Renaissance cities swarmed with children. As many as half of those who walked their streets or lived in their crowded homes were under 15 years old, and perhaps one-third were under 8. In modern societies percentages this high trigger violence, vandalism, and anxiety about a self-indulgent, youth-oriented consumer culture. Renaissance adults were concerned too. They may not have wrung their hands and fretted about their youth as obsessively as people do today, but they complained in familiar ways that young people lacked morals, discipline, and respect for their elders. They worried about sex and violence becoming a way of life for children without adult supervision. And they wondered what to do with all those children.

By and large, Renaissance parents pushed their children quickly toward adulthood. This frequently involved forcing them out of the house and into work and marriage. Children moved into the homes of others for days, weeks, or years at a time, some to apprentice with a master, others to serve in the kitchen and at table. This might happen as early as age 8 or 10, and would almost certainly have happened by the later teen years, when a child might return to her or his parents’ home only as a visitor. This might strike us as heartless, and it once struck
some historians as evidence that Renaissance adults could not have cared much for children or, for that matter, family.1 Yet nothing could be further from the truth. In pushing their offspring out of the house, Renaissance parents were sending them into larger families who would help shelter, feed, educate, and raise the children better than any single set of parents could. These larger families might be related by blood or marriage, but frequently were not. They were created by choice and circumstance, occupation and neighborhood. People freely used the language of family to strengthen social ties—honorary brothers and sisters weren’t found only in monasteries and convents, but also in guilds, in political assemblies, and in the lay religious groups known as confraternities that helped organize much of people’s day-to-day worship and charitable activity.

Most people could identify a wide range of these surrogate mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters in their social life. The long list began with the “milk parents,” consisting of one’s wet nurse and her husband. It continued with “godparents,” those adults called in to provide spiritual instruction and practical benefits in equal measure. It even extended to the friends that young boys ran around with as well as the co-workers they sweated with before they were even 10 years old. All these were kin, and the older you grew, the more extensive your web of kin became. Although people were free with the language of family, they were strict with its obligations. Charity began at home, but the walls of that home expanded outward to incorporate many others. When you needed them, they should be there for you, and the more brothers and sisters you could gather into your home, the more secure you would be if illness hit, or unemployment, or death. People now claim that you can’t choose your family, but in the Renaissance you could—and would be foolish not to. Some even found in their deliberately constructed family a welcome alternative to the incessant demands and claustrophobia of their blood family, or from the pressures to conform from neighbors and business associates. Whatever the reasons, you constructed a family quite deliberately, and this was what responsible parents were building when they sent their preadolescent children out to live with others.

Did it work? The language of kinship was egalitarian, and some groups such as guilds and confraternities aimed to preserve the fiction that within their constructed family, rich and poor could meet as brothers without distinction. But this was still a society more accustomed to thinking vertically than horizontally. The successful brother or sister was the one who recognized the richer and more powerful fathers and mothers in the group and deferred accordingly. Similarly, the language of kinship could be highly inclusive, but it was spoken most enthu-
siastically by the middling range of artisans, merchants, and professionals who were the active agents in the local economy. They had first used this language in the thirteenth century, when they needed solidarity to seize political control of towns and cities from nobles, magnates, and clergy. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were banding together against the larger numbers of day laborers and working poor who filled the city streets. By that time, however, the language of kinship had become so common a part of the political discourse that even the merchants’ and professionals’ traditional opponents appealed to it to justify expanding their authority. Local oligarchs practiced tight and effective kinship, and nobles and monarchs gladly assumed the title, role, and powers of the father of the social family and head of the body politic. By the sixteenth century, the language of kinship was heard everywhere, but social kinship itself was less egalitarian and more exclusive than either the rhetoric implied or history taught.

We can move quickly from the child-crowded streets of the Renaissance city to the family-rich terms of Renaissance political science because family and kinship framed people’s experience and view of the world. But to understand the strengths and tensions, the definitions and contradictions, we need to look at what happened when families broke down. And they did frequently. The extended webs of kinship that men and women wove as they moved into adulthood and parenthood were aimed at easing the devastating effects of poverty and death, and in most cases did. Yet some families still disintegrated after the death of one parent or both, threatening to cast children on the street. When plague or famine hit, the results were catastrophic. The Bolognese jurist Alessandro Stiatici, who had witnessed the devastating plague of the mid-1520s, painted a harrowing picture:

Many poor men and women died of hunger... leaving their children of both sexes abandoned and stripped of every means of subsistence. These, having no home at all, slept under the porticoes, or like beasts in holes and caverns, or at night in the trash heaps and dung hills. By day they were seen going around the city all foul, filthy, and smelly, their faces and limbs lean and gaunt, looking as though they had stepped out of the grave. It was a horrifying thing. Something miserable to see, but even more to hear their cries and moans day and night, wailing like injured animals. Some went to sleep at night close to the fires of the night watchmen, or at the kitchen of the city council, so as not to die of cold, being nearly naked. In getting closer to the fire, they burned the few rags that they had. While a few were
picked up, many of these boys and girls found themselves on the streets, fed and helped only by charitable people and servants of God.²

This book looks at how people like Stiatici tried a new approach to get these children off the streets. The institutional homes they created filled the gap that yawned when kin failed, but it is telling that the homes themselves were still organized around kinship: staff and wards were to consider each other parents and siblings. Some administrators even saw themselves as the fathers and mothers of the dozens of children under their care, arranging work and marriages for their wards as they would for their own children. In other instances they saw their responsibility as strictly short-term, returning the girls and boys to their blood kin as soon as possible. Yet through the course of the century while family rhetoric remained strong, some orphanages took on more of the features of workshops and factories, particularly for the textile trade. This was not necessarily a contradiction, since much preindustrial production took place within small family workshops. But by the end of the sixteenth century, the larger orphanages could count many dozens of wards. If their work was to be done efficiently, it had to be organized more strictly than was the case in a home workshop operated by a married couple with a few of their own children, perhaps a brother or cousin, and a traveling journeyman. From the sixteenth into the seventeenth centuries, orphanages for children from lower social ranks slowly transformed into the large-scale factories, pushed by their needs, their numbers, and opportunities in textile industries that valued small hands, low wages, and a captive labor force. By the eighteenth century, orphanage factories could be found across Europe from Leiden to Venice to Lyon, organized on an ever larger scale by governments when it became clear that the private kin-based charities that had founded them could no longer cope. Kin-language and kin-organization were overwhelmed by the economic demands and rational organization of these workhouses, though they never quite died. They remained potent through the eighteenth century in the secret associations of traveling journeymen, and then reemerged in the nineteenth century as the chosen language and automatic bond of unions and fraternal organizations that fought to restore some justice and humanity to the industrial workplace.

