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*Women, Family,
and Ritual in
Renaissance
Italy*

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7

Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300–1530

*Oh! What joy the Virgin had in suckling!
Surely it is impossible that in nursing such a
son she not have felt delights unknown to
other women!*

Meditationes vitae domini nostri Jesu Christi,
attributed to Giovanni da Calvoli (thirteenth
century)



Several studies in recent years have examined the abandonment of children in Mediterranean societies. Florence and Siena, which had hospices that specialized in the care of *trovatelli*,¹ have been the object of particularly thorough studies.² We are beginning to learn a great deal about the circumstances surrounding the abandonment of foundlings and their life expectancy from the late fourteenth century on, but also about the appointment of nurses by these charitable institutions and about changes in their salary scale. The elements missing from this picture are, of course, the child's parents: a hazy outline of the parents appears only in the note sometimes found pinned to a baby's blanket or, occasionally, in their subsequent attempts to regain the child. The fact remains, however, that the history of paid breast feeding in these establishments—important as it might have been socially—is not the history of

the average baby in the big cities: it obviously leaves out the triangular relationship that bound two sets of parents—the natural parents and the nursing parents—and the child who moved from one set to the other.

The practice of putting children out to nurse was widespread among middle class Florentines as early as the mid-fourteenth century. How widespread it was can be judged by the extraordinary blossoming of the *ricordanze*, domestic journals that related, usually on a day-to-day basis, how a newborn child was received and what happened to it in the years following. To be sure, it may take patience to pick these jottings out of the hodgepodge noted daily by heads of families in these journals. They are invaluable, however, not only to throw light on the history of the infant and on attitudes toward him, but also because, by spotlighting the two parental couples, they give a good idea of their relations and clarify the place that the nurse and her husband occupied in the life of the family.

It might be objected that the Florentine *ricordanze* do not present all levels of society, and that the paid breast feeding they speak of is still typical only of a rather narrow stratum of urban society. It is true that the great majority of the 318 infants studied here, who were born of 84 couples and suckled the milk of 462 different wet nurses, belonged by right of birth to the established middle class in Florence. However, between one-third and 40 percent³ of the fathers in this group were artisans or skilled craftsmen, small merchants or landholders, notaries, doctors, and jurists, who did not belong to the governing circles in the city. Moreover, I have counted among the city's leaders some fathers who bore an illustrious family name—Strozzi, for example—but who were poor relations with a fortune unequal to the fame of their lineage.⁴ I might add that nearly 8 percent of the fathers considered here did not live in Florence: three were Sieneese or Bolognese, and four others lived in a secondary city in the Florentine domain (Prato, Pistoia, Poggibonsi).

The *ricordanze* reveal the spread in society of the practice of putting an infant out to nurse—at least in the fifteenth century, for before 1360 this is more difficult to judge.⁵ Out of fifteen fathers whose children we know

3. Depending on whether or not the people of the *distretto*—the cities subject to Florence—are included. On the *ricordanze*, see D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles* (Paris, 1978), 190, n. 3. On this literature see the recent studies of F. Pezzarossa, "La memorialistica fiorentina tra Medioevo e Rinascimento: Rassegna di studi e testi," *Lettere italiane* 1979: 96–138; Pezzarossa, "La tradizione fiorentina della memorialistica," in *La memoria dei mercatores* (Bologna, 1980), 39–149. J. B. Ross, "The Middle-Class Child in Urban Italy, 14th to early 16th Centuries" in L. De Mause, ed., *The History of Childhood* (New York, 1975), 183–228, has used these family journals for a first picture of childhood in Tuscany (see esp. pp. 184–96 for early infancy).

4. Thus Tribaldo dei Rossi (see note 44), Doffo Spini (Archivio di Stato, Florence, henceforth abbreviated ASF, *Strozzi*, 2d ser., 13, 1415–36), and Giovanni di Jacopo d'Ubertino Strozzi (ASF, *Strozzi*, 3d ser., 275, 1443–77).

5. Approximately 19 percent of these 84 fathers lived in the fourteenth century, 68 percent in the fifteenth, and 13 percent in the first third of the sixteenth century. The distribution of children, in like manner, is, respectively 16 percent, 70.4 percent, and 13.5

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1. San Gallo took in *trovatelli* from the end of the thirteenth century; la Scala, founded in 1306, from 1316 on; the Innocenti, founded in 1419, from 1445 on.

2. On the abandonment of children in Tuscany, see R. C. Trexler, "The Foundlings of Florence, 1395–1455," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1973): 259–84; G. Pinto, "Personale, balie e salariati dell'ospedale di San Gallo," *Ricerche storiche* 2 (1974): 113–68; C. A. Corsini, "Materiali per lo Studio della Famiglia in Toscana nei secoli XVII–XIX: Gli esposti," *Quaderni storici* 33 (1976): 998–1052; L. Sandri, *L'ospedale di S. Maria della Scala di San Gimignano nel Quattrocento. Contributo alla storia dell'infanzia* (Florence, 1982).

to have been put out to nurse between 1302 and 1399, only two did not come from prominent families,⁶ whereas after 1450 half of the families concerned were of modest social rank. Does this change show an evolution in behavior and the extension of paid breast feeding, or does it simply reflect a more widespread keeping of account books and journals—or, even, better conservation of such records—in levels of urban society that had made little use of them before? If the first hypothesis proves correct, it implies that paid breast feeding and the keeping of domestic journals progressed in strictly parallel manner. Indeed, all the account books,⁷ from of all levels of society, mention salaried nurses when they speak of births in the family. Conversely, the *ricordanze* never note, except in truly exceptional circumstances,⁸ that Florentine mothers nursed their children themselves.⁹ We would probably have to look to a still lower social level; in particular we would have to leave Florence and delve into the smaller towns of the territory that is administered¹⁰ to get back to a world in

6. Francesco di Giovanni di Durante (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, henceforth abbreviated BNF, 2, 3, 280, 1342–48) and Paliano di Falco Paliani (ASF, *Strozzi.*, 2d ser., 7, 1382–1406).

7. The *ricordanze* that concentrate on recapitulating the great events of one lineage obviously do not report on putting infants out to nurse. For others that do not mention the practice, one might assume the presence of a slave woman permanently charged with the job, as, for example, in the book of Francesco di Tommaso Giovanni, ASF, *Strozzi.*, 2d ser., 16, 16 bis (1422–58), fol. 11; Francesco, who does not mention nurses for his children, does mention in passing the *schiaiva e balia* (slave and nurse) of his grandson.

8. It was often a feeling of insecurity that justified the mother's breast feeding: see the Siensese Cristoforo Guidini's 1384 "Ricordi," ed. G. Milanese, *Archivio storico italiana* 4 (1843): 25–48. On Guidini, see G. Cherubini, *Signori, contadini, borghesi* (Florence, 1974), 373–425, esp. pp. 410–12. Some taxpayers, conversely, invoked their wife's inability to nurse in order to get their taxes eased, in particular a notary from San Gimignano, ser Nazario di Lorenzo, whose wife "has no nipples on her breast and cannot nurse" (ASF, *Catasto*, 266, fol. 513, 1428).

9. A priest in Pistoia, Jacopo Melocchi, living with a concubine—a certain Cicilia da Mantova, whom he seems to have cherished in spite of her social status, obviously much inferior to his own—permitted her to nurse all the children she bore him (ASF, *Acquisti e Doni*, 8, 1497–1517). Her simple origin and breast feeding are not incompatible. The arrival of twins also explains why the parents of Catherine of Siena, the next-to-last of twenty-five children, put out her twin sister to nurse. The twin soon died, while the future saint was nursed by her mother until she was weaned. None of her older siblings were so treated, for "propter frequentes conceptiones, nullum ex filiis potuerat [mater] proprio lacte nutrire" (because of frequent conceptions, the mother was unable to nourish any of her children with her own milk) (*Acta sanctorum*, Aprilis III, 859). In the *catasto* of 1427, the less wealthy taxpayers occasionally complain that their wife was obliged to put one twin out to nurse and to the nurse the other herself, or worse yet, that poverty obliged her to nurse both of them. See Archivio di stato, Pisa, *Ufficio dei Fiumi e Fossi* (1540), fol. 75: twins are nursed by their mother, "ch'è grande fatica e affanno e miseria" (which is a great effort, worry, and hardship). On salaried nursing, see J. Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques au Moyen-Age dans le monde méditerranéen* (Paris, 1981), 199–204.

10. Paradoxically, the *catasto* of 1427–30 describes the nursing children of the countryside or of the subject cities better than those in Florence: obviously the Florentine taxpayers were aware how slight their chances were of touching the hearts of the tax collectors. (Out of the 234 infants put out to nurse mentioned in the *catasto*, only 34 are in Florence. Rural taxpayers who speak of their nurses always give the reason for a situation that they consider

which the mother took on the function of nursing. We can state that in the large city of Florence, nursing by a salaried nurse or by a slave woman became the dominant practice, at least from the middle of the fifteenth century onward, even if we cannot for the moment trace the exact limits of the practice.

Furthermore, a Florentine who put one of his children out to nurse would put out the others as well, both girls and boys.¹¹ Discrimination does not enter the picture on the level of a decision as to whom the mother would or would not nurse. It might do so in the choice of a nurse, on the other hand, according to both the sex and the birth order of the child. The *ricordanze* tell us much about the criteria, both individual and contingent, that were respected in the selection of these substitute mothers, about their supervision, and about the terms and conditions of wet nursing.

The Choice of a Nurse

In Florence, putting a child out to nurse implied, for the overwhelming majority of parents, separation from the child. Among the more than 400 nurses for whom we have sufficient documentation, we can count, from 1300 to 1530, one nurse *in casa*, who was part of the household of the child's parents, for more than four who take the baby to their own house.¹² The general tendency throughout the period is toward a somewhat lower proportion of nurses living under the master's roof. The shrinkage is noticeable particularly during the first two-thirds of the fifteenth century. (It is perhaps linked to our greater knowledge of the customs of middle-class families from this period onward.) A similar and even more insistent pattern may be observed in the relative likelihood of a child's departure for the country or remaining in the city of Florence near its parents: in

exceptional (the mother's pregnancy, the birth of a younger child, the mother's inability to nurse). Giorgio di Piero di ser Galletto, from Poggibonsi, permitted his wife to nurse all their children except for his son Piero, whom he placed with a nurse in 1528 because his wife was pregnant. His second wife took an aversion to one of the twins she bore in 1538, and "this aversion lasted from when he was with his nurse." The child died of the "poor care" of his mother in 1540 (Biblioteca Laurenziana, *Acquisti*, 203, fol. 51).

