



*Italian
Courtesans*

Selling the Illusion of Love

Mistress Magdalena La Sanguigni



Laura, Giotto, 1506



Fiammetta Michaelis

We first hear of Fiammetta in 1479 in a papal commissions Deed of Gift. She was described as a “damsel of singular beauty” from Tuscany, and without a father. This gift from the Church was given “for the love of God and to provide her with a dowry;” understandable given her precarious state. An early marriage would have solved the problem, but no marriage was forthcoming. Fiammetta, her mother and her “brother” (or more likely son), bought property, specifically a palazzo and a vigna (a garden). Fiammetta is the the first woman who could qualify for the term “courtesan” found in public records. She would go on to purchase more property and become quite wealthy. At the time of the gift she was likely around 14 years old. In 1493 she would become the lover of Cesare Borgia. His father had been elected pope the year before and Cesare was one of the richest and most sought-after men in Rome and probably the greatest prize for any courtesan of the time.

We hear of her last in the will she wrote shortly before her death. She leaves a house and a 3rd of her worldly goods to her “little brother” Pietro and the bulk of her estate to the Church and for a chapel to be built in her honor Basilica of Sant’Agostino in Campo Marzio. This Church became the church most associated with courtesans. Today you can still see her house in the Piazza de Fiammetta in Rome.



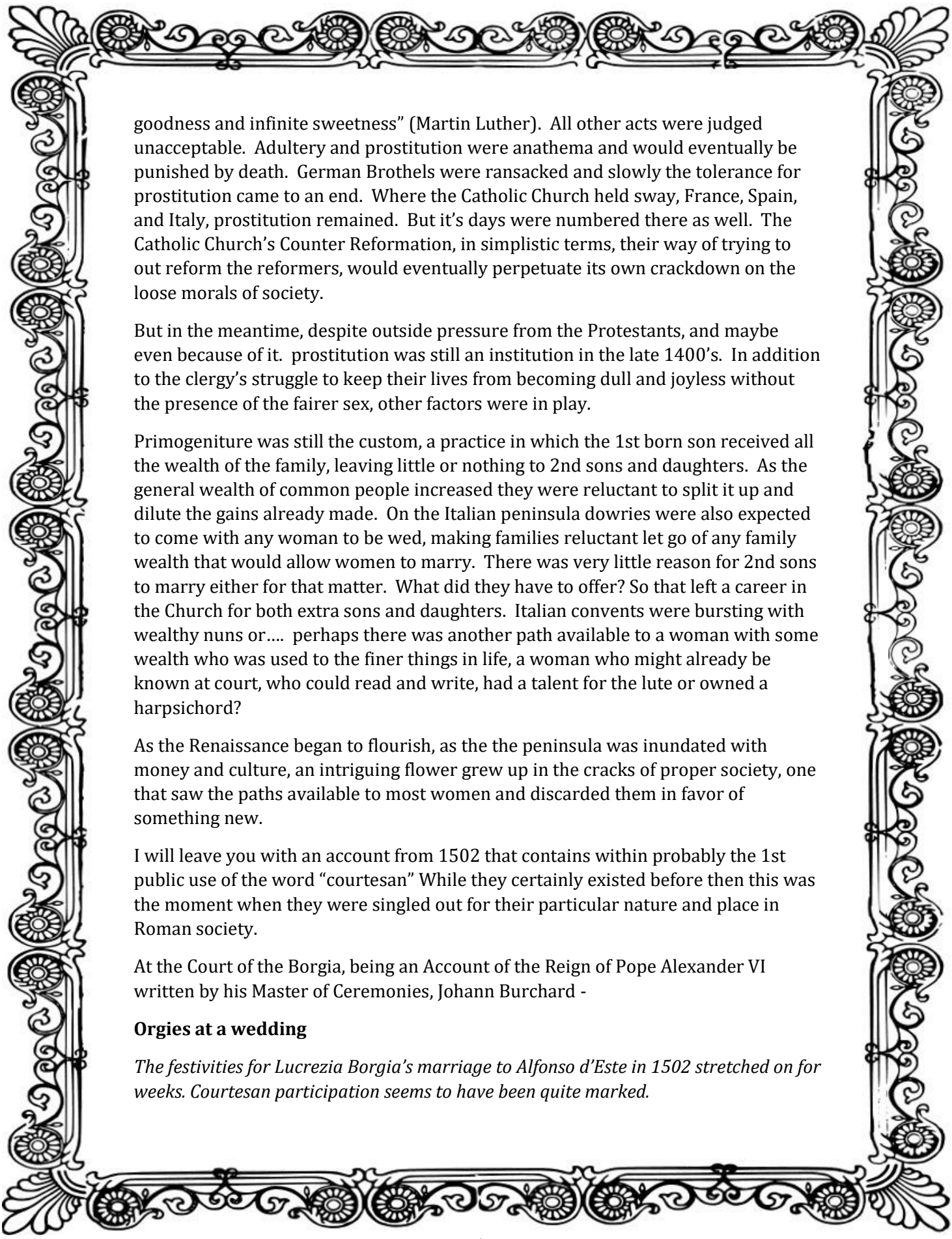
Benedetto Caliari, Venetian Villa, 16th Century