But this is to look far ahead. This book concentrates on the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and investigates how orphanages emerged out of a host of needs, expectations, resources, and opportunities. Charity drove the earliest founders, and they had many models to draw on when they aimed to act as
kin to children whose “real” family had failed due to death or poverty. I trace the gradual evolution of common forms, the slow construction of networks of homes in a couple of Italian cities, and the dawning realization that the cost of care could be borne in some part by those being cared for. There was nothing deliberate or inevitable about this evolution. While some orphanages evolved into factories, others became schools or convents. And while the children worked more and more, their governors frequently found employment opportunities for them beyond factories and fabrics.

Orphanages emerged out of the disintegration of the family. Yet families had faced disintegration before these orphanages existed, and even afterward only a proportion of orphaned and abandoned children could enter through their doors. Before focusing on the new orphanages, we need to look at the circumstances of orphaning and abandonment, and then at some of the ways that Renaissance society had kept these children off the street before institutional orphanages appeared.

Orphaned and Abandoned

Renaissance families dealt constantly with death. Within a few years of marriage, most young couples faced the death of their parents and, more tragically, the deaths of their children. Few parents could escape the deaths of one or more of their children, and if some aimed to compensate by having more children, the strategy did not keep them far ahead of the scythe. The Florentine merchant Gregorio Dati fathered twenty-eight children with five mothers from the time he was 29 until age 69, but only eight remained alive when the last was born in 1431, and Dati buried most of the rest while they were still young. High death rates offset high birth rates, with the result that few households had more than two or three children in them at any one time.

Death hit most often in the first days or weeks of life, but could take also children who were old enough to be starting school, entering apprenticeships, or preparing to leave the home and strike out on their own. Though conditions varied across Europe and between town and country, as many as 20 to 40 percent died before their first birthday and 50 percent before their tenth. In Florence, which kept a series of Books of the Dead, fully half of those dying from 1385 to 1430 were children, and during plagues they died at twice the rate of adults. Worms, diarrhea, and smallpox killed most of them, though as David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber pointed out, these were often the diagnostic face
A Renaissance family’s first encounter with death was likely the death of a child. But the death of the mother or father might not be far behind. The worst case was the deaths of both parents within a short period, a tragedy usually triggered by plagues, which regularly swept back and forth through cities in both their episodic and epidemic forms, taking away a good part of the population each time. Even outside of periods of epidemic, two of five Florentines died of plague, with young children particularly vulnerable. Gregorio Dati’s family battled plague through the summer of 1420, twice moving to different houses in search of healthier quarters. In five short weeks, Dati buried a manservant, a slave, and five daughters. The toll was so high, devastating families, neighborhoods, and social groups, that all the usual kin-based resources for helping each other and particularly for sheltering children were strained to the breaking point. Almost all of the orphanages in this book were founded in wake of plague epidemics.

Whether due to plague, miscarriage, or accident, the death of a mother or father could create conditions that forced the surviving parent to disperse the children. Women were more likely than men to live into old age, but they faced the gravest threats during their childbearing years. A contemporary French proverb held that “a pregnant woman has one foot in the grave,” and possibly 20 percent of women died in childbirth or through complications that could extend their suffering for weeks afterward. Some historians believe that the percentage was likely even higher. Recall that half of all children might die by age 10, and yet that half the population of cities was typically made up of children, and you realize that Renaissance women were frequently pregnant, and as a result, often in danger. Three of Gregorio Dati’s four wives succumbed in or through childbirth. Widowers frequently remarried, and the stepmother ensured that the household would remain intact, but some men cited their wife’s death as the reason why they could no longer care for all of their children and had to abandon one or more.

The deaths of children and mothers brought grief, but it was more often the death of a father that caused the family to collapse. The widow might have little income and few resources beyond her dowry, and her parents and siblings could pressure her to remarry, particularly if she was in her 20s or younger. Taking on a new husband most often meant leaving her children behind. They were considered the “property” and responsibility of her late husband’s line, and of no concern to her new spouse, who was under no obligation to take them into
his home. Gregorio Dati’s third wife, Ginevra, had an 8-month-old son from her first marriage to Tommaso Brancacci, but in his libro di ricordo, Dati neither mentions his name nor writes of what happened to him when the 21-year-old Ginevra married the 41-year-old Gregorio.

Italian women in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries married men eight to fifteen years older than themselves, and the higher up the social scale the broader the age gap yawned. By the end of the fifteenth century, women were contracting their first marriages at age 21 and men at age 29. Their ancestors a hundred years before had married a good five or six years younger, and among the upper classes marriage for girls at 15 or 16 was still the norm.7

Richer husbands were older, poorer husbands were less healthy. Regardless of social class, young women marrying older men faced the very real prospect that they would be widows before their children were fully grown. In 1427, 14 percent of Florentine households were headed by widows, not a surprising statistic when we consider that a quarter of all women at the time were widows. Women headed 17.6 percent of households by 1552, and 25 percent by 1632, and most of these were widows too. By age 40, 18 percent of Quattrocento Florentine women were widowed, and by age 50, almost 45 percent were.8 The younger and wealthier among them faced enormous pressures to remarry. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber notes that, judging by the diaries kept by more prosperous families, “two-thirds of the women who became widows before 20 found a new husband, one-third of those widowed between 20 and 29, but only 11 percent of those widowed between 30 and 39—when their numbers grow.” Wealthy women were the most likely to marry a far older man, and hence the most likely to be widowed early, yet they were the least likely to head a household.9

A woman widowed at age 50 could likely live out her years with an adult child, but younger widows faced more complicated prospects. Most widows had the right to recover their dowries and return to their natal homes (the tornata). While their parents, siblings, or more distant blood kin were obligated to shelter them until death, some saw this as a convenient opportunity to employ the young woman in their alliance-building strategies, and so arranged a second marriage for her.10 This required prompt return of the dowry, something which so strained the resources of the widow’s in-laws that many husbands loaded their wills with incentives for wives who remained in the family home and penalties for those who left. A widow who remained loyal to her dead husband's family could often count on more generous allowances, life tenancies on property, and the return of her dowry with interest. A widow who bolted—and some young ones did so
almost as soon as their dead husbands were in the ground—could count on nothing more than the return of the dowry. While her natal family wanted to use the dowry to remarry the young widow, her late husband’s clan were loathe to withdraw it from their own holdings, and in any event counted on it as the allowance that would offset the costs of raising the now-fatherless children. The mother’s dowry came out of the children’s inheritance. Diaries and memoirs complain of the “cruel mother,” whose lust, greed, and self-centeredness led her to abandon and impoverish her own children, but in fact it was more often obedience to her father or brothers that drove a young widow to remarry. One Florentine memoirist, Giovanni Morelli, complained bitterly of having been “abandoned” by his “cruel” widowed mother because she remarried when he was only 3. Yet Giovanni lived in her household with his stepfather until he was a teenager. She was not cruel for having removed her affections from her son, but for having removed her dowry from his inheritance. Klapisch-Zuber notes that “abandonment was economic as much as affective, and what abandoned children complained of explicitly was the financial implications of their mother’s remarriage.”