11. This can be verified every time it is possible to follow the destiny of a complete set of siblings. Unfortunately, many of the *ricordanze* permit only a partial reconstruction of the history of the descendants of one couple because they cover only a limited period. Antonio di ser Tommaso Masi reports that when his wife died in 1459 at the age of 57, she had given him 36 children (*sic*) "28 of whom were put out to nurse and, at her death, she still had 9 male children." It is probable that the 8 babies who were not sent out to nurse died soon after their birth (ASF, *Manoscritti*, 89, 1455–59, fol. 18).

12. On the *in casa* nurses, see Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 200–201, which cites data from the Pisa *catasto*: three families employ such a nurse, but twenty-eight other families send their babies out. On more general aspects of putting babies out to nurse, as seen in the *catasto* as a whole, see Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, esp. pp. 340, 507, 555–61.

the latter case, the parents naturally followed the child's development more carefully. Although there was, on the average, one nurse caring for a small Florentine in the city for 2.4 in the country, rural nurses show constant gains from 1300 to 1530 (see table 7.1).

Whether these changes should be interpreted as indicative of a real diffusion of paid breast feeding in this society, or whether we are simply better informed by the *ricordanze* of the middle class, the fact remains that the increasing predominance of outside nurses, particularly rural nurses, gives a glimpse of parental strategies—both those of the natural parents of the infant and those of the nursing parents.

We learn from the communal statutes of 1415¹³ and from descriptions of practice in our family journals that a nurse's salary varied greatly with her residence. A nurse *in casa* was a luxury that demanded a higher price than a peasant woman living on her sharecropped farm. When she lived in her master's house, the woman generally received 18–20 *fiorini* a year between 1400 and 1480—more than any other category of paid domestics. According to how far her farm was from Florence, a country nurse could hope for the equivalent of 9–15 *fiorini* a year¹⁴—in common coin, subject to depreciation, and not in good *fiorini d'oro*. The pay of a nurse whose own home was in Florence was close to that of a woman living under the master's roof, discounting the latter's living expenses, which she was expected to pay.¹⁵

Table 7.1
NURSES IN CASA AND OUTSIDE NURSES

Nurses's residence	1300–1399	1400–1469	1470–1530	1300–1530
a. Employer's household	16	32	23	71
b. In Florence	12	22	9	43
c. In the country	51	131	90	272
Total	79	185	122	386
Ratio a/b + c	3.9	4.8	4.3	4.4
Ratio a + b/c	1.8	2.4	2.8	2.4

13. *Statuta populi et communis Florentiae* (1415), bk. 4, 148 (Fribourg, 1778–80), 2:267–70. See M. Roberti, "Il contratto di lavoro negli statuti medievali," *Rivista internazionale di scienze sociali* 40 (1932): 166.

14. Around 1500, salaries for city domestics were counted in *fiorini da serva* at 4 *lire* to a *fiorino*. This made them compatible with rural salaries, which were always paid in *lire*. The *fiorini d'oro* was worth a good deal more.

15. Nurses in Florence were paid 6 or 7 *lire* per month. During the final third of the fourteenth century the monthly salary for a nurse *in casa* was about 100 *soldi*, at a time when a peasant nurse's pay averaged 62 *soldi* (with considerable variation). A century later they were, respectively, 111 and 72 *soldi*.

A map of nurses' residences would show that Florentines were not at all reluctant to send their nursing infants quite far from home. A good 42 percent of the outside nurses lived beyond the suburbs of the city, within a radius of fifteen kilometers; 45 percent lived even farther out, particularly in the Mugello, to the north of Florence, where many Florentine families had their roots and owned farm lands,¹⁶ in the countryside around Prato, or, less frequently, in the more mountainous Casentino, all of which were regions known for their nurses.¹⁷ Florentines vied with one another to celebrate the salubrity of these parts—perhaps with the secret thought of justifying the exile of their progeny.¹⁸ The "goodness of the air" is a less logical explanation for the departure of Florentine babies to peasant houses on the Florentine plain, between Florence and Prato, where the climate was more suspect. One Florentine baby out of six was raised there, however. As for nurses within the city of Florence, whose high salary was beyond the reach of many purses, they seem to have been called on for shorter periods, such as the first days, before the arrival of the permanent nurse, or a gap between two nurses.¹⁹ The effects of a diversity of salaries as great as this need to be examined from two points of view—the nurses' and the parents'.

There was one parental demand that anyone who proposed to nurse a tiny Florentine had to take into account: the parents took it for granted that a nurse could breast-feed no more than one baby—their baby—at a time. "Milk brothers" are never spoken of in Florentine texts, and this absence seems to me to be explained by the customs connected with breast feeding. Either the Florentine's baby followed a child of the nurse who had been weaned early, or the nurse's child has died, "liberating" its mother's milk, or the child was itself put out to nurse so that its mother could be hired by a Florentine. This last solution is attested in the *ricordanze*, and never does a nurse arrive under her employer's roof with her own

16. See, for example, the Morelli children, who were sent to the Mugello, from which the family came (Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, *Ricordi*, ed. V. Branca [Florence, 1956], 87–104) or the Minerbetti children (Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence, *Acquisti e Doni*, 229, 1492–1551), where eleven of the sixteen nurses employed by Andrea di Tommaso lived in the Mugello.

17. See the carnival songs about nurses: *Canti Carnascialeschi del Rinascimento*, ed. C. Singleton (Bari, 1936), no. 29 (pp. 39–40); no. 39 (p. 51), no. 94 (p. 125).

18. Morelli thus sings the praises of the Mugello of his ancestors. On "la buona temperanza de l'aria molta generativa" (the excellent temperance of the highly productive air) of the Florence region, see the "Diario fiorentino d'anonimo," BNF, *Panciatichi*, 158, fol. 188v.

19. See Appendix to this chapter. The mother was not supposed to nurse immediately after the birth, as colostrum was reputed to be harmful to the child. See Francesco da Barberino, *Del reggimento e costume di donne*, ed. G. E. Sansone (Turin, 1957), lines 275–76: "It is true that in the beginning it is better to give the milk of another than the mother." Giovanni Michele Savonarola, *Il trattato ginecologico-pediatrico in volgare*, ed. L. Belloni, (Milan, 1952), 149–50 also states that the first milk is "serale, non buono come il sequente" (thin, not as good as the subsequent) (my thanks to Linda Duchamp for this reference).

child,²⁰ whereas we can often see her paying her own child's nurse with her own wages.²¹ The example of Piero Puro,²² cited in the Appendix to this chapter, shows that he found it advantageous to send his own children out to nurse, and rather far from Florence, so that his wife could offer her services to Florentine families. When the country nurse's pay had been deducted from her own, their net gain was exactly equal.²³

It is probable that the demand for nurses among proper Florentines motivated the *popolo minuto*—particularly those who, like this Piero Puro, had professional dealings with the merchants and the families of the highest society—to dispatch their children to the country as soon as they were born so that they could offer the wife's milk to the burghers who found it unthinkable that their own wives be allowed to breast-feed. This behavior enables us to understand how the mechanisms of a model that had originated in the dominant classes spread to other classes during the Fifteenth century.

One thing we need to ask is whether natural parents gave preference to certain of their children according to their birth order or their sex, and whether they agreed to a greater financial sacrifice for their breast feeding. An examination of all the nurses studied reveals that Florentines were more apt to keep their boys at home than their girls: for the whole of the period scrutinized (1300–1530), 23 percent of boys were entrusted for a relatively long period to a nurse who lived in the house, as opposed to only 12 percent of the girls.²⁴ Conversely, 68.5 percent of girls and 55 percent of boys were sent to the country. Florentine nurses who took the child into their own houses are in comparable proportion for the two sexes. In the aggregate, then, the parents' preferences, without being systematic, are beyond doubt: it was easier for them, generally speaking, to separate themselves from a female baby than from a little boy and future heir (table 7.2).

20. One exception occurred in the house of Manno di Cambio Petrucci (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 17, fol. 99v, January 1441), but the child brought along by the *balia* was six years old.

21. The *balie* of Matteo Strozzi (ASF, *Strozz.*, 5th ser., 10, fols. 19v–20, 1425–26; fol. 74, 1427) received advances on their wages to pay the nurses of their children. The same was true of the nurses of Niccolò Busini in 1395 (ASF, *Strozz.*, 4th ser., 563, fol. 6), of Recco Capponi in 1452 (ASF, *Conventi soppressi*, S. Piero a Monticelli, 153, fol. 14) and of Marco Parenti in 1450 (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 17 bis, fol. 18v). Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 200, states somewhat hastily that the nurses *in casa* had lost their own children.

22. This humble person lived off his salary as a servant for a Castellani in 1422; he was later employed by the Ufficio del Banco until 1428, then by the Arte di Calimala in 1428, finally by the Parte Guelfa from 1430 to 1457. His social position was the lowest of all the cases of *ricordanze* studied. (Archivio degli Innocenti, Florence, *Estranei*, 714, 1413–65).

23. See Appendix to this chapter. She received two *Fiorini* per months and gave one to her own nurse.

24. If we add to these figures the 9 percent of nurses (of boys) and 6 percent of nurses (of girls) who seem to have lived in Florence, either with the child's parents or with their own families, the percentages for urban nurses change from 36 to 45 percent for boys and

Table 7.2
CHOICE OF NURSE AND SEX OF THE CHILD

Nurse's residence	Males		Females		Males and Females	
Employer's household	53	22.8%	29	12.3%	82	17.6%
In Florence	30	12.9	31	13.2	61	13.0
Employer's household or in Florence	21	9.1	14	6.0	35	7.5
Outside Florence	128	55.2	161	68.5	289	61.9
Total	232	100.0%	235	100.0%	467	100.0%

If we look at just the twenty most numerous sibling groups for which we have data on the whole series of nurses, we arrive at the same conclusion. Approximately one family out of three shows a tendency to keep its male infants closer at hand, to keep them nursing longer, and pay for more expensive nurses for them, sending their girls, on the other hand, to some more distant farm at lower cost. Birth order also plays a role in these parental strategies: in one family out of four, the eldest child or children, both male and female, have a certain advantage over younger siblings and are more likely to remain at home.

It would be difficult to state that this was conscious policy on the part of parents—that they deliberately sent away females to the advantage of their brothers, or treated their younger children worse once the elder ones were raised. However, what the child represented and the place that its sex conferred on it in its family's expectations naturally affected the nature and the strength of the bonds that were formed between a child and its family at a very early age. These data seem to be strong confirmation of information taken from other sources that also points to an antifeminine tendency in Florentines' attitudes toward the child.²⁵

How was the ideal nurse to be found? In Florence, the father in search of a nurse alerted the entire network of his clients and friends. If he himself held lands in the countryside, he could count on his knowledge of the area and keep track of promising pregnancies or nursing mothers, and in like manner he would get his acquaintances to survey the villages and farms they were familiar with in order to locate potential nurses. Many writers of *ricordanze* mention the intermediary who had helped them to find the woman who eventually took in their infant: one such writer, one month before the expected birth, even notes several possible names, which share space in his notebook with the address of a weaver reputed to cure pox scars.²⁶ If all else failed, the father could turn to one of the "placers of

25. See Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 338–40; R. C. Trexler, "Infanticide in Florence; New Sources and First Results," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1973): 96–116.