A Fertile Field for Growing Italian Courtesans

The first aspect to be considered and perhaps the most important, the foundation from which all the rest will spring: Before the mid-17th c. prostitution was, for the most part, legal, public, and very popular. A situation quite different from today, where it is largely illegal and hidden. Indeed, prostitution was so integrated with daily life at one time most people would have had a hard time believing the world could exist without it. It performed a vital social function acting as an outlet for the unchecked desires of men who might otherwise behave in evil ways. Thomas Aquinas likened prostitution to the sewers of a palace, carrying away the filth of society so that good people could live free of the stench. You or your kids might not know how to locate a sex worker today, but throughout SCA's time period everyone knew and most adult men partook of their services if they could afford it. The church condoned, supported, and frequently made money off prostitution.

In Rome there was a particular need for women. Yet the cardinals could not marry. Rome had become extremely wealthy. The Pope and his council were themselves quite rich. Within the Vatican was a tolerant culture predisposed to sex with available women despite the mask of celibacy they wore for the rest of the continent. Roman clergy also had a need for women to enhance the gatherings, meetings, and parties in which the Church did business. The Vatican were not monks. They were a kingdom unto themselves- in need of doing what kingdoms do, supporting armies, participating in trade, negotiating diplomatic issues, and entertaining and bargaining with Royals and wealthy merchants. So, a kind of subtle culture grew in which the mistresses of these churchmen took over the roles of wives. But in addition to offering themselves sexually they also helped facilitate commerce by hosting the parties where bargaining took place. They acted as spies and confidants of the men who visited Rome to do business. But unlike wives they were not required to be faithful to one man nor limit their education to the bible and needlework. Their incomes came from the Papal coffers in the form of dowries...which they instead used to buy property, clothes, and the trappings of wealth, all to better entertain their clients and his guests.

By the late 1400 disaffection with the Church was brewing. A number of factors played a part. The invention of the printing press without question had the most to do with this tectonic shift of power, a world shattering invention I won't cover here except to say that it allowed people to read biblical scripture in their own language. The Protestant Reformation was formed because of this world changing act. What was to be reformed? The sexual hypocrisy of the Church for one. The idea that a person serving the church would not hold to his vows of celibacy was becoming intolerable. The Protestants turned the idea of carnal pleasure on its ear as well. They promoted the idea that sexual pleasure was a gift from God- as long as it was limited to the marriage bed. And in the Marriage Bed it was a sign of "God's



goodness and infinite sweetness” (Martin Luther). All other acts were judged unacceptable. Adultery and prostitution were anathema and would eventually be punished by death. German Brothels were ransacked and slowly the tolerance for prostitution came to an end. Where the Catholic Church held sway, France, Spain, and Italy, prostitution remained. But it’s days were numbered there as well. The Catholic Church’s Counter Reformation, in simplistic terms, their way of trying to out reform the reformers, would eventually perpetuate its own crackdown on the loose morals of society.