These convoluted marital politics were played out at the higher social levels, but two legal obligations resonated on down the social scale when widows remarried. On one hand, Roman law and local custom held that their new husbands were under no obligation to bring another man’s offspring into their households (and were frequently discouraged from doing so as it could play havoc with any children of their own from a previous marriage). On the other hand, the dead father’s own blood relatives were obligated to take the children on as part of his personal legacy and their family’s collective property and lineage. From what we know of wealthier families whose members penned diaries and saved notarial contracts, this obligation was usually honored, either by taking the children into another household within the family or by boarding them with others for a fee, all under the watchful eye of a guardian. In some instances, these families even arranged a deal with the widow and her second husband, formally appointing them the children’s guardians and even reimbursing them for their costs in raising the children. This allowed the remarrying widows to bring their own children into their second marriages, as Giovanni Morelli’s mother did. There were nonetheless many poorer families who bore the same obligations in law, but who had nowhere near the resources, and who may have lost contact with parents and siblings if the couple had moved to a new city in search of work. Children from these poorer families were in the worst circumstance, since they had no right to a stepfather’s attention and no guarantee of an uncle’s care.
Death was not the only wrecker of families. Poverty, plague, famine, and unemployment left some parents unable to care for their children. Local studies in London, Madrid, Limoges, and northern Italy demonstrate that when bread prices rose, more and more children were abandoned at the foundling homes and orphanages. Parents intended or promised to reclaim them when conditions improved, but frequently this proved impossible, or the child died in the overcrowded home. Sometimes fathers simply disappeared. Fathers might abandon their families in order to escape unhappy marriages, since divorce was virtually impossible to obtain. Like Martin Guerre in sixteenth-century France, they might simply slip away in order to escape family pressures and explore opportunities elsewhere, intending to return at some point in the future. Criminal activities caught up to other fathers, and if they did not manage to flee justice, they might instead endure months in prison, years in the galleys, or a relatively quick trip to the scaffold—all of these were reasons given by mothers who found themselves left with more children than they could manage.

Orphaned and abandoned children whose families had fractured and collapsed would end up on the street unless kin, neighbors, or civic officials found a place for them. The painting of Our Lady of Succour from the Florentine church of S. Spirito (Figure I.1) graphically depicts their fear of the devil’s reach. The boys would join street gangs and survive on theft and extortion. The girls would almost certainly become prostitutes. What options did they have to ensure that these children would have the adult governo necessary to keep them from these fates?

Sheltering Orphaned and Abandoned Children

The shelter found for orphaned and abandoned children before the sixteenth century was almost always small scale, like the home of a poor woman who took in a few wards for money, or the workshop of a guild master who acted as a foster father to his apprentices. Failing that, shelter came in institutions that had a general charitable and religious purpose, like hospitals or convents. Most were organized by kin of one sort or another, though some larger cities like Florence and Bologna established civic magistracies to look after the interests of children in this situation.

Dealing with a prestatistical era, we cannot put comparative percentages on these options open for children affected by the breakup of their families. And while we look at the variety of shelters that stood in for family and that became the models in one way or another for institutional orphanages, we should never
forget that the great majority of these children were simply absorbed without a trace into households of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and siblings. These blood relatives had the most direct and powerful obligations to their destitute kin. They might take the children into their own homes, but they might also steer the children into apprenticeships or domestic service, the very forms of fostering that the children’s own parents may have intended for them.

Figure 1.1. Master of the Johnson Nativity, Our Lady of Succour (showing the devil attacking a child), ca. 1450 (Church of S. Spirito, Florence)
If blood ran thin, was water—specifically the water of baptism—thicker? The first spiritual kin relations for all European Christians were the godparents who had brought the infant to the baptismal font within days or weeks of his or her birth. Godparents were primarily expected to look to their godchildren’s spiritual health and education through prayer and catechizing, but were also to take on physical care if the parents were unable or absent. They were popularly expected to look to the child’s practical advantage as well—helping find work, housing, or a mate when the time came. There are no systematic studies of godparenthood in Italy, but those for contemporary England suggest that godparents played only a small role in their godchildren’s lives after the baptismal ceremony, and that few stepped in as foster parents when the necessity arose. For all the rhetoric surrounding this spiritual kinship bond, it seems to have had little traceable effect when children were orphaned or abandoned. Gregorio Dati recorded the godparents of only about half of his children, and typically recruited between one and three people, though on one occasion he had the standard bearers of all but two of Florence’s militia companies. Dati’s boys typically received businessmen and colleagues as godparents, while girls received friars, a neighbor, and “the blind woman,” who was clearly recruited more for the prayers she could offer than for her ability to raise the child in the event that Dati died. It is entirely possible that some of these godparents arranged for legal guardians or foster parents when their wards were orphaned, but we have no clear evidence.  

Guild and confraternity members were also spiritual kin, and seem to have put more efforts into rescuing the children of their deceased brothers and sisters. Some of Renaissance Florence’s estimated thirty-five hospitals were small shelters with a few beds operated by guilds primarily for the benefit of members and relatives who might be old, sick, or poor; S. Giovanni Decollato was run by and for the porters, S. Onofrio by dyers, and S. Trinità by the shoemakers. In Venice, members of the major confraternities, called Scuole Grande, knew that after they died, their dependents could be assigned quarters in confraternal housing. Both confraternities and guilds frequently offered dowries to set the daughters of their dead members on a new life, and in Bologna, the confraternity of S. Maria Maddalena guaranteed that needy boys of deceased members would have first call on any spaces that came available in the S. Onofrio orphanage that the confraternity operated. 