26. Biblioteca Laurenziana. *Buonarrotti*, 27, no. 3 (ricordanze di Buonrotto di Lodovico

nurses and servant women," women who made a profession of finding an employer for other women newly arrived from their region, in exchange for just retribution of their services.²⁷

What was this ideal nurse like—not as doctors or moralists had described her from antiquity on,²⁸ but, in balder terms, as Florentine families dreamed of her? The first criterion for their choice was the abundance²⁹ and the "youth" of her milk. The nurse they dreamed of was a woman fresh from childbirth whose child had died. This was the opinion, about 1400, of Margherita Datini, the wife of the merchant of Prato, whose Florentine acquaintances often charged her with finding a nurse for them.³⁰ For her, a good nurse has the use of both eyes and her milk should have started within the last two months or less. Preferably, she will have lost her own baby, for "never shall I believe that when they have a one-year-old child of their own, they give not some [milk] to it." Margherita writes with disappointment that, alas, the child of one potential nurse recovered from his illness; and later, full of hope, she reports that she made another woman promise to come as soon as her child was buried. Thus anyone prospecting for a nurse was watching out for death as much as for the life to come. Florentines were insensitive to the moral handicap that weighed on their nurses—women who had had to give up raising their own children.

As a matter of fact, it is difficult to eliminate a more serious suspicion: did not a good number of Florentine fathers accept or even hasten the death of certain socially condemned infants (the children of slaves or of servant women) when they abandoned such infants in order to have the benefit of the mother's milk, and gave the milk to their own newborns or sold it at a good price to other fathers in search of a nurse? At the end of the fourteenth century and still during the fifteenth, domestic slaves were part of the belongings of most of the wealthy urban households.³¹ Their presence, however, was not constant. They were acquired, sold, or rented

27. ASF, *Acquisti e Doni*, 21, fols. 39v–40 (1526) (ricordanze di ser Piero Bonaccorsi). ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 10, fol. 77v (1422) (ricordi di Cambio di Tano Petrucci). *Ibid.*, 2d ser., 15, fol. 12 (1426). Archivio Innocenti, *Estranei*, 300 (1463) fols. 53v, 60v, 68 (ricordi di Battista Vernacci).

28. On this advice (which was always addressed to men), see Ross, "The Middle-Class Child," 185–86; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 555–56; the famous pages of L. B. Alberti, *I Libri della famiglia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1969), 102; Paolo da Certaldo, *Il libro di buoni costumi*, ed., A. Schiaffini (Florence, 1945), 233–34.

29. Cambio Petrucci congratulates himself that the nurse he had engaged for his child "did not take him away, for she did not want to stay the evening, whereas we wanted to see if she had milk. I am glad not to have given him to her. I think it is for the best" (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 10, fol. 10v, 12 March 1411).

30. I. Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini* (London, 1957), 200–201. See also Luca da Panzano, who rejoices in 1423 that his nurse had "milk fifteen days old" (ASF *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 9, fol. 22).

31. Domestic slaves appear in the 1427 *catasto* in 323 households in Tuscany, 261 of them in Florence. See Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 135ff. Origo, *The Merchant of Prato*, 192ff.; Origo, "The Domestic Enemy: the Eastern Slaves in Tuscany in the 14th and 15th Centuries," *Speculum* 30 (1955): 321–66.

out according to the household's needs. Two of the functions to which they were destined, in perfectly good conscience, were the satisfaction of the master's sexual needs, those of his sons, who married late, or of family friends, and the nursing of their newborn children.³² The pregnancy of a slave, of course, did have a drawback: there was obviously a risk involved in the deterioration of a valuable capital. But if childbirth went well, her child could be abandoned in all haste to one of the city homes,³³ and the slave, in two or three years of loyal service, would enable her owner to amortize his investment by sparing him the expense of a salaried nurse *in casa*. Or else she would earn a solid income for him when he rented her, *cum lacte*, to another household.³⁴ Even free servant women, whose condition was not profoundly different from that of the domestic slave women,³⁵ were perhaps not fully shielded from this sort of calculation, which was also, after all, just like the thinking of fathers who came to the city to find employment for their daughter, the mother of an illegitimate child to be brought up in some remote country area or destined to the foundling home.³⁶ The correlation that Peter Laslett has observed in various societies between the statistics for the abandonment of children and those for paid breast feeding is evident here.³⁷ Florence permits direct observation of the mechanism that makes these two phenomena work together.

This suggests that the first criteria in the choice of a nurse were not her moral qualities. Girls who had been seduced, "bestial" Tartar slave women, or mothers who had abandoned their children all made good nurses if their milk was "young" and abundant. In fact, the social identity of the nurse often seems of little importance to parents. Of the nurses

32. Thus in 1447 Giovanni Strozzini spent 47 *Fiorini* on a slave woman "with her fresh milk" to nurse his son Piero (ASF, *Strozz.*, 3d ser., 275, fols. 14v–16). On these sales of slave women *cum lacte*, see Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 203.

33. Trexler, "Foundlings," 266–68; Trexler, "Infanticide," 101–2. Nearly one-fourth of the admissions to San Gallo from 1430 to 1439 were the children of slave women, and more than one-third of those to the Innocenti in 1445. Pinto, "Personale, balie," 126, n. 55 also mentions seven children of slaves among the admissions to San Gallo around 1400.

34. On the rental of slaves *cum lacte* see Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 203–4. Giovanni Strozzini (see above, note 32) found a position as a nurse for a slave he had bought in 1447 and no longer needed, after which he took her back, then rented her out again as a servant. He did the same in 1453–54 with another slave woman bought in 1453 for 35 *Fiorini*, rented out, then resold, then taken back and placed as a servant with someone else (ASF, *Strozz.*, 3d ser., 275, fols. 16v, 19, 31v, 43, and 45v).

35. As Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 204–4 rightly emphasizes. Servant women were also sometimes rented out by their employer to a third party. See also the affair of the servant woman of one of the Baldovinetti, whose liaison with Jacopo Niccolini resulted 20 February 1474 in the birth of a boy, given to a country nurse through an intermediary and in secret, "to avoid scandal"—Jacopo had married in September 1473—and later abandoned to the Innocenti (ASF *Acquisti e Doni*, 190, 3, Memorie diverse Baldovinetti, fol. 28v).

36. This was perhaps the case of one Maddalena, daughter of an inhabitant of the Valdigueve who came to nurse one of Lorenzo Morelli's sons in 1477 and received an advance of 5 *lire* 15 *soldi* "to send to her father so he could pay the nurse of her son" (ASF, *Carte Gherardi*, Morelli, 137, fols. 150v–151).

37. According to the lectures given by P. Laslett at the Collège de France, June 1982.

employed, 22 percent seem to manage their own affairs and produce no male guarantors;³⁸ some of them come from far, having wandered along God knows what routes before they end up in a Florentine household. Their employer seldom seems particular about the legitimacy of the liaison that made their breasts swell (see table 7.3).

The great majority of women who offer their milk have an irreproachable conjugal identity, to be sure. One time out of four, however, the Florentine journals give only the anthroponymic mention of the *balio*, the husband of the *balia*, and simply omit the given name of the woman. Behind her rustic husband, the nurse remains a vague silhouette, and it is

Table 7.3
MATRIMONIAL STATUS OF NURSE BY NAME GIVEN

Nurse Name Given	Nurse First Name Known			Nurse First Name Unknown			Totals		
	a	b+c	a+b+c	a	b+c	a+b+c	a	b+c	a+b+c
N. wife of X	14	160	174	—	15	15	14	175	189
% of total	2.9	33.8	36.7	—	3.2	3.2	2.9	36.9	39.9
N. widow of X	—	10	10	—	—	—	—	10	10
% of total	—	2.1	2.1	—	—	—	—	2.1	2.1
N. daughter of X	1	2	3	—	—	—	1	2	3
% of total	0.2	0.4	0.6	—	—	—	0.2	0.4	0.6
N. <i>di</i> X (father? husband?)	10	84	94	—	—	—	10	84	94
% of total	2.1	17.7	19.8	—	—	—	2.1	17.7	19.8
N. or N. <i>da</i> (place of origin)	45	32	77	—	—	—	45	32	77
% of total	9.5	6.7	16.2	—	—	—	9.5	6.7	16.2
Slaves	8	—	8	—	—	—	8	—	8
% of total	1.7	—	1.7	—	—	—	1.7	—	1.7
Only man's name known	—	—	—	—	93	93	—	93	93
% of total	—	—	—	—	19.6	19.6	—	19.6	19.6
Total	78	288	366	—	108	108	78	396	474
%	16.5	60.7	77.2	—	22.8	22.8	16.5	83.5	100.0

a = servant woman in employer's household

b = living in Florence

c = living in the country

38. See table 7.3 for anthroponymic references. This point is developed further in C. Klapisch-Zuber, "Genitori naturali e genitori di latte nella Firenze del Quattrocento," *Quaderni storici* 44 (1980): 549–50.

to her husband that the father gives the infant to be raised—and breast-fed.³⁹ We can see here a first characteristic of the paradoxical "masculinity" of the function of the wet nurse. The nurse's personality mattered infinitely less to our Florentine burghers than all the good authors of books in their libraries told them that it should.

Wet Nursing: Men's Business

When the parents intervened in any of the arrangements for the *balatico*, the period of nursing, it was the father who acted. The agreement was usually reached by the natural father and the *balio* "alone,"⁴⁰ sometimes between the father and the couple of the nursing parents, and sometimes between the father and the nurse alone. Hardly ever is the mother mentioned,⁴¹ and it was generally the father who later discussed salary adjustments with the nurse *in casa*, who paid out advances or full pay to the nurse or to one of her kin, and, above all, who seemed to supervise all aspects of the progress of the breast feeding and to determine when it should end.