But in the meantime, despite outside pressure from the Protestants, and maybe even because of it. prostitution was still an institution in the late 1400’s. In addition to the clergy’s struggle to keep their lives from becoming dull and joyless without the presence of the fairer sex, other factors were in play.

Primogeniture was still the custom, a practice in which the 1st born son received all the wealth of the family, leaving little or nothing to 2nd sons and daughters. As the general wealth of common people increased they were reluctant to split it up and dilute the gains already made. On the Italian peninsula dowries were also expected to come with any woman to be wed, making families reluctant let go of any family wealth that would allow women to marry. There was very little reason for 2nd sons to marry either for that matter. What did they have to offer? So that left a career in the Church for both extra sons and daughters. Italian convents were bursting with wealthy nuns or.... perhaps there was another path available to a woman with some wealth who was used to the finer things in life, a woman who might already be known at court, who could read and write, had a talent for the lute or owned a harpsichord?

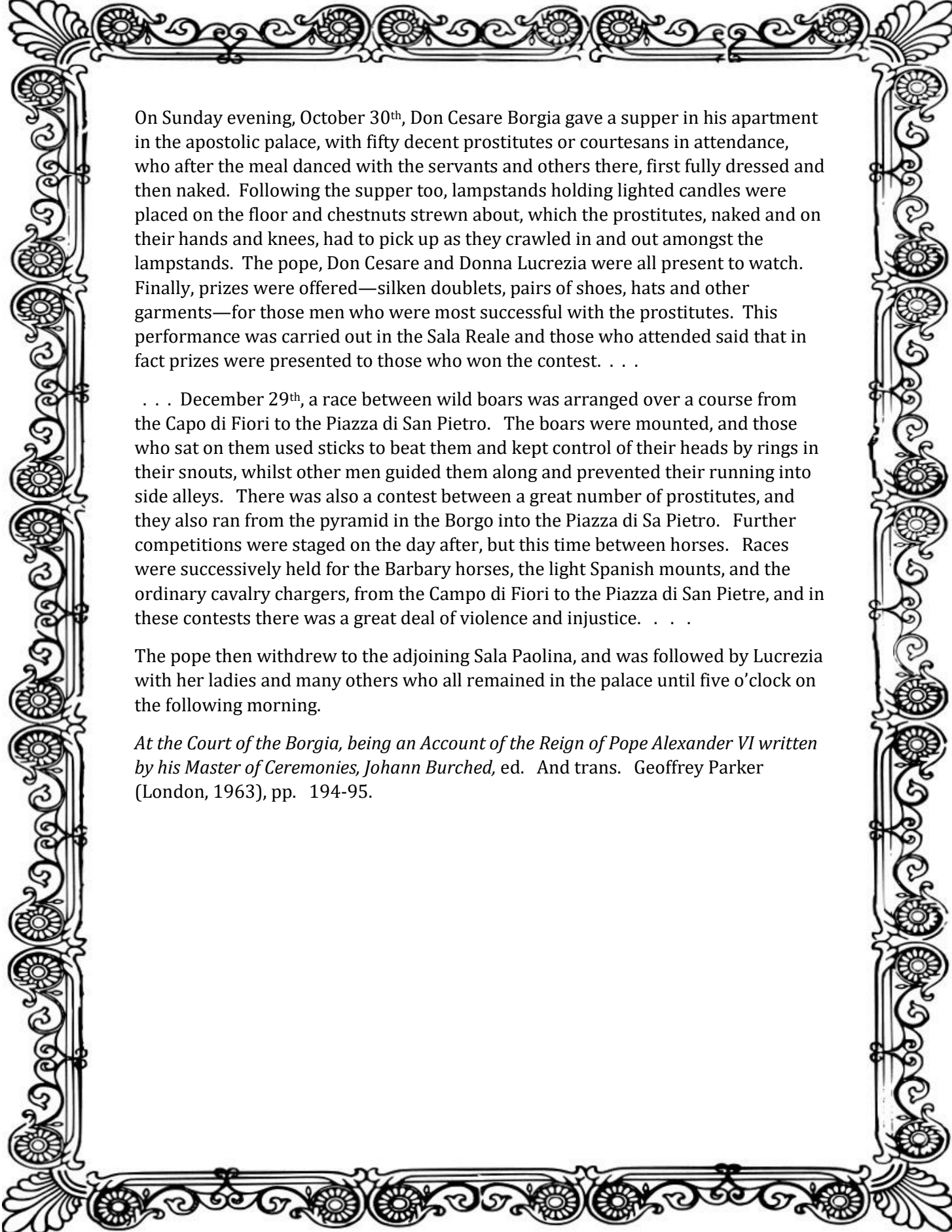
As the Renaissance began to flourish, as the the peninsula was inundated with money and culture, an intriguing flower grew up in the cracks of proper society, one that saw the paths available to most women and discarded them in favor of something new.