With or without the death of a father, a child’s apprenticeship was much like fostering. Up to half of boys and perhaps a third of all girls left the parental...
home to spend a few years as an apprentice or domestic servant in the homes of others, and the percentages moved higher with orphaned children of both sexes. Twenty-two percent of apprenticeship contracts in Florence’s Wool Guild in the sixteenth century were with girls, and of these, 70 percent had lost their fathers and had been enrolled by mothers or other relations. Girls tended to have longer apprenticeships than boys: in five-year contracts, the ratio was 80 boys to 20 girls, in those of 6 years it became 60:40, and in those of 7 years and more, it moved to 20:80. The extra years represent apprenticeships that started before the usual age of 12. In one extreme case, Bernardo di Monticelli took on 3-year-old orphaned Nannina di Jacopo for a 14-year apprenticeship, and received use of her legacy in the meantime in recognition of the cost of raising her. As Luciano Marcello notes, this contract was really a “form of adoption” that wasn’t at all rare in the case of very young orphaned children.16

What did this apprenticeship-fostering mean for orphans? In 1419, the year he gained the commission to design Florence’s new foundling home, the Ospedale degli Innocenti, Filippo Brunelleschi fostered and then apprenticed a young orphan Antonio Cavalcanti.17 The 7-year-old boy had the nickname “Il Buggiano” from his home village 40 kilometers northwest of Florence. Brunelleschi’s father owned some land in Buggiano, and it was likely a web of connections anchored in that small village that directed Il Buggiano to Brunelleschi’s home and shop. The boy trained with and eventually worked alongside Filippo, sculpting significant marble pieces for the master’s two other major Florentine commissions, the cathedral and the church of S. Lorenzo. Brunelleschi never married, and was master, employer, and father to the orphan. This gave the two much to argue about, and they fell out when Buggiano was in his early 20s and growing increasingly frustrated by Filippo’s unwillingness to pay him for his work. The young man’s sculptures were good enough to win him independent commissions, but he felt that Brunelleschi was still treating him as a child. Buggiano stole some jewels as payment, and fled to Naples to set up shop there. Brunelleschi wasn’t willing to let either the jewels or Buggiano go, and it is a sign of his determination that he appealed to the highest authorities for help. Pope Eugenius IV was then residing in Florence, and he intervened with the queen of Naples, who returned Buggiano to Florence. We might expect Brunelleschi’s response to be a harsh one, but in fact the confrontation seems to have triggered a reconciliation. Filippo named Buggiano his heir soon afterward, and the two continued to lived together until Brunelleschi died 12 years later at age 69.

One hundred years later, the Venetian Antonio di Leonardo Capello dal Banco
wrote in his will that he had taken a child from the Venetian foundling home of the Pietà as his fìo di anima. He named him Bonaventura, and lodged him with a Sier Zorzi, agent of a Filippo Capello who, judging by the name, may have been a relative. Antonio Capello paid the Zorzi family for Bonaventura’s maintenance, and also for his apprenticeship in the Zorzi goldsmith shop on the Rialto. In a few years Bonaventura would be 18 and, if his benefactor were no longer alive, the trustees were to pay off Zorzi and give the orphan boy some clothing and some funds set aside in trust. Bonaventura would be independent and, while Antonio begged his relatives the trustees to consider him as their responsibility, there was no question of formal adoption, of naming Bonaventura an heir, or of bringing him into the Capello home. A late-sixteenth-century confessor’s manual recommended that priests impose this kind of individualized care for orphans as a penance on those who were wealthy enough to afford it, but it is hard to get a sense of how common such arm’s-length fostering was.\textsuperscript{18}

Filippo’s relationship with Buggiano, Antonio’s with Bonaventura, and Bernardo’s with 3-year-old Nannina demonstrate some of the paradoxes of substitute family life in the Renaissance. Their relationships look to us very much like modern-day fostering or adoption, and we might be tempted to use the terms. Yet Renaissance families shied away from this terminology, and by the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, some European legal codes began making adoption illegal or difficult, forcing parents through loopholes if they wished to contract it. The issues were economic and moral, and vexed wealthier families and legal theorists more than they did those of the middle and lower social ranges. According to its detractors, the adoptive child was a thief. Anything he inherited from his adoptive parents was stolen from their extended family line, which had accumulated property over generations and had maintained it within the line through careful marriages, gifts, and legacies. His adoptive parents were more rightly the custodians than the owners of family property, and their misplaced sentiments should not be allowed to undermine a long-standing family strategy aimed at increasing collective wealth generation after generation. On this line of reasoning, it would be unnecessary and redundant for a paternal relative to formally adopt an orphaned or abandoned child because she or he was already in the family. But adoption that brought an outsider into the family undermined proper patriarchal authority and family solidarity, encouraged illegitimacy, could lead to unintentional incest, and challenged the fundamental belief that blood alone bound families together. Looming behind these alarmist fears was the image of the anonymous and likely illegitimate orphan who had emerged
out of the foundling home to wreak havoc on the domestic hearth. The image stirred upper-class lawmakers into action, and so forced adoptive parents into finding ingenious ways around one of the most common restrictions, the ban on letting adopted children (and illegitimate children generally) inherit property. It was sometimes enough to preempt inheritance disputes by donating property through a simple gift *inter vivos* (i.e., between living persons) that was registered with a notary, but there was no guarantee that uncles, cousins, or relatives twice removed might not hire lawyers to get the family property back into the blood line.¹⁹

But a paradox has two sides. We should remember that while Renaissance society fought legal adoption with an intensity and line of reasoning that may puzzle us, many families—and even unmarried individuals like Filippo Brunelleschi—regularly took others’ children into their households and raised them as though they were their own, with an ease that we also cannot imagine. The family was legally closed, but practically open. Many Renaissance families divorced emotive relations from property transfers, and counted more on the kinship ties they could create than on the property they could accumulate. The bulk of families could not hope to transfer more than some tools, household furniture, and clothing from one generation to the next and so legal property transfer was an abstract point. Their indifference to this abstract legality began with marriages undertaken without benefit of ecclesiastical ceremony or legal contract. So-called free or clandestine marriages were recognized popularly by symbols of exchange, by processions and communal meals, and above all by the simple act of living together publicly for an extended period of time. So while we recognize the legal restrictions on fostering and adoption, we should also remember that many people conducted their family lives below the legal radar (the cause of extraordinary complications when they decided to go to court for one domestic reason or another), and that real family ties were sometimes created in spite of legal restrictions or, like the artists who adopted the names of their famous masters, in a free adaptation of convention. Paradoxically, people constructed their families so freely and broadly, that many felt little need to formalize this in law. This would change in the coming centuries.