If they had chosen to take the nurse into their household, Florentines seem to have installed her in the upper portions of the house, near the kitchen, "in the servant women's room." In this way it was easier for them to check on the movements of the women of their domestic staff and to supervise their visitors. Indeed, keeping the nurse in the house offered the theoretical advantage—which was dearly paid—of avoiding a pregnancy that might interrupt breast feeding. There was, unfortunately, no total guarantee of this: the *balio* occasionally came to "visit" his wife, and the charms of an unmarried nurse might tempt other men. Virgilio Adriani learned this in 1470, to his loss, when a woman from Ragusa in service in his house for more than a year had to admit that she was two months

39. Certain texts push the masculinity of the formulas to absurd extremes. In 1468 Vergilio Adriani put a daughter out to nurse with the daughter-in-law of one of his sharecroppers, monna Cosa. Twenty months later he writes: "I agreed with Giovanni di Benozzo and his sons Benozzo [the husband] and Meo that they would no longer give the breast to Alessandra, I mean Monna Cosa" (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 21, fol. 59v). Luca da Panzano says, when he put an illegitimate son out to nurse: "I gave him to nurse 7 February 1423 to Nencio di Martino from Torri in the Valdipesa in exchange for 4 *lire* 5 *soldi* per month." The description of the trousseau follows, then the report of the child's death and the following clarification: "Given to Nencio di Nanni from Torri in Valdipesa whose milk was fifteen days old" (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 9, fols. 22–22v).

40. As one Bolognese father, ser Eliseo Mamelini, says frankly ("Cronaca e storia bolognese del primo Cinquecento nel Memoriale di ser E. M. [1480–1531]," ed. V. Montanari, *Quaderni culturali bolognesi*, 3, 9 [1979], fols. 10–11).

41. It seems exceptional for a mother to reach an agreement on a contract with the nurse couple (see the text cited in Appendix to this chapter and the *ricordi* of Marco Parenti, ASF *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 17 bis, fol. 28v, 1451).

pregnant.⁴² Such accidents were rare, however, and it is easy to see why nurses taken into the household could breast-feed for much longer periods than women who stayed with their husbands.⁴³

When the child was carried away from the paternal house in the arms of his new mother or “in a basket on the donkey,” guided by the *balio* or by a servant,⁴⁴ the family’s control over what subsequently happened was relaxed, except when nursing parents were also family sharecroppers. Although one author advises families, around 1370, to “visit [children put out to nurse] often, so as to see how they are, and if they are not well, to change them on the spot to another nurse, without leaving them there for monetary reasons,”⁴⁵ the father in question does not seem to have made the trip for the express purpose of checking on the progress of his child. The nursing couple occasionally brought the child to Florence “to show it.” But news, good and bad, did circulate, above all by means of the bailiffs and servants who were in constant movement back and forth from the Florentine’s city residence to his country holdings and from farm to farm. They alerted the Florentine father in case of need, as when the nurse failed in her duties or the child fell sick.

Broken Contracts

If the nurse became pregnant or if the child was not progressing properly, the father had to look for another nurse, breaking the contract that bound him to the nursing parents. It was his task to recognize changes in the quality of the milk, to force the admission of a hidden pregnancy, and to take necessary decisions without delay.

The nurse’s contract often specified that the salary was due only “as long as the *balia* furnishes good and healthy milk” and that “if she becomes pregnant or loses her milk she must respect all of the parents’ rights, as custom reasonably demands.”⁴⁶ As soon as she herself became aware of her condition, an honest nurse who became pregnant was expected to bring the child back to its parents.⁴⁷ The *ricordanze* show that more often

42. ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 21, fols. 3 and 70. The same sense of honor being held up to ridicule by the behavior of a servant woman can be found in G. Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study* (Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 218, document 105.

43. The average is eighteen months, as against ten months for the total group of nurses.

44. Tribaldo dei Rossi, BNF, 2, 2, 357, fol. 173v (1500).

45. Paolo da Certaldo, *Il libro di buoni costumi*, 233.

46. Francesco di Matteo Castellani, ASF, *Conventi soppressi*, 90, 84, no. 2, fols. 34 and 45 (1448). None of the agreements mentioned in the *ricordanze* states that it was drawn up before a notary, contrary to the affirmation in J. Heers, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 201 for Genoa (citing, inappropriately, Ross, “The Middle-Class Child,” 190).

47. And even before, if we can believe Francesco da Barberino, who authorizes nurses to return to relations with their husbands on condition that they take the infant back to his parents immediately and look for another nurse for him (*Del reggimento*, 192).

than not she did so. Out of thirty pregnancies mentioned in our sampling that necessitated the search for a new nurse or the weaning of the infant, twenty-two provoked no recriminations on the part of the parents. The pregnancy had been declared in good faith, and the *balii*, judging that the child was ready, sometimes took this opportunity to wean it.⁴⁸ In eight cases, however, the suspicions expressed by the father of the child show that he was not fooled by their allegations, and he accuses them of having given the child bad milk longer than they say.⁴⁹ In that event, the father keeps track of the date at which the nurse gives birth in order to deduct from the sum owed her payment for the months during which she was pregnant but continued to nurse.⁵⁰

In all, 36 percent of the changes of nurse for which reasons are given are justified by the nurse’s pregnancy, and 15 percent by her sickness. Milk that gave out or that was “too old” are the cause of another 16 percent of the broken contracts. One time out of ten, the accusation of having cared poorly for the child, of having behaved badly, of being addicted to drink is the pretext the father gives for withdrawing his baby, and in another 10 percent of the cases the child is taken from the wet nurse because the child is sick (table 7.4).

These momentary obstacles resulted in some infants being tossed from nurse to nurse. Children remained only ten months, on the average, with the same nurse. Out of 100 infants, we can estimate that 33 went on to a second nurse, 8 to a third, 3 to a fourth, and nearly 2 to a fifth. This mobility is particularly marked in the fourteenth century but becomes noticeably attenuated in the fifteenth century and even more so after 1500 (table 7.5). Is this because parents realized that a degree of stability is more favorable to the development of a child? Did they choose the nurse with more care? Were they, on the other hand, less attentive to the baby’s well-being or more inclined to leave him in the hands of a mediocre nurse? We would do well to avoid premature judgments.

48. As for a child of V. Adriani, ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 21, fol. 70 (1471).

49. “She gave him ‘sullied’ milk, for she was long pregnant, as we shall see. . . . She has been paid, but I got bad merchandise for it since she was pregnant” (Cipriano Guiducci, ASF, *Acquisti e Doni*, 83, Prov. ign., 2, fol. 52, 13 May 1429). “She became pregnant before the time foreseen and gave a ‘pregnant’ milk to the child for more than a month” (Matteo Strozzii, ASF, *Strozz.*, 5th ser., 11, fols. 58–59, March 1428). “It is true that it seems to me that she has given him ‘pregnant’ milk” (Antonio Rustichi, ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 11, fol. 48, 1428). “As she was pregnant, so it seems, by several months,” the nurse was to be paid at the rate of 3 *lire* per month “for the time during which she was not pregnant” (Tribaldo dei Rossi, BNF, 2, 2, 357, fol. 111, 1494).

50. See the reactions of Antonio Rustichi when he thought that his *balii* “had given him bad services”; he writes, 18 January 1427: “She gave ‘pregnant’ milk to my daughter for a month and a half, and [the baby] nearly died of it; I do not want to pay her. We will verify carefully when the nurse comes to term” (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., A11, fol. 42). The same reactions can be seen in Neri di Bicci, *Le ricordanze, 1453–1475*, ed. B. Santi (Pisa, 1976), 271–72, year 1466). See also above, note 49.

Table 7.4

CAUSES FOR TERMINATION OF CONTRACT FOR WET NURSING

<i>A. Change of nurse</i>				
Without explicit reason	88	24.7%	56.1%	
Because of weaning	3	0.8	1.9	4.4%
Lack of milk, "old" milk	11	3.1	7.0	15.9
Nurse's pregnancy	25	7.0	15.9	36.2
Nurse's illness	10	2.8	6.4	14.5
Bad care, bad conduct of nurse	7	2.0	4.5	10.1
Illness of the child	7	2.0	4.5	10.1
Nursing couple's refusal to continue	3	0.8	1.9	4.4
Child sent to foundling home	1	0.3	0.6	1.4
Death of an older sibling	1	0.3	0.6	1.4
Return to the mother (for breast feeding?)	1	0.3	0.6	1.4
	157	44.1%	100.0%	100.0%
<i>B. Definitive end of breast feeding</i>				
Weaning and return to parental household	126	35.4%	92.0%	
Weaning justified by:				
birth of a younger sibling	5	1.4	3.7	
death of the nurse	1	0.3	0.7	
nurse's pregnancy	5	1.4	3.7	
Death of the child				
by sickness, accident, or without given reason	53	14.9%	85.5%	
by suffocation	9	2.5	14.5	
	62	17.4%	100.0%	
Total explained terminations of contract	356	100.0%		
	(77.1%)			
<i>C. Outcome or conditions of the ending of breast feeding unknown or unclear</i>				
	106			
	(22.9%)			
General Total	462			
	(100.0%)			

When the Child Dies

A Florentine could fear the worst if the *balio* came knocking at his door. In 17.4 percent of the cases, putting a child out to nurse ended in the death of the child. In 85 percent of these cases, "sickness" carried him off; in the other cases the nursing parents had to confess that they caused his death directly and that they "suffocated" him in their sleep.⁵¹ According to the fathers of the children, only once in the nine cases studied here, in

51. Or 62 out of the 356 *baliatrici* the outcome of which is known. On the smothering of children during the Middle Ages, see Trexler, "Infanticide," and the bibliography cited

Table 7.5

DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDREN BY NUMBER OF THEIR NURSES

	Nurse						Total number of nurses
	1st	2d	3d	4th	5th	6th	
<i>Males</i>							
1300–1399	27 (100)	17 (63)	4 (15)	1 (4)	1 (4)	1 (4)	51
1400–1449	60 (100)	14 (23)	5 (8)	3 (5)	1 (2)	—	83
1450–1499	48 (100)	15 (31)	3 (6)	—	—	—	66
1500–1530	24 (100)	7 (29)	1 (4)	—	—	—	32
1300–1530	159 (100)	53 (33)	13 (8)	4 (3)	2 (1)	1 (0.6)	232
<i>Females</i>							
1300–1399	24 (100)	10 (42)	3 (12)	2 (8)	1 (4)	—	40
1400–1449	58 (100)	16 (28)	2 (4)	1 (2)	—	—	77
1450–1499	58 (100)	19 (33)	5 (9)	3 (5)	2 (3)	—	87
1500–1530	19 (100)	6 (32)	1 (5)	—	—	—	26
1300–1530	159 (100)	51 (32)	11 (7)	6 (4)	3 (2)	—	230
<i>Both Sexes</i>							
1300–1399	51 (100)	27 (53)	7 (14)	3 (6)	2 (4)	1 (2)	91
1400–1449	118 (100)	30 (25)	7 (6)	4 (3)	1 (1)	—	160
1450–1499	106 (100)	34 (32)	8 (8)	3 (3)	2 (2)	—	153
1500–1530	43 (100)	13 (30)	2 (5)	—	—	—	58
1300–1530	318 (100)	104 (33)	24 (8)	10 (3)	5 (2)	1 (0.3)	462

The figures in parentheses give the number of children, on a basis of 100 children, who had a second, third nurse, etc. during each period.

which the nurse's husband was formally accused of rolling over on the baby in his sleep, was the *balio* held responsible for the accident. In all the other cases, it was the nurse who was blamed for her negligence.⁵²

Several aspects of these smotherings of children in Tuscany should be noted. In the first place, the father never calls on any justice other than

there. R. C. Trexler, *Synodal Law in Florence and Fiesole, 1306–1518* (Vatican City, 1971), 64 (1327), 126–27 (1517) for the ecclesiastical texts concerning this problem.