I will leave you with an account from 1502 that contains within probably the 1st public use of the word “courtesan” While they certainly existed before then this was the moment when they were singled out for their particular nature and place in Roman society.

At the Court of the Borgia, being an Account of the Reign of Pope Alexander VI written by his Master of Ceremonies, Johann Burchard -

Orgies at a wedding

The festivities for Lucrezia Borgia’s marriage to Alfonso d’Este in 1502 stretched on for weeks. Courtesan participation seems to have been quite marked.



On Sunday evening, October 30th, Don Cesare Borgia gave a supper in his apartment in the apostolic palace, with fifty decent prostitutes or courtesans in attendance, who after the meal danced with the servants and others there, first fully dressed and then naked. Following the supper too, lampstands holding lighted candles were placed on the floor and chestnuts strewn about, which the prostitutes, naked and on their hands and knees, had to pick up as they crawled in and out amongst the lampstands. The pope, Don Cesare and Donna Lucrezia were all present to watch. Finally, prizes were offered—silken doublets, pairs of shoes, hats and other garments—for those men who were most successful with the prostitutes. This performance was carried out in the Sala Reale and those who attended said that in fact prizes were presented to those who won the contest. . . .

. . . December 29th, a race between wild boars was arranged over a course from the Capo di Fiori to the Piazza di San Pietro. The boars were mounted, and those who sat on them used sticks to beat them and kept control of their heads by rings in their snouts, whilst other men guided them along and prevented their running into side alleys. There was also a contest between a great number of prostitutes, and they also ran from the pyramid in the Borgo into the Piazza di Sa Pietro. Further competitions were staged on the day after, but this time between horses. Races were successively held for the Barbary horses, the light Spanish mounts, and the ordinary cavalry chargers, from the Campo di Fiori to the Piazza di San Pietre, and in these contests there was a great deal of violence and injustice. . . .

The pope then withdrew to the adjoining Sala Paolina, and was followed by Lucrezia with her ladies and many others who all remained in the palace until five o'clock on the following morning.

At the Court of the Borgia, being an Account of the Reign of Pope Alexander VI written by his Master of Ceremonies, Johann Burched, ed. And trans. Geoffrey Parker (London, 1963), pp. 194-95.



