically important for both lay and secular authorities. As Didier Lett and others have argued, urban children in this period were exposed to a

significant number of obstacles and dangers. Schools and orphanages were intended to provide “safe havens” to children, as well as to equip them with useful skills. I am not so naïve as to ignore or discount the persistent dangers that awaited students and orphans inside these institutions. We know, for example, about corporal punishment and harsh physical treatment; and we know that mortality rates sometimes reached 50%, or even 70%, in some orphanages. Nevertheless, the archival documents suggest that schools and orphanages were places that offered personal and professional opportunities to the destitute children of this era.

Notes

¹ On Girolamo Miani, see Filippo Crucitti (2001), *ad vocem* in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 56.

² “Le lettere di S. Girolamo Miani”, in *Fonti per la storia dei Somaschi*, 3 (1975, p. 16).

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