52. Biagio Buonaccorsi lost two children by suffocation. The second daughter of his second marriage, at the age of eight days, in 1517, "having been suffocated by this Bernardo" (the *balio*), and the first son of his fourth marriage in 1524, at less than one month: "He was suffocated by the nurse as she was giving him the breast" (BNF, *Panciatichi*, 101, fols. 31 and 36). A *balio* of Andrea Minerbetti refused to be paid for the eight months due him after the baby girl entrusted to him was *affoghata* by his wife (Biblioteca Laurenziana, *Acquisti*, 229. 2, fol. 95v. 1515).

the divine. Even when he suspects that the accident could have been avoided, he seems resigned, and he expresses no doubt that the act was unintentional.⁵³ A deliberate suffocation would be difficult to explain, what is more, since nurses were paid at regular intervals. (This was not true of nurses employed by the foundling homes, which were not always able to pay what they owed the nurses, nor among the poor women in the country, overburdened with children.)⁵⁴

Does this mean that Florentines made no effort to prevent the 15 percent of infant deaths that occurred before the age of six months? We should note that it seemed normal to all, in the fourteenth century, that the child should sleep at his nurse's side: Donato Velluti states, around 1368, that his eldest son, who was born in 1342, made all of the nurses with whom he slept fall ill.⁵⁵ This accident, then, could take place even under the gaze of the parents, under their own roof.⁵⁶ It is interesting that children who were *affogati*, *schiacciati*, or *stretti* (smothered, crushed, squeezed) in our sampling appear explicitly in the family journals only in the fifteenth century, and that they become more frequent at the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁵⁷ Some degree of sensitization to this avoidable cause of infant mortality came from the Church, which specifically *named* it a crime and insistently called the attention of parents and nurses to their responsibility for it.⁵⁸

53. The only somewhat lively reproach comes in 1506 from Carlo di Niccolò Strozzi: "May God forgive her if she deserves it!" (ASF, *Strozz.*, 4th ser., 75, fol. 138). Battista Vernacci strikes out the word *disavedutamente* (negligently), which he had first written concerning his nurse's suffocation of one of his children (Innocenti, *Estranei*, 300, fol. 23v, 1461).

54. Trexler, "Infanticide," 108–10.

55. D. Velluti, *Cronica domestica*, ed. I. Del Lungo and G. Volpi (Florence, 1914), 310–11.

56. One example is in the *ricordanze* of Terrino di Niccolò Manovelli (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 14, fol. 19, 22 November, 1433). A temporary nurse with the best of intentions finds the child she had charitably taken on for a few days, "until his mother had milk," dead in her bed beside her, killed *disavedutamente* (by negligence) (*Ricordanze di Bartolomeo Masi calderai fiorentino dal 1478 al 1526*, ed. G. O. Corazzini [Florence, 1906], 140). Filippo Strozzi has nurses *in casa*, one of whom suffocates his daughter Lionora "in the bed" in 1474 (ASF, *Strozz.*, 5th ser., 22, fol. 90, 1474).

57. The dates of the nine cases of suffocation in our group of infants put out to nurse are: 1423, 1433, 1461, 1473, 1476, 1506, 1514, 1517, 1524. See Trexler, "Infanticide," on the increase in such cases in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Other cases, all from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, are known by various texts or *ricordanze* that are not part of the corpus analyzed here. Thus Benvenuto Cellini tells in his *Vita* (Rizzoli edition, 343–44), vol. 2, chap. 66, how the nurse of his illegitimate son, the wife of one of his sharecroppers and his *comare* (godmother of his child) suffocated the child three days after he had been to see him. Giovanni Morelli (*Ricordi*, 452) expresses the suspicion that his nephew had been suffocated in 1405. Matteo di Giovanni Corsini accuses the nurse of his son Orlando of having "killed" him in 1457. (*Libro di ricordanze dei Corsini (1362–1457)*, ed. A. Petrucci, [Rome, 1965], 147).

58. See Trexler, *Synodal Law* and "Infanticide." As early as the first half of the fourteenth century, however, Francesco da Barberino, citing Soranus, warns of the danger (*Del reggimento* 195). A religious painting of the Judgment of Solomon could be taken as an object lesson to warn mothers not to keep their child in bed with her while nursing. See Diane

Along with this increased consciousness came a search for ways to remedy the problem by avoiding suffocation, even when a child was warmly tucked in next to his nurse. Many of the *ricordanze* list the trousseau that accompanied the baby.⁵⁹ Out of twenty-five families, thirteen send a cradle, which in ten instances was equipped with a frame of arched ribs to prevent the covers from stifling the baby and to keep him from rolling out of the cradle if it were rocked too energetically.⁶⁰ Were these frames also supposed to protect the child from being smothered? If so, we would have to suppose that the nurse placed all this equipment in her own bed. In any event, the frame evidently did not prevent all accidents, and in at least two of the cases of suffocation studied here the child's trousseau included a cradle with a frame.⁶¹ Thus, either the nurse took the baby in with her at night, removing him from his protective frame, or the frame was insufficient protection against the couple's heavy sleep. "Little boxes to put in the bed," more specifically aimed at avoiding the suffocation of the child, are mentioned in two of the trousseau lists. These may have brought a better answer to the problem at a time when the Church's campaign against what it characterized as a crime was in full swing.⁶²

There were other ways to avoid having a small, livid body sent home that were just as important in the parent's eyes. The babies left home covered with talismans: little crosses or "Agnusdei," pious medals,⁶³ but also the coral branch or coral bouquet that were always present in a baby's trousseau, or the "wolf's teeth set in silver" that served both as a good luck charm and a teething toy.⁶⁴ This arsenal of more or less magical objects

Cole Ahl, "Renaissance Birth Salvagers and the Richmond 'Judgment of Solomon,'" *Studies in Iconography* 7–8 (1981–82): 157–74.

59. The infant's trousseau is discussed in Ross, "The Middle-Class Child," 191.

60. These bent wood frames were called variously *archetto*, *arcuccio*, *arcioni*. See the "zana nuova con uno arcione da ongni testa da chullare" (new, rocking basketware cradle with a frame at each end) that figures, with mattress and blankets, in the trousseau of one of Luca da Panzano's children in 1423 (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 9, fol. 22). The oldest example of a cradle that I have found dates from 1403 (Ricordi di Rossello d'Ubertino Strozzi, ASF, *Strozz.*, 3d ser., 271, fol. 20v). Trexler, "Infanticide," 116, n. 66 cites a later depiction of the frame.

61. Andrea Minerbetti (see above note 52 and also Biblioteca Laurenziana, *Acquisti*, 229, 2, fol. 43v) and Antonio Rustichi (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 11, fol. 33v, 1423).

62. "Una chassetta da tenere nel letto" (a box to keep in bed) (*Ricordi C di Filippo di Neri Rinuccini*, Archivio Corsini, fol. 17v, 1509); "Una cassetta" (a box) (Ricordi di ser Piero Bonaccorsi, ASF, *Acquisti e Doni*, 18, 2d notebook, fol. 50, 1509).

63. These are the *brevi di tenere a collo* (amulets, charms to wear around the neck) that appear so often in an infant's trousseau (see, for example, Filippo di Neri Rinuccini, as cited in the previous note).

64. Dog teeth or wolf teeth figure in the trousseau of Rossello Strozzi in 1404 (see above, note 60), Antonio Rustichi, Filippo di Neri Rinuccini, and Luca da Panzano. The *Madonna della Pergola*, a painting by Bernardino di Antonio Detti (1498–1554), now in the collection of the Museo Civico di Pistoia, shows a small John the Baptist offering the infant Jesus a wolf's tooth, a coral branch, a cross, and a small round reliquary with the inscription "Ecce Agnus Dei" (my thanks to Caroline Elam for calling this curious painting to my attention).



Plate 7.1 Bernardino di Antonio Detti, called del Signoraccio, *Madonna della Pergola* (talisman offered the infant Jesus by John the Baptist). Museo Civico, Pistoia. (Photo Caroline Elam).

was supposed to fend off evil, particularly the *malocchio*, the evil eye, to which nurses attributed their failures and which they conjured away by carrying the infant promptly to the village healing women.⁶⁵ This was how the city infant was armed to confront life.

65. See the *Canti Carnascialeschi*, no. 29 (pp. 39–49). See chap. 5 above, “Childhood in Tuscany,” n. 25.

We can estimate the infant mortality rate for children put out to nurse at 17.9 percent. It was notably higher for boys than for girls.⁶⁶ These rates need to be checked against larger population samplings; furthermore, they are probably understated, since they do not include mortality during the first days or the first weeks of life, before the child left with his nurse. To be sure, the nurse who took the child to her house did so, in the majority of cases, during the first two weeks of his life,⁶⁷ but more than a negligible proportion of these departures took place in the succeeding weeks, as table 7.6 shows. This preliminary estimate of infant mortality will have to be reconsidered, then, on the basis of all children from birth on—which the *ricordanze* will indeed allow us to do.

It seems to me important to stress, even before these figures can be ascertained more accurately, that breast feeding, albeit for money, gave these children of Florentine merchants and middle-class families a decent chance of survival—a chance that was in any event superior, in ordinary times, to those of abandoned children. Richard C. Trexler has calculated an infant mortality rate of 26.6 percent in the hospice of the Innocenti in Florence for the years 1445–47, which were relatively good years from the point of view of the home’s directors. In the following years, however, the combination of famine, epidemics, and military operations made the rate rise to 50.6 percent. The average for the period 1445–51, given these conditions, can be established at 40.3 percent.⁶⁸ Giuliano Pinto, who has studied the mortality rate of children in the hospital of San Gallo during the period 1395–1406, which included a violent wave of the plague in 1399–1400, confirms these frightening statistics, setting the death rate for abandoned children at 50 percent.⁶⁹ Obviously, it remains to be seen whether the estimate based on the *ricordanze* and the one for foundling mortality represent the outside limits of average infant mortality—that of the population as a whole. Between these two extremes—the group of tiny privileged creatures of the best families and the miserable children rejected by their families, both of which we know thanks to meticulous accounting of their breast feeding—we are forced to admit that we know practically nothing about the conditions in which the offspring of the rural and popular masses survived their first year of life.