As we move farther out from the family circle, arrangements for sheltering orphaned and abandoned children become more impersonal—organized by guardians who may not know the children, contracted with professional care providers for a fee, or carried out in institutions that may also have had their eyes on the fee, or may even have had their eyes on the child. But we need to be
careful about our assumptions here, because what may look like impersonal care on the surface sometimes turns out to have hidden or indirect kin connections. For instance, many of the guardians who arranged for paid care or apprenticeships may have been godparents, guild brothers, or confratelli, but either were not identified as such in documents or made their arrangements without leaving a documentary record.

One guardian that did leave records consistently was the city government, which sometimes took on legal guardianship of orphaned minors. Bologna’s podestà had appointed tutors from at least 1267, and in 1393 Florence established a five-man Magistrato dei pupilli et adulti to formalize guardianship practices that civic officials had been taking on for at least twenty-five years, often at the request of families themselves. Tutors and Pupilli officials stepped in when fathers had died intestate, or when the guardians appointed by fathers were fighting, dishonest, or negligent, or if the family wanted an outside body to oversee the actions of family guardians. The officials inventoried and administered the ward’s property, appointed foster parents and guardians, saw to education if that was required, arranged apprenticeships and marriages, and generally looked out for the orphan’s interest until he or she came of age (25 for girls and 18 for boys), married, or entered a religious house. Bolognese officials had to render accounts annually to the ward’s relatives and the podestà, and from 1454 these were to be passed on to the Camera degli Atti and kept in the communal archive. Florence was initially reluctant to take on guardianship, but once it granted itself legal powers to borrow money from the wards’ estates, the government’s attitude changed. This conflict of interest meant that relatives had to keep a close eye on the Pupilli’s activities. In 1397, Caterina di Giovanni Gherardini, widow of Bartolomeo di Ser Spinello, complained to Florence’s Signoria that when her husband died leaving their 18-month-old son Giovanni as his sole heir, she had petitioned the Commune to appoint administrators for the estate who would collect the large number of debts owing and manage the properties. Their management demonstrated the worst-case scenario: the administrators had failed to collect on debts, they had failed to appeal excessive taxes and forced loans, and their mismanagement had driven down the value of the estate by one-quarter, or 36,000 florins. The Signoria agreed to Caterina’s request for a formal investigation of Giovanni’s records in the office of the Pupilli, though it is not clear if they reduced his tax assessment.

Caterina demonstrates the active mother who calls in the civic magistrates to administer the estate, but still keeps an eye on things as an informal guardian.
This was a job that by law and custom fell to her late husband’s family, but in later centuries maternal and paternal families frequently cooperated in managing such estates. As Giulia Calvi found in her study of 150 cases from 1580 to 1750, the Pupilli itself appointed remarried mothers and stepfathers as the ward’s caregivers in 45 percent of cases. Mothers were actually favored since under Roman law they were unable to inherit from their children, and so they would not be tempted to endanger or defraud the child, as male relatives could and did. “There was thus a possibility of reconstituting a family unit around the new couple, who could keep with them, besides the children of the new husband’s previous marriages (that, of course, was obvious), those of the widow’s first marriage too.” The balance of cases were entrusted either to paternal family (18%), or to other caregivers who offered care for a fee. What other caregivers could Bologna’s tutors or Florence’s Pupilli magistrates draw on?

Their preference, and the preference of other kin who had the obligation and the funds to care for wards, but who lacked the space or inclination to take the orphan into their own households, was to entrust the child to communities of women. This might take the form of an agreement with an established convent of nuns. Many Florentine convents took girls in temporarily as boarders in an arrangement called serbanza. The girls might be orphans, but they could equally be young women whose fathers were simply out of town on business. Sharon Strocchia has shown how serbanza became popular from the early fifteenth century as concerns about plague, sexual honor, and marriage loomed larger in Florentine civil discourse. It was challenged and even outlawed by religious reformers in the early sixteenth century, who thought that the presence of young lay girls was bad for the morals and morale of the nuns. Yet serbanza carried on because it was convenient, reliable, and cheap for families, and because it was a valuable source of income for the convents. In the early fifteenth century, girls entered at about age 7 to 9, and stayed one to three years for a fee—10 to 14 florins annually—that tax officials had estimated as a fair cost of living. By century’s end, the fee had risen somewhat and the length of stay had extended to five to ten years. Almost all Florentine convents except the strictly Observant houses took girls on serbanza, and many had four or five at a time; the poorer the house, the more it relied on this as a source of income. Some even took in a larger contingent when they faced particularly expensive repairs. Families and guardians decided on one or another house based in part on its reputation for security, for piety, for the quality of education it offered wards, or for the quality of food it put on the table. A larger factor was the presence of family members...
among the nuns in the house, particularly the sisters or aunts of an orphan’s late father. *Serbanza* could thereby reinforce kin ties, and in Florence this frequently took on a political dimension as well. Each girl was assigned a nun-mentor, perhaps her relative in the home, who would train her in spiritual disciplines and domestic arts. This intense mentorship resembled the training that novice nuns received, but *serbanza* was not meant to be an extended novitiate; most girls left the convent to get married, and very few became nuns.24

*Serbanza* assumed a relatively open convent that maintained relations with lay society. One of the challenges faced by the nuns was training their wards for lives as wives and mothers. Religious reformers who promoted tight enclosure couldn’t decide whether this was immoral or a contradiction, but they did succeed in curtailing the practice by the mid-sixteenth century. But not all communities of religious women were formally structured as convents. Italian widows sometimes banded together in loose communities to share living expenses and carry out charitable works. These households of *bizzoche* and *pinzochere* might only last for the lifetime of their founding members, though some eventually affiliated with religious orders as tertiaries. The widows could capitalize on their experience as wives and mothers to offer shelter and domestic training to orphans for a fee. Florence’s first conservatory was essentially the work of a widow, Leonarda Barducci Ginori who, assisted by her daughters Caterina and Maria, funneled needy girls to a residence where they came under the care of a trio of widows headed by Mona Nanina. In some cases, individual widows offered the same service for two or three orphans at a time. As we will see below, Bologna’s S. Croce conservatory began when the philanthropist Bonifacio dalle Balle hired the widow Lucrezia Seghandina to shelter a few children in her home. One child led to two, then four, and soon dalle Balle transferred Seghandina and the girls to larger quarters. As the number of children grew beyond Seghandina’s ability to manage, dalle Balle transferred the girls to a community of four female tertiaries, and eventually recast it as a conservatory like the others in Bologna.25