Raphael, detail from Galatea, 16th Century, Villa Farnesina

The Glorious Imperia

Imperia Cognati was born in Rome Aug 3, 1481. Her mother was also courtesan, but a minor sort, and her father was not known though it has been attributed in various documents to Paris de Grassis, Master of Ceremonies to Pope Julius II. She called herself both Imperia (de Pietro) Cognati and Imperia de Paris. She also occasionally referred to herself as Lucrezia. This may also have been the name of her daughter. All this is a great example of how hard it is to track down accurate histories of anyone in the 15th c., let alone women who lived outside society's norms. Her mother, Diana, eventually married a much older man, a member of the Sistine choir. Together Diana and her husband built two houses along the Via Recta, a new and fashionable street. How did they manage this feat in 2 short years? The answer of course was Imperia who was 17 and had already given birth to a daughter. Among her patrons were already counted Giacomo Sadoletto and Agostino Chigi, who would become the wealthiest banker in Rome.

Imperia's beauty was legendary, both during her short life and long after. Poets attempted to capture it in sonnets and epigrams, though much of it was couched in frustratingly generic terms so that no clear picture of what she actually looked like exists. Some mention of her "broad white brow" "crowned with golden hair" is a little helpful while lines like "her neck was long" and her breasts were "ample and delicious" leave more of a mystery.

More success can be found in some of the paintings of Raphael. Some art historians identify her as Sappho and Calliope in his painting Parnassus and as the Logias of Galatea and Psyche in the Villa Farnesina. If these depictions are accurate she was the epitome of Italian beauty for her time, fair skinned, blonde, with a sweet round face and a graceful ample body.

-A fun story- In 1506 A Mantuan ambassador reported in one of his dispatches: A Venetian named Giacomo Stella was murdered in Rome. It was not the work of an ordinary thief but a hired assassin, paid to do the job by Alberto Becuto one of the secretaries of the Vatican chancery. The reason for the homicide "was due to no other cause but jealousy over a courtesan called Imperia." However, he opined "I do not think that Our Lord will be too angry with her about it, and probably the courtesan will get off lightly, mainly because she is very well known, owing to the favor she enjoys among certain cardinals, whom one cannot mention."

Imperia 'enjoyed' a short stay in the house of the Governor of Rome, more as a guest than a prisoner, from June until August of 1506. The matter was quickly forgotten, and she regained her liberty.

Also, that year Matteo Bandello, a Dominican friar, wrote a novella about Imperia (He would go on to write another about the Courtesan Isabella de Luna). In it he expresses how greatly impressed he was with her lodgings, saying that judging from

the number of servants and the luxuriousness of the furnishings and fabrics any stranger would think a princess lived there.

In the novello he goes on to tell the story of day when her patron, Angelo del Bufalo, brought the Spanish ambassador Enriques di Toledo to visit her. She came to the door to greet them herself and when she brought them through the suite of rooms to boudoir the ambassador was astonished at both her beauty and at the luxury and style in which she lived that he stayed talking to her some time. After a while however he felt the need to spit and, turning to one of his servants he spat in the man's face saying, "Don't be upset because here there is nothing uglier than your face"

On March 13, 1511 she entered into a contract with Lord Aeneas Piccolomini of Siena. In exchange for leasing land from her he would build her a house of which she was to have use of rent free for the rest of her life. At her death Aeneas was to gain ownership of the house but her daughter could not be made to leave without a payment of 300 ducats. Now that her living arrangements were secured, she used her funds to purchase a vigna (vineyard) for 117 ducats along the old Appian way. No doubt this would have become a pleasure garden for her and her clients but, alas Imperia's time was short.

In August 1512 Imperia's heart was broken, and nothing, not her child, her great wealth or her other patrons could soothe her pain. One of her 1st lovers, Angelo del Bufalo informed her that his love for her had ended. In an excess of despair, she poisoned herself. She lingered a few days, just enough time to write her will and then she passed. Her end made a profound impression on Rome

Biagio Pallai: The Gods gave Rome two great gifts:
Mars gave her the Empire and Venus Imperia....
Fortune robbed her of the Empire, and Death of Imperia
The Empire was the light of our Fathers, but
To Imperia we lost our hearts

Imperia was buried in St. Gregorio on the Coelian, in a tomb paid for by Agostino Chigi. The inscription:

Imperia a Roman Courtesan
Who was Worthy of Her Name
Her Form was of Beauty
Rare Among Mankind
She lived XXXI Years and XII days
And Died In MDXII ON August XV



Pieter de Jode the Elder, *A Venetian Carnival Scene on a Terrace*, 1595

How Courtesans Conquered the Italian City-States

The approval and frankly the celebration of courtesans in the papal states gave tacit permission to the rest of Italy to allow their own prostitutes to climb the social ladder. Unlike the Vatican, the rest of the peninsula had women. They just didn't let them out of the house.