66. Out of 283 children (144 boys and 139 girls) put out to nurse soon after their birth and whom we can trace through their first year of life, 48 died before their first birthday (26 boys and 22 girls, respectively, or a rate of 18.1 percent for boys and 15.8 percent for girls).

67. And often very soon after their birth. Ser Piero Bonaccorsi had a fifth son 24 April 1515; the 25th “the nurse and her husband came to my house,” and 1 June the *balatico* officially began and the child left his family (ASF, *Acquisti e Doni*, 19, fol. 36v).

68. Trexler, “Foundlings,” 275.

69. Pinto, “Personale, balie,” 127: out of 168 infants (62 boys, 106 girls), the mortality rate is 20 percent for the first month. The other deaths were during the next eleven months.

Table 7.6
LENGTH OF TIME BETWEEN BIRTH AND NURSE'S TAKING CHARGE OF CHILD

Period	1st		2d		3d-5th		6th-14th		15th-30th		Total		Following months		Total
	5	6	15.9	4	14	17	22	20.3	14	4	46	3	3d-6th	7th-12th	
1320-1429	5	6	15.9	4	14	17	22	20.3	14	4	46	3	3	1	69
%															100.0
1430-1469	3	4	13.7	6	21	18	18	7.8	8	8	60	—	—	—	60
%															100.0
1470-1530	7	6	21.7	6	21	18	18	13.3	13.3	8	60	—	—	—	60
%															100.0
1320-1530	15	16	17.2	16	53	58	58	26	26	14.5	167	7	4	2	180
%															100.0

What did these children die of when "sickness" carried them off? Unfortunately, the father's diagnoses are infrequent and, naturally, imprecise.⁷⁰ Certain characteristics of death by illness can be seen, however, in the seasonal distribution of deaths. One time out of six, Florentine babies died in August.⁷¹ The next most deadly months were July, November, and March, followed by April and, farther down the list, June, then September, October, and February. January, December, and May—a month that smiled at infants as at lovers—closed the list. If we compare this distribution to that of deaths in the population as a whole (excluding deaths from the plague), we can see that Florentine infants had less resistance to the rainy months of spring and autumn than their elders.⁷² Children under five months old were hardest hit in summer and autumn, while spring carried off more of the newborn and infants over five months of age. Here also, the data permit only a brief exploration of an almost unknown area.⁷³

Weaning

With weaning, the child arrived at an important moment in his short life. If he overcame its dangers, weaning soon brought him separation from the woman who had nourished him up to that point if he had been taken outside the home, and reunion with his family. Until recently little has been known of this event except what a very few authors had to say about the subject.⁷⁴ Fortunately, if we take the *ricordanze* as a serial source, they tell us much about both the moment of weaning and the conditions under which it was carried out.

Let me once again stress the place that men—the father and the *balio*—occupied in this decision. Three-quarters of the authors of *ricordanze* pres-

70. Illnesses that are explained in some detail are a *male di chanhero e bole nela bocha* (cankers and boils in the mouth) (1444), *rosolie* (German measles) (1497), *febbre e lattime* (fever and milk crust), a *mal di tossa* (coughing illness), a *certo zitomore saldo* (a bad case of milk fever) in 1509, and an *uscita ghrande* (serious diarrhea) in 1507.

71. August accounted for 16.7 percent of infant deaths. The large number of summer illnesses (plague excluded) suggests intestinal disorders and diarrhea. The same conclusions are suggested in J.-L. Biget and J. Tricard, "Livres de raison et démographie familiale en Limousin au XV^e siècle," *Annales de démographie historique* (1981): 345-46.

72. The comparison can be made using the data from table 76 in Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 465, and subtracting deaths due to plague during the years 1424-30. These data concern all ages and can be compared with the seasonal distribution of deaths of children less than two years old in our sampling: January: 5.0% of infant deaths, 5.2% of all deaths; February: 6.7% and 4.4%, respectively; March: 11.7% and 5.7%; April: 10.0% and 5.7%; May: 1.7% and 7.2%; June: 8.3% and 8.9%; July: 11.7% and 14.1%; August: 16.7% and 17.9%; September: 6.7% and 12.7%; October: 6.7% and 7.3%; November: 11.7% and 5.7%; December: 3.3% and 5.2%.

73. See Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 191-93, 456-66.

74. Ross, "The Middle-Class Child," 195; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 559-60. Cherubini, "Un notaio senese," in *Signori, contadini, borghesi*, 411.

ent themselves as responsible for, or at least the principal partner in, the decision to wean the child.⁷⁵ Never does the *balia*—even less the mother—appear as an expert in this affair.

According to table 7.4, deaths in category B accounted for 31.2 percent of the definitive terminations of breast feeding contracts. But some of the children from category C, whose destiny is unknown or unclear, should probably be added to the group of children for whom we know the date of weaning.⁷⁶ If we correct the figures in this manner, the death rate drops to 25.6 percent and, conversely, successful weanings rise from 68.8 percent to 74.4 percent. Thus, three out of four of the children given over to a nurse were brought back, weaned, to their parents.

A more restricted sampling of 131 well-documented contracts that ran to term⁷⁷ enables us to calculate the age at which weaning took place. An even more restricted group of 53 contracts specify the exact modalities of the weaning, permitting us to ascertain whether its beginning coincides with the child's return home. As might be expected, the child's age at the start of weaning is markedly younger than the age at which he is returned to his parents. Weanings in this well-documented group begin on the average at about 18.7 months, while the children return definitively to the family at 20.4 months. If these ages do not coincide, it is because in one-third of the cases the child is left with the nurse who breast fed him, or is transferred to another woman, perhaps one who specialized in weaning. When this happened, he remained there for a transitional period, during which the nurse was paid less and the child was gradually shifted to a more solid diet. This period could last one or two months or could continue for up to six months. When it went beyond this time, it is clear that the nurse had become guardian and governess, and she was paid not even half as much for this work and for the more varied diet that she now gave the child.⁷⁸

75. One time out of three the first person plural used by the father seems to refer to the natural parents or the nursing parents, but in nearly 30 percent of the cases, the decision seems to have been taken by the *balio*, and the rest of the time the father and family head takes exclusive responsibility: "I have weaned Vettorino, and Monna Apollonia, his nurse, has left for home with her husband," Bonaccorso di Vettorino Ghiberti says in 1503 (Archivio Innocenti, *Estranei*, 546, fol. 74); and, in 1419, Antonio Rustichi writes: "I have weaned the said Lionardo and I have given the nurse Stefano in exchange" (ASF, *Strozzi*, 2d ser., 11, fol. 11).

76. We can distinguish among them some children for whose breast feeding we have some subsequent information (the payment of the nurse, for example) or about whom we have biographical data that allow us to conclude that this part of their early childhood had a happy ending.

77. Thus they make up 41 percent of the 318 infants under examination. We know the precise date of their birth and that of their definitive return to the parents' household.

78. The cut in salary that often strikes a nurse after fifteen or eighteen months of service indicates either lower pay for a milk judged to be "old" or a change in the child's diet that involves less milk. It is rare that these cuts in salary are noted in the original contract. Most of the adjustments observed occur in connection with the weaning of the child.

Florentines clearly agreed to and paid for this supplementary period of one to six months, which permitted unhurried weaning,⁷⁹ more readily for their sons than for their daughters. Although we have seen that, for both sexes, two-thirds of the children appear to have been weaned abruptly, without transition,⁸⁰ the practice was accentuated for females, 74 percent of whom (as opposed to 59 percent of their brothers) were taken from the breast and from the nurse with no interim step. Generally speaking, a girl returned home earlier than her brother. In the cases for which we know the exact date at which weaning began, the same gap of about a month and a half attests that a girl's stay with a nurse—an index to the real length of the breast-feeding period, which is somewhat exaggerated but nevertheless dependable—was shorter than a boy's (18 months and 19.4 months, respectively; see table 7.7).

I know of no contemporary medical or pedagogical text that puts forth scientific arguments authorizing parents to cut short the breast feeding of their daughters for constitutional reasons.⁸¹ The statutes of the city also made no difference between the sexes. As late as 1415, probably repeating older dispositions, they prescribed the legal length of the contract for a

Table 7.7
DURATION OF BREAST FEEDING BY SEX

	1340–1399	1400–1469	1470–1530	Total 1340–1530
Males				
number	13	35	19	67
age*	23.2	21.6	18.5	21.0
Females				
number	12	39	13	64
age*	20.8	20.4	16.5	19.6
Both sexes				
number	25	74	32	131
age*	22.0	21.0	17.7	20.4

*Child's age in months at the time of his return from the nurse or of the nurse's departure from the household.

79. See Paolo da Certaldo, *Il libro di buoni costumi*, 126, which advises (around 1370) "not to give anything but the breast during the first year; you will then begin to give, aside from the breast, other things to eat, little by little." This is confirmed in Francesco da Barberino, *Del reggimento*, 192. See Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 560.

80. We can see evidence of this brutality in formulas like Francesco di Giovanni di Durante's in 1343: "che si spodò questo di" (who was weaned this day) (BNF, 2, 3, 280, fol. 18).

81. For older girls, Paolo da Certaldo, *Il Libro di buoni costumi*, 126–27, recommends a diet that is simply sufficient, whereas the diet for boys should be richer and more varied. But he is not speaking of nursing infants, in contrast to the statements that Joubert (see below, note 94) puts in the mouths of the women of Languedoc.

wet nurse to be thirty months, a duration only the parents were authorized to cut short.⁸² The distribution of ages at the termination of the nursing period shows that they did not hesitate to do so (table 7.8). What is more, parents adapted legal or medical recommendations to the sex of the child. Parents continued to enjoy a good deal of autonomy in their decisions, and this autonomy probably increased during the period studied. Table 7.7 summarizes children's ages at the moment of their separation from the nurse over a period of two centuries around 1500, weaning generally took place, a good four months earlier than a century before. The shortening of the nursing period affects boys more than girls, thus reducing slightly the gap between boys' and girls' length of stay.