These forms of fostering blurred the lines between institutional and non-institutional care: the nuns and widows fit groups of children into the rhythms of the convent or household, but they never took in more than a few at a time, and the care they offered was relatively individualized. Moreover, the child’s kin kept up regular contact and eventually took the child back in or arranged the marriage, apprenticeship, or other work that would launch her or him on an independent life. It was the return to lay life that separated this kind of care from oblation, another form of fostering carried out in convents and monasteries that
was superficially similar but that had different results. We can consider it here briefly. The practice of parents dedicating their young children as oblates to a monastery or convent emerged in Western Europe in the late fifth century and peaked in the thirteenth. Most oblates cut their ties with lay life and their families before age 10 and became monks or nuns by late adolescence. Religious reformers were always fearful of the possibility of sexual ties between young and old in the religious house, and many oblates were ill-suited—or at least ill-disposed—to the contemplative life, and could be very disruptive. The practice declined significantly by the fourteenth century, at least for boys. Yet it did not die out altogether as a form of fostering or abandonment: Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), illegitimate son of a priest and a doctor’s daughter, was sent by his guardians to the Augustinian monastery at Steyn when his parents died; at this point, he was 21 years old and a veteran of a series of boarding schools. Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523), who would later become Erasmus’s more stridently schismatic counterpart in the early stages of the Reformation, was abandoned to the monastery at Fulda by a father who saw little hope for his survival. Perhaps not surprisingly, both men railed at the monasteries and thought that forced confinement in them was tantamount to a prison sentence.

A more institutionalized and thoroughly lay form of care that guardians could turn to took place in the hospitals that were found in every town and city. These places were not just for the sick; hospitals offered hospitality. They provided care in accordance with the demands of Christian charity and to those categories of the needy that the Gospels identified as most deserving: widows, orphans, pilgrims, the hungry, the sick, and the dying. Guilds and confraternities might run hospitals for their own members, and in Florence there was also a number that had been opened thanks to the legacy of a pious benefactor who sometimes installed his family in perpetuity as the governors, caregivers, and even the beneficiaries of his testamentary charity; almost all kin-organized hospitals assumed that charity began at home with one’s own. Beyond this were the large civic hospitals like Siena’s S. Maria della Scala which, from its late-eleventh-century origins as a pilgrims’ shelter, grew to the point where, by the fifteenth century, it was that city-state’s largest landholder, most important economic agent, and the occupant of a vast extended complex of buildings that stepped down the hillside opposite the cathedral. In small towns or large hospitals, the various classes of needy might be mixed together under one roof and possibly in one bed, but from the fifteenth century Italian hospitals moved toward greater specialization, frequently under pressure from civic authorities who wanted better care for all their
citizens. Separate rooms were desirable, and separate buildings optimal. This was particularly the case for the foundlings who, usually in the middle of the night, were laid in fonts posted just by the main door and off the ground to keep them safe from roaming and hungry animals.

This is not the place to summarize the vast body of literature that over the past few decades has brought to light the details of infant abandonment in Renaissance Italy. Through a host of local studies we know how many infants were abandoned, of what gender and at what age, and sometimes from what locale. We know that most were illegitimate, the offspring of slaves and servants who had been assaulted in the homes where they worked—by employers or owners, by household friends or guests, by fellow workers. We know how these children were cared for, from their early transit to wet nurses to their eventual return to hospital-homes where they received some education before being sent out as teenage apprentices or servants. And we know that even for a time when people expected that one-third of children might die before their first birthday, these hospitals had staggering death rates, the consequence of overcrowding, malnutrition, and disease.27

Among the foundling homes established in Renaissance Italy, one of the first and most famous was Florence’s Ospedale degli Innocenti. Planned from 1419 and opened in 1445, it is as famous for Filippo Brunelleschi’s elegant building as for the thousands of children who passed through its turntable—the innovation that eventually replaced the raised font. Though funded and run initially by the Silk Guild, which Florence had first appointed to be in charge of foundlings in 1294, the Innocenti eventually came under closer civic control and became a model for similar institutions elsewhere in Italy. Bologna’s Ospedale dei SS. Pietro e Procolo—colloquially known as the “Esposti” (exposed) or more vulgarly as the “Bastardini”—began construction in 1500 on a building that had the kind of prominent location and portico that many associated with the Innocenti.28

Large hospitals like S. Maria della Scala and foundling homes like the Innocenti and Bastardini sheltered hundreds of orphans and abandoned children, and were the most immediate inspiration for the orphanages that this book examines. Yet they differed in three key respects. Children entered as infants, often only hours old. They were largely illegitimate. They had been dropped off anonymously, and as such had been cut off from connections with their parents’ blood and spiritual kin. Foundling homes began in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to rescue infants who might otherwise be abandoned in church doorways, thrown into nearby rivers, or left to die in garbage heaps. As we will see,
the orphanages that emerged a hundred years later were more deliberately selective, taking in only children who were older, who were preferably legitimate, and who might yet have some network of kin relations into which they could be reinserted by late adolescence. They were far smaller, and offered far better living conditions. The differences between foundling homes and orphanages were significant enough that guardians like Florence’s Pupilli magistrates and Bologna’s tutors seldom sent their wards to lodge at the former.

The orphanages of the sixteenth century were to some extent a refinement of the foundling homes of the fifteenth, with concerns about class and citizenship creating somewhat more comfortable homes for these legitimate children of respectable parents. Yet these initial differences faded over time under the pressures of numbers and costs. Distinct in their origins, foundling homes and orphanages came to resemble each other by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with both sharing the grim characteristics that we associate with the institutions from *Oliver Twist*. That said, Italian foundling homes in the industrial age exceeded even the lachrymose descriptions of a Charles Dickens. By the 1830s, 10 percent of all Tuscan infants, but a staggering 38 percent of all infants born in the capital city of Florence were regularly abandoned to foundling homes. Married parents began joining unmarried women in the trek to the Innocenti turntable once they realized that their infant might get better care and perhaps education, a job, or a dowry. In 1451 the Innocenti foundlings had represented 4.8 percent of Florentine baptisms. This almost doubled to 8.9 percent by 1465, doubled again to 21.9 percent by 1531, and then shot to 37.3 percent by the crisis year of 1552. These are spikes pushed by famine and plague, but by the later eighteenth century, the Innocenti regularly cared for one-third of all Florentine infants. Whatever their parents’ hopes, most foundlings got little more than baptism. Overcrowding pushed the death rate up precipitously, with 60 to 70 percent dying before their first birthday. Perhaps the worst case was Modica in Sicily, where 1,459 infants were abandoned between 1873 and 1883; three survived. One observer in Salerno claimed that these homes were “the tomb of the foundlings.” 29 If this was where it ended, where did it all begin?