From the *Collezioni di antichità a Venezia* - "In a woman one does not look for profound eloquence or subtle intelligence, or exquisite prudence or talent for living, or administration of the republic, or justice, or anything else except chastity...because in a woman this is worth every other excellence"

As previously mentioned though, there were many noble women who would never marry. Their chastity wasn't particularly useful. Even entering a convent required a dowry of sorts for most women. There were also prostitutes who, like almost everyone who was experiencing the Humanist awakening, sought to better their station and make more money.

15th and 16th c. Italy had become more than just the center of art and culture for Europe. It had achieved enormous wealth and power. The rise of the merchant class found its feet there. And while there was a tremendous amount of war and general civil unrest, there was plenty of room for finally experiencing the finer things in life, for parties, wining and dining, for luxury and relaxation. People actually had time to be tourists. Venice and Naples were two cities you would expect to sample the delights of courtesans in between shopping and sightseeing. Clever women found ways to oblige these tourists as well as the local merchants and government officials who had money to burn.

Venice in 1490 actually strengthened the positions of Courtesans while trying to control prostitution in general. Their mistake was made to a somewhat lesser extent by other municipalities like Florence for instance. The Council of Ten (Venice's governing body) passed a law that kept prostitutes out of taverns and limited them to brothels. Some prostitutes simply started to receive men in their homes.

In 1500 the diarist Marin Sanudo wrote of an altercation between 6 men, all from distinguished families. One evening 3 young nobles went to the home of Anzola Chaga. She was already entertaining 3 others. A fight broke out and one gentleman had his face slashed. Sanudo also felt it necessary to point out that all of these men had beautiful wives. 14 years later Sanudo speaks of Anzola again. Now he refers to her as an "honored and renowned meretrice." Meretrice is the Roman word for prostitute. Sadly, he was speaking of her death and subsequent burial in the Church of the Frari.

Of note is a collection of travel logs made by the English writer Thomas Coryatt. His contribution to our knowledge of Venetian courtesans in his book Coryatt's Crudities is both funny and informative:

Here to his Land-Friggat hee's ferried by Charon,
He bords her, a service a hot and rare one. Or,
Here to a Tutch-hole hee's row'd by his Godelier,
That fires his Linstocke, and empties his
Bandolier.

Here his Friggat shootes eggs at him empty of
Chickens, Because shee had made his purse
empty of Chiquins, or Here shee pelts him with
egges, he saith, of Rose-water; But trust him not
Reader, t'was some other matter.



These women made themselves indispensable to Society in ways that made it very hard to remove them when public favor began to wane. Courtesan trade became an industry that supported other industries, not the least of which was banking. In order to maintain the look of wealth, courtesans borrowed money. It was in the interest of the government that they be allowed to work freely to pay off their debts. This, coupled with the need for servants, cooks, bodyguards, and craftsmen to make beautiful things, meant that this sort of prostitution was protected above all others. If the city fathers (or the Pope on one infamous occasion) tried to remove them or even control their behavior using sumptuary laws they found that an army of citizens and clergy would be at their door begging them to consider the damage that getting rid of courtesans would do to everyone else.

Legal prostitution would end in Europe just outside of 1650 helped along by the Counter-Reformation and the spread of Syphilis. In Italy it would be severely limited. But Venice, ever the place for commerce and love of business allowed prostitution and its beloved courtesans to flourish well into the 18th c.



Moreto da Brescia, 1535, Portrait of a Lady

Isabella de Luna