These figures speak of a phenomenon that continued from previous times, and which unfortunately we can perceive only through the normative texts. Statutes in Tuscany of the end of the thirteenth century recommend a three-year period for putting children out to nurse and, as we have seen, these norms were repeated well into the fifteenth century, whereas pedagogues or doctors attest, beginning in the fourteenth century, that the duration of the nursing period was really shorter.⁸³ This shorter duration may perhaps be the price paid for a certain popularization of the practice—whether this be a true popularization or the effect of better documentation, as we have pointed out. In any event, the latest dates of weaning can be found in the fifteenth century among the richest families.⁸⁴

Unforeseen circumstances sometimes hastened the moment of weaning,⁸⁵ but, generally speaking, the father decided the matter, taking into account the state of the child and that of his own finances. The first of

82. *Statuta*, bk. 4, sec. 148 (2:269). On the duration of breast feeding see J.-L. Flandrin, "L'attitude à l'égard du petit enfant et les conduites sexuelles dans la civilisation occidentale: Structures anciennes et évolution," *Annales de démographie historique* 1973: 143–210, esp. 179–81. There are in fact few instances in the *ricordanze* of contracts broken by the nursing couple. We can even find *balii* who did not want to give back or wean the child (*Libro A di richordi, 1459–1498* of Antonio Rospigliosi, ed. G. C. Rospigliosi [Pisa, 1909], 47–48 for the year 1481).

83. *Statutum potestatis comunis Pistorii anni 1296*, ed. L. Zdekauer (Milan, 1888), and Francesco da Barberino, *Del reggimento*, 192, indicate a duration of two years. The rental of slave women *cum lacte* was set at a period of three years (Heer, *Esclaves et domestiques*, 203). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the recommended duration was still three years, although practice did not respect this norm (Flandrin, "L'attitude à l'égard du petit enfant," 180).

84. One member of the great Bardi lineage left his children out to nurse between 27 and 32 months (Ilarione di Lipaccio Bardi, ASF, *Conventi soppressi*, 79, 119, passim, 1420–55), while Filippo Strozzi's brother-in-law, Marco Parenti, went as far as 24 months (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 17 bis, passim, 1447–94), and the needier Manno Petrucci took his children back from their nurses at about 15–17 months (ASF, *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 17, passim., 1441–50).

85. See table 7.4: out of 137 contracts terminated because of weaning, 5 were linked to the birth of a younger child whom the nurse was asked to take on, 7 to the nurse's pregnancy, one to her death. The insecurity of the countryside also prompted fathers to call their infants home (Tribaldo dei Rossi, BNF, 2, 2, 357, fol. 112, 1494).

Table 7.8
AGE DISTRIBUTION AT TERMINATION OF BREAST FEEDING

	12–19 months	20–24 months	25–32 months	Total	Average Age	Median Age
Males						
1300–1399	4	4	5	13	23.2	23
1400–1469		17	6	35	21.6	22
1470–1530	13	6	0	19	18.5	18
<u>1300–1530</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>20.4</u>	<u>20</u>
Females						
1300–1399	7	3	2	12	20.8	18
1400–1469	15	16	8	39	20.4	21
1470–1530	10	2	1	13	16.5	16
<u>1300–1530</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>19.6</u>	<u>17</u>
Both sexes						
1300–1399	11 (44.0%)	7 (28.0%)	7 (28.0%)	25 (100%)	22.0	22
1400–1469	27 (36.5%)	33 (44.6%)	14 (18.9%)	74 (100%)	21.0	21
1470–1530	23 (71.9%)	8 (25.0%)	1 (3.1%)	32 (100%)	17.7	17
<u>1300–1530</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>131</u>	<u>20.4</u>	<u>20</u>

these criteria is rarely expressed as explicitly as in one rather late text (1534), in which a father deplors the June departure of the nurse, “when she had promised us to remain with us until September, so that we could avoid having Cecchina weaned during the great heat and before she has all her teeth.”⁸⁶ Financial considerations are usually more evident. The study of twenty well documented sibling groups has already shown us that subsequent children generally enjoyed shorter stays, with more distant nurses, and the sum involved was less than for their elders. There is one Tribaldo dei Rossi, for example, member of an ancient lineage that had fallen on evil days around 1500, who complains that his poverty forces him to break off the breast feeding of his last daughter, Maddalena, at one year old, whereas her older siblings had returned home between 17 and 20 months.⁸⁷ Poor Maddalena here suffers the accumulated disadvantages of her birth order and her sex. When the household had its fill of children, and when, what is more, the child was a girl, the financial burden represented by the nurse’s wages became unbearable. So, contrary to general usage, Maddalena was weaned at one year.

For most children, however, weaning around 19 or 20 months—a late weaning—offered them a good chance of coming through this trial successfully. Weaning seems responsible for only a very small number of deaths, and they occurred as weaning was started.⁸⁸ Tiny Florentines thus found compensation for the handicap they suffered in their start in life, when maternal milk with its precious antibodies was refused them, in a breast feeding that was fairly prolonged and a weaning gradual enough to enable them to shift easily to a more solid diet, whether they were armed with “all their teeth” or just with a wolf’s tooth.

The mother also derived some benefits from putting her children out to nurse. In a society in which daughters were married before they were 18 years of age⁸⁹ and in which fertility was highly valued, it may have been easier for a woman to agree to more closely spaced childbirths than to the demands of incessant breast feeding. In 701 births, occurring in 115 couples, the intergenetic interval was 20.8 months, and the median falls to 17.8 months. Between two childbirths, the Florentine woman of these well-off circles could hope for a real respite, freed of all obligation to breast-feed, and lasting from 8 to 12 months, according to the length of time the child was put out to nurse. If she breast-fed her child, on the other hand, she would have a very good chance of doing so until the next pregnancy, thus devoting all of her energies to the two female “functions”

of procreation and suckling. The engagement of a wet nurse liberated her from the second of these burdens, and although it contributed to the closer spacing of the births of her children, it at least permitted her to enjoy complete liberty during half of her life as a fertile woman. It seems more than likely that Florentine women were sensitive to such advantages and therefore all the more willing to consent to separation from their children. Paid breast feeding was a distinctive sign of the urban elites; it flattered the vanity of the husbands, to be sure, but it also enhanced the woman’s status as a fertile and prolific wife.

Blood and Milk

From the beginning of the contract to its end, the father of the child presents himself as the principal actor in this quintet that paid breast feeding puts onto the stage. Of course, he casts himself as leading man: he holds the script and he speaks in the first person. But even though he plays a double role and exaggerates its importance, he is still the leading actor. His male voice dominates, echoed and amplified by the solo voice of the *balio*, who, one time out of four, sells him “his” milk and negotiates with him. The mother, on the other hand, cuts an uncertain figure and appears even less important than the nurse. What is exchanged here—money, child, or milk—seems out of her grasp. The relationship between the four adult actors is thus asymmetrical, an imbalance which, above and beyond the context of the contract, raises problems.

As we have seen, the reason cited by the nursing couple or by the father for breaking a contract was very often the nurse’s pregnancy. Furthermore, when Florentines complain of their nurse, it is not so much because they are afraid that her milk will dry up as because they fear that it will be “denatured” or “perverted.” It may have been the medical tradition that came down from Galen that taught educated Florentines to fear that pregnancy might send poorer, baser milk to the woman’s breasts.⁹⁰ But in the *ricordanze*, milk that is *pregno* (pregnant) is also called *sozzo*—repugnant and somewhat sickening. Permitting the child to drink it amounted to insidious poisoning, which explains the anger of the nurse’s employer when she conceals her pregnancy too long.⁹¹ The employer’s resentment seems out of proportion with the teaching of antiquity, for this sullied milk provokes a reaction of horror. Behind the violence of the father’s

86. Bartolomeo di Lorenzo *banderaio* (banner maker), ASF, *San Paolo*, 129, fol. 71v. The contract with the nurse stipulated that she would leave only in the case of her husband’s death.

87. BNF, 2, 2, 357, fols. 173v and 59v, 112, for an older son and an older daughter.

88. Two cases, both of which occurred in April.

89. On age at marriage, see Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 394–400.

90. In reaction to this attitude, however, one of the characters in Leon Battista Alberti’s *I Libri della famiglia* (Einaudi, 1969), 44, contradicts the ancient doctors, Favorinus and Aulus Gellius, according to whom “milk makes mothers weak and sometimes makes them sterile.” For Alberti’s character, nature provides equally well for procreation and the child’s survival, and “pregnancy multiplies milk.”

91. See the citation from Antonio Rustichi in note 49 above, to which he adds, “and she nearly died of it.”

rejection, should we not read, if not the infraction of a true taboo, at least ambiguous sentiments and feelings of guilt?

When a pregnant nurse “fouls” her milk and it becomes such a threat to the baby’s well-being that the baby must be removed from it as quickly as possible, her behavior obliges Florentine parents to consider all the contradictions of the choice that they have made. J. T. Noonan and J. L. Flandrin have shown how the consciousness of risk to the child imposed continence on parents or recourse to contraceptive methods incompatible with their eternal salvation.⁹² The payment of a salaried nurse resolved this contradiction, but it created others.

When parents bought milk from the *balii* to the tune of good hard *fiorini*, they bought their own right to pursue conjugal relations without worrying about the fruit that might be born of their actions and without threatening the older child with maternal milk that might dry up or become “perverted.” In the logic that J. L. Flandrin has outlined, such behavior reflects a degree of concern for the welfare of the child, for his health, and for his survival. Whether or not this is so, the compromise represented by putting a child out to nurse allayed two fears: that of sinning in the flesh and that of acting in opposition to beliefs or violating prohibitions concerning lactation. But this agreeable compromise rested on a fundamental hypocrisy. Parents preferred not to think of the sin that their actions might impose on the nurse couple: when threatened with withdrawal of the child, a source of profit for them, they too might refuse their conjugal obligations or have recourse to disapproved means in order to avoid a new pregnancy. The anger expressed in the *ricordanze* when a nurse became pregnant was undoubtedly born of the feeling of having to some extent been cheated in a contract that stated implicitly that the nursing couple curb, if not totally interrupt,⁹³ conjugal relations. But might not their denunciations of the nurse couple’s irresponsibility also stir up in the parents a certain bad conscience regarding their egotistic initial decision? All things considered, they had preferred acts of the flesh and the exclusion of their child over what the doctors of the period unanimously presented as a natural duty, one that even the most ferocious animals did not shirk. And, as it usually happened among Florentine men, the accounts they rendered to God and to their own conscience took them back to their account books.

The *balii* most probably did not share their employers’ fears regarding the quality of a pregnant woman’s milk. As Laurent Joubert was to observe

92. J. T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969). Flandrin, “L’attitude à l’égard du petit enfant.” On older condemnations based on the sinfulness of pleasure (Council of Paris, 823), see G. Duby, *Le chevalier, la femme et le prêtre* (Paris, 1981), 35.