The Test Cases: Florence and Bologna

This study will compare the networks of orphanages that developed in two cities in the course of the sixteenth century: Florence and Bologna. Both had
populations that ranged between 60,000 and 75,000 through the course of the century, and both experienced the plagues and famines that drove those numbers down on a regular basis. Both were economically prosperous, with a rapidly expanding silk industry growing beside more traditional textile trades and banking, but both also suffered the cyclical movements of these industries that could halt the looms and throw hundreds or thousands out of work and into poverty. Both drew in large numbers of workers from their surrounding hinterlands whose deaths often left their families stranded in a strange city far from kin. Both were culturally sophisticated and internationally connected. Florence was a center for the arts and humanities that drew writers, thinkers, and artists from across Italy. Bologna was the home of Europe’s oldest university that attracted students from across the Continent for professional studies in law and medicine. As a result, both cities had sophisticated governing elites who were conversant with political and social developments elsewhere in Italy and Europe. Both had dozens of active and sometimes very wealthy confraternities whose members shaped local civic religious life and charitable activity. In both cities, these confraternities worked closely with civic authorities, and often served as the agents that organized and delivered social welfare on the city’s behalf and with its money. Both had major hospitals that dated back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and were well known for the advanced level of charitable care offered in them. Both had civic governments that were ready to experiment with ways of making the plethora of large and small hospitals more effective by imposing forms of rationalization and specialization. Both made significant changes and additions to their networks of institutional charities in the 1550s, opening new homes and devising new forms of administration that combined private and civic funding, and that reached new categories of poor children. Both found that this expanded network began to strain and break under the accelerating cycle of plagues and famines that hit in the 1590s.

In short, Florence and Bologna were both wealthy, progressive, and innovative cities. Propelled by a combination of religious, economic, and political motivations, both fashioned new systems of poor relief out of older models and institutions and resources and traditions. Yet there were also significant differences, above all in political structure. Florence was the capital of an independent state. Small groups of powerful families had controlled its republican government through the fifteenth century, and continued to exercise control after the defeat of the last republic in 1530 and the installation of the Medici as dukes.
They assumed that this would continue when 17-year-old Cosimo de Medici, son of the illegitimate Medici mercenary Giovanni delle Bande Nere, was drafted onto the ducal throne in 1537, but they were soon disappointed. Duke Cosimo turned out to be a gifted survivalist and the architect of one of the most effective centralizing governments of the sixteenth century. Ducal Tuscany was a prototype of absolutist government, and given its more compact scale and lack of serious internal religious, cultural, and linguistic distinctions, it demonstrated a more effective absolutism than those larger European states, like France, to which the term is usually applied. Yet it was also effective because Duke Cosimo I knew how to negotiate with the families, institutions, and towns within his state, adapting dictate and compromise as situations required. His reforms to Florence’s welfare system, and his determination that this should be more tightly controlled by his appointees and should more generously serve the whole of the territorial state, profoundly shaped the direction of charitable institutions generally, and orphanages in particular.

Bologna was not an independent state, but the second city of the papal state. Though the fifteenth century a faction within its oligarchy had coalesced around one family, the Bentivoglio, and had worked with them toward de facto autonomy. They were successful to a point, because Bologna was strategically located and was able to develop strong links with other cities that wanted to influence peninsular politics, Milan in particular. The Bentivoglio party monopolized political power and tapped into the city’s tax revenues so successfully that it alienated many other leading families and clashed with a series of popes. They survived one major conspiracy and the advance of Cesare Borgia, but eventually found their match in Pope Julius II. The Bentivoglio fled without a fight before his entry to the city in November 1506, but Julius II’s subsequent efforts to subdue the city proved too harsh, and it fell to Pope Leo X to devise the governing structure that lasted to the end of the ancien régime. Leo established a senate of forty (increased to fifty in 1590) members drawn from leading families, believing rightly that this brought all the traditional faction leaders and families into one governing chamber. Senate decisions had to be approved by the papal legate and vice versa. Members served for life, and some seats tended to become family possessions. The senate itself became a closed oligarchy whose members guarded Bologna’s privileges and their own prerogatives very closely. Early on, they worked to rationalize the network of Bologna’s charitable institutions and to complete it with a workhouse that opened in 1563 as the keystone of a broad set of poor relief services that arched over the city. Unlike Duke Cosimo I in
Florence, they aimed to restrict these services to the citizens of the city rather than to residents of the outlying hinterland.

Their histories gave the two cities different relations with the institutional Church. Florence was always much closer to the institutions and hierarchy of the Catholic Church. It had little to fear and much to profit, particularly when its bankers lent money to popes and its leading families controlled lucrative curial positions like the depository general. Authors from Boccaccio to Machiavelli freely lampooned clergy, but in their confraternities and their personal relations ordinary Florentines demonstrated loyalty to and confidence in the clergy. They had particularly close relations with religious houses and their charismatic leaders; the Dominican friar Savonarola was popular locally, and retained a determined following long after his ashes had floated down the Arno. Florentine charities often had closer relations with both religious houses and secular clergy, and indeed as we will see, some of the conservatories opened in the sixteenth century metamorphosed into convents by the seventeenth.

Bologna’s relations with the institutional Church were always marked by political conflict, and the continuation of this conflict over centuries had bred anticlericalism more deeply into the bone. There were no charismatic religious leaders like Savonarola based in the city, and the Dominicans (associated with papal authority as the agents of the Inquisition) could not find here the popular following they enjoyed in Florence—Bolognese preferred to follow the Franciscans, who frequently seemed to get into trouble with Rome. The city’s main agents of civic-religious culture were its confraternities rather than its clergy. Even after the senatorial oligarchs realized that their personal futures were best served through cooperation with the papal hierarchy, they aimed to keep the city’s charitable institutions in confraternity hands and thus outside the purview of the papal legate and archbishop. As just one example, through the 1580s the founders of Bologna’s dowry fund fought to avoid juridical designation as a so-called luogo pio, or pious institution, because after the Council of Trent bishops had the authority to conduct pastoral visits of luoghi pii, to review their accounts, and to appoint clerics to their boards. Though ecclesiastics challenged its autonomy repeatedly, and in spite of a papal charter, the Monte del Matrimonio successfully protected its status as a lay institution governed by its own statutes to the end of the ancien régime. 30

The sixteenth century was a critical time across Europe for the development of civic welfare systems that were more comprehensive in scope, more selective in service, and more ambitious in what they aimed to achieve both for the poor
and for the city itself. Where individuals had always woven personal safety nets through a multitude of intersecting and overlapping kinship ties, cities now aimed to weave larger nets that could rescue and redeem the poor while simultaneously directing their energies to the needs of the urban community. The threads in these larger nets included local charitable traditions and institutions like the hospitals, active lay bodies like the confraternities, expanding state bureaucracies, new financial institutions like charitable pawn shops offering cheap loans to the poor, new industries like silk, and religious reform movements that emphasized redeeming the poor. The resulting welfare bureaucracies of the sixteenth century were hybrids—both political and private, lay and clerical, secular and religious, domestic and institutional. They were built on the material resources of the past, represented by hospital and confraternity legacies, supplemented by the potential earnings of the present, reflected in the work carried out by those whom the new institutions served and the tax revenues that governments funneled into them. It was once common to attribute these developments to the Protestant Reformation, and for good reason. Protestantism was an intellectual and political revolution. It did away with those elements of Catholic theology that promoted charity as a means of getting into heaven. It drew poor relief into its vision of a government-organized and lay-directed church that expropriated the resources of former monasteries, convents, parishes, and confraternities, and used the funds to underwrite worship, education, and social services more generally. But if Protestantism was an overt revolution that reshaped northern Europe, Catholicism underwent its own revolutions that changed the delivery of welfare in much the same way. Catholic reform movements promoted an aggressively activist piety that used charity to save body and soul. And Catholic governments proved no less eager than Protestants to try and control or at least employ the resources of charitable and clerical institutions. The Spanish Catholic humanist Juan Luis Vives codified the ideas embraced by Protestant and Catholic governments alike in his *De Subventione Pauperum* (1526), a book that circulated widely throughout Europe in various translations. The book drew on some experiments and inspired others, and many cities kept one eye on the expanding literature and another on the multiplying practical models as they altered their welfare systems through the sixteenth century.31

This study focuses on Florence and Bologna because, in an era when *all* welfare reform happened at the civic level, they were at the forefront of change in at least three ways. First, they led other cities in the number, type, and organi-
zation of shelters for needy poor generally, and children in particular. Bologna opened one of the first specialized orphanages in Europe, and the first specialized paupers’ workhouse in Italy. Florence had pioneered a century earlier with its Innocenti foundling home. More to the point, while other European cities experimented with single homes for one category of poor or another that might be established by philanthropists, confraternities, political leaders, or churchmen, Florence and Bologna forged ahead with deliberately integrated networks of homes that wove such individual efforts into a coordinated web of care. Second, these two cities demonstrated two very different approaches to the practical problem of running a network, and their differences would become models for government welfare bureaucracies in early modern Europe. In Bologna, large bodies of volunteers ran smaller homes that were hybrids of the small medieval hospital and the specialized shelter. There were fewer paid staff, and administrators had more day-to-day contact with the children and more personal involvement in bringing them in and eventually seeing them out. In Florence, small councils of administrators ran large homes with the help of paid staff in what was more definitely a prototype for modern government. Administrators had closer relations with their political masters than with their juvenile wards, and their push for efficiency and economy became a push toward the ever larger homes and factory-style workshops that multiplied across Europe. Third, the differences between Florentine and Bolognese welfare bureaucracies and institutions were rooted at least in part in the emerging political distinction between the two cities, and offered distinct lessons to cities on one side or another of the gap that yawned as early modern territorial states began to emerge and consolidate. A few cities followed Florence and became the capitals of these territorial states, retaining political influence and expanding their boundaries. Many more cities were, like Bologna, forced under umbrella of such states, and looked for ways to stem the erosion of their traditional autonomy. The Bolognese built their coherent network of interlocking specialized institutions as much to shore up the local authority of a political elite that now functioned under the wing and in the shadow of the papal state, as to offer better care to select groups of citizens. They focused more directly on the economic and demographic needs of the city itself, and worked far more deliberately to return the poor to an active role in it. Florence’s institutions were agents of the state’s expansion and fringe benefits for subject communities, and as such were open to a broader range of poor drawn from the whole of Tuscany. They were initially less organized and innovative be-
cause Florence's system of hospitals had long been adequate for its needs, and it typically took a serious crisis to bring change. Moreover, in spite of a magistracy established for the purpose in 1542, Florence took longer to achieve the ordered and rational network that Bologna quickly developed. The early dukes were ambivalent and wanted to be sure that the magistrates running such a network would not undermine their own authority and patronage. On a different level, the Florentines generally were also ambivalent, and took far longer to embrace the idea of a lay religious network of charitable orphanages, particularly for girls. Some of its homes turned into convents, and under the pressure of numbers, the remaining institutions more quickly degenerated into the large and grim welfare institutions that we associate with later centuries.

In societies accustomed to distinguishing between worthy and unworthy poor, orphaned and abandoned children were universally recognized as the most vulnerable and needy of the poor. Yet few universals remained as cities worked out the details of how to help them. As we investigate how Florence and Bologna came to care for these children, we will see what difference gender, class, and citizenship made. We will also see that, given the political and bureaucratic differences just noted, the accidents of geography could result in quite different experiences for children in one city or the other. While these homes demonstrate the best charitable care that cities could muster for their most deserving poor, they also show us how demographic, economic, and social pressures gradually reshaped that care over the course of the sixteenth century. Chapter 1 will review how the two cities developed their networks of homes in response to the demographic crises, famines, and plagues of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (particularly the 1520s, 1540s–50s, and 1590s). Chapter 2 will consider who entered the homes and how they got in. Chapters 3 and 4 will look at how girls and boys respectively experienced life in the homes. Chapter 5 will shift attention to the adults who ran the homes, looking at how the two cities ran their homes differently, and then at how women ran homes differently from men. Chapter 6 will look at how and when children left their homes, and where they ended up once the doors opened for them.

Note on terminology: The shelters for orphaned and abandoned children that this book deals with were generally called only ospedale or casa in the Renaissance because those were the institutions and terms that contemporaries were familiar with. For convenience and clarity, I will refer to shelters for boys as orphanages and shelters for girls as conservatories, though strictly speaking these terms
only came in to use later. We can call the children themselves orphans even though many still had one surviving parent (most often the mother) because contemporaries used the words orfano or orfanello to designate a fatherless child.

*Note on dating:* Until 1751, Florentines calculated the new year from 25 March. Dates in this volume have been adjusted such that the new year begins on 1 January.