93. The text of Francesco da Barberino cited in note 47 demonstrates that Florentines were conscious of the promises that they made nurses make in this regard, at least when the woman was taken in to the household of the child’s father.

a good century later in Languedoc, peasants did not believe that pregnancy corrupted maternal milk, and they let their children drink it, thin as it was, to the last available drop. The children, Joubert adds, were none the worse for it.⁹⁴ It must have been fear of sanction if they broke a law in force that led the Tuscan sharecroppers to declare pregnancies promptly and to return the child, thus submitting, willy-nilly, to the cultural models of the dominant classes. In this fashion, the “negligence” in delaying the declaration of a pregnancy was perhaps not intentional: we can credit these peasants with a certain fidelity to their own cultural traditions—a fidelity misunderstood by the city people, who saw in it only rustics’ treason.

There is a further contradiction that explains the parents’ malaise vis-à-vis the nursing couple. The moralists in the family, the medical authorities they read, and the preachers they listened to tirelessly repeated the warnings of ancient authors who opposed the very idea of breast feeding by any woman other than the mother. For them, the pregnant mother, then the nursing mother, rose above the passive role imposed on her at the time of conception: she nourished the child she carried with her blood and, after his birth, with her milk, which was presented as directly derived from menstrual blood (a notion to which an anatomical drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, dated about 1492, testifies).⁹⁵ The nursing mother thus continued to shape the child in her own image; according to these theories, she ceaselessly rooted her own qualities in him. The seed planted in the womb by the father matured through the administration of maternal milk, and this idea prompted doctors to recommend—if the mother was out of the question—the choice of a nurse who resembled the mother. This was obviously considered a lesser evil, preferable in any event to animal milk—goat’s milk or cow’s milk—which might degrade the little man-to-be and push him in the direction of the brutes. These respected authors add that the intimacy born of nursing would forge indestructible ties between mother and child.⁹⁶

These literary spokesmen for our bourgeois families repeat such ideas ad nauseam.⁹⁷ They also draw the consequence that the choice of a wife and future mother is extremely difficult and important, since she will nourish her child with her blood and her milk and will transmit to him

94. L. Joubert, *La première et la seconde partie des erreurs populaires touchant la médecine et le régime de la santé* (Paris, 1587), 226–28, cited in Flandrin, “L’attitude à l’égard du petit enfant,” 208–10. In the chapter he devotes to weaning, Joubert incidentally compares Tuscany and Montpellier for the similarity of their climates (242). He also notes that pregnant nurses are said to *enganar* (fool, cheat) the child “d’un mot italien pour dire ingannare” (228).

95. This drawing shows veins that lead from the upper part of the uterus to take menstrual blood to the breast (*Disegni anatomici dalla Biblioteca reale di Windsor*, exposition in Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1979, no. 16A).

96. Ross, “The Middle-Class Child,” 185–87; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 555.

97. See the texts of Alberti, Palmieri, Ruccellai, Vegio already cited.

qualities complementary to those transmitted by the father. However, our Florentines contravened these handsome precepts merrily and consistently by putting their children out to nurse; and in order to have done so they must have been governed by infinitely stronger and more dynamic values than this medico-moral literary heritage. The values were those of lineage: according to them, the children born of a couple belonged to the father and to his kinship group. Such values minimized female roles and female contributions to the family group; the only valid anchors for personal and collective identity lay in the various kinds of patrimony received from the male line.⁹⁸

Such an ideology in no way contradicts the behavior of Florentines as we have observed it. To send away one's child to be cared for by another woman—chosen with as much care as a wife—promised him successful maturation of the virtues inherited from the father and from his lineage. Basically, the qualities inherent in the wife did not count. To forbid the mother this share in the nurture of her children, this complicity that many authors had found of capital importance, did not at all contradict the idea of the continuity of the lineage, which was satisfied when the wife was fertile. Thus we can explain the remarkable absence of the mother in all that pertains to her children's nurses: the father took responsibility, both material and spiritual, for assuring the development of his seed. This was how Florentines proclaimed the superiority of the paternal "blood," transmitted in the act of generation, over the blood and the milk with which the mother, then the nurse, would nourish the child. Lastly, a "pregnant" milk was considered the final move in a feminine plot, widely denounced at the time, to destroy or dilapidate the wealth created or transmitted by men.

Our Tuscan *balii* were thus often taken as scapegoats in a conflict greater than they. Were their relations with the child entrusted to them any less burdened with ambiguity? The most human touches in the *ricordanze* concern them rather than the natural parents. We perceive this when we listen to one nurse, who refused further payment to prolong the pleasure of breast-feeding and enjoying the child she had raised—a pleasure worthy of the Virgin, if our epigraph is to be believed.⁹⁹ Or when we listen again to Piero Puro from Vicchio, *balio* for a Florentine family, according to whom "by the grace of God and of my wife" a child was occasionally saved.¹⁰⁰

98. On lineage in Tuscany, see F. Kent, *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, 1977); Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans*, 532–50; C. Klapisch-Zuber, "L'invention du passé familial à Florence (XIV^e–XV^e s.)," in *Temps, mémoire, tradition au Moyen Âge*, Actes du Congrès des Médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur d'Aix-en-Provence, June 1982 (Aix-en-Provence, 1983), 95–118.

99. Ricordi d'Andrea Minerbetti, Biblioteca Laurenziana, *Acquisti*, 229, fol. 45: "She said she wanted to suckle Maria until March for her pleasure, without other salary and with only her salary [as a servant] noted above."

100. See Appendix to this chapter.

Appendix
Extracts from the journal of a Florentine *balio*,
Piero di Francesco Puro da Vicchio

(Archivio degli Innocenti, *Estranei*, 714, Ricordanze A e memoriale G. di Piero, etc., 1413–60)

... [fol. 2v] I gave a child to nurse 20 October 1422 to Jacomino di Bartolo di Bianco da San Benedetto at the salary of 4 *lire* per month. [Payments continued until 9 August 1424 for a total of 51 *lire*, 17 *soldi*.]

... [fol. 4r] 20 October 1424, I received from Niccolò dei Ricci a child of his to be put to nurse; he will give me two *fiorini* per month; thus we agreed for the two years to come, or [a total of] 48 *fiorini*. I shall note below what he gives me. [Notations of payments follow until 18 September 1425, for one of which, 17 March 1425, for 5 *lire*, he notes "which my *balio* at Poppi received."] The above mentioned Niccolò has paid 46 *fiorini* for the 23 months during which my wife gave the breast to Sanminiato his son.

... [fol. 12r] 7 April 1428, I received from monna Leonarda, wife of Piero son of messire Vanni Castellani, her daughter, whom my wife is to raise; the said wife and nurse shall receive each year for her trouble and for the breast feeding of the said little girl seven *lire* per month paid by the said monna Leonarda, who is bound to pay for the whole year 21 *fiorini* to Piero Puro and to his said wife.

Thursday 6 May 1428, I have returned to monna Leonarda her daughter, whom my wife had taken to nurse, and I have also returned 20 linen swaddling cloths [diapers], 7 bands, 6 woolen swaddling cloths, one mattress, one sheet, one cradle. She still owes me 6 *lire*, 15 *soldi*, 8 *denari*, and I must return to her one linen cloth. [On 14 May he is paid 6 *lire*.]

Friday 7 May (1428), I have received from Santa Maria della Scala¹⁰¹ a child named Valoriano; I kept him until the 31st of this month when, for a servant woman of Giovannozzo Pitti,¹⁰² I returned him to the superior of S. Maria della Scala.

Tuesday 31 May, I have received from Giovannozzo Pitti a child to put to nurse for several days at the price of 6 *lire* and a half per month. He has sent me with the child 12 linen swaddling cloths, 3 red cloths,¹⁰³ 5 bands, and the cradle. Sunday 13 June, I have returned the son of Giovannozzo Pitti and all the cloths, woolen and linen, the bands, the

101. Santa Maria della Scala was one of the two institutions that accepted foundlings in Florence at that time. It had been opened in 1316. In 1389 it had 130 infants out to nurse, and about 1435, nearly 200 (see Trexler, "Foundlings," 261, 263–64).

102. The sense is not quite clear. Is this child of G. Pitti's the son of the servant woman?

103. Nursing infants often seem to have been wrapped in red cloth; see ASF *Strozz.*, 2d ser., 7, Ricordanze di Paliano di Falco Paliani da Firenze (1382–1404), fol. 2v, where the father gives three *fiorini* to the nurse "for red cloth for the swaddling cloths."

cradle, and the blanket, at the same time as the child. And I have received from him 3 *lire* for the time I kept him.

. . . [fol. 12v] Thursday 15 April 1428, I have given to Meo di Cucio da San Tomato my daughter to nurse at the salary of 3 *lire* per month. He has taken with the child 4 woolen swaddling cloths, two red ones, two linens (?), as well as four bands (two new, two used), twelve linen swaddling cloths, old or new, and a new cradle to put the little one in, as well as a mattress and a small quilt. [The child was returned 17 June.]

13 June 1428, the [medical] nurse of Francesco di . . . , a grocer in the Old Market at the sign of the keys, gave me his son to be nursed. He was so sick that he could not suckle. They had let him get so weak that we very nearly lost him. With the grace of God and of my wife, we saved him, so that this day, 16 June, I have decided to keep him until the time when the wife of Francesco di Benedetto di Caroccio brings her child into the world;¹⁰⁴ until then, my wife is to receive for her trouble with the child 7 *lire* for one month, or more, if she sees fit. [They kept the child seventeen days and were paid 3 *lire* 10 *soldi* 6 July.]

104. That is, until the time at which Piero's wife was to take on this child, having agreed with the mother to do so. It is clear that she neither breast-feeds her own child at the same time as a child under contract, nor two children under contract.

8

Female Celibacy and Service in Florence in the Fifteenth Century



“I engaged Caterina, who tells me that it was forever, with the consent of her father, and also with that of her mother. . . . She has done this because she does not in any manner want a husband. All, quite in agreement, have therefore given her to me. I must clothe her and shoe her as one does for servant women, and this they leave to my discretion. When God decides my death, I shall leave her what I shall judge, with my wife, to be her deserts, considering the time spent with us, and, since she refuses a husband, we shall make sure that she has something in her old age, that is, the clothes she wears, as it will seem proper to us and not otherwise.”¹

A contract of this sort, let me hasten to note, was an exception to the rule.² Does it nevertheless betray one important function of domestic service, analogous, in the popular classes, to the entry into a convent among rich girls? Was a surplus of girls for whom the lack of a dowry, an unfortunate physical appearance, or a lopsided marriage market made a nor-

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1. Archivio di Stato, Florence (henceforth abbreviated ASF), *Manoscritti* 96, fol. 24 (27 March 1492) (*Ricordanze di Bartolomeo Salvetti*).

2. There is only one other example, in the *ricordanze* of Andrea di Tommaso Minerbetti, dated 1 November 1499: “and the said Marietta says that she wants no husband and that she wants to remain with us always; and thus it shall be if she behaves well and does not change” (Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence, *Acquisti e doni* 229 bis, fol. 27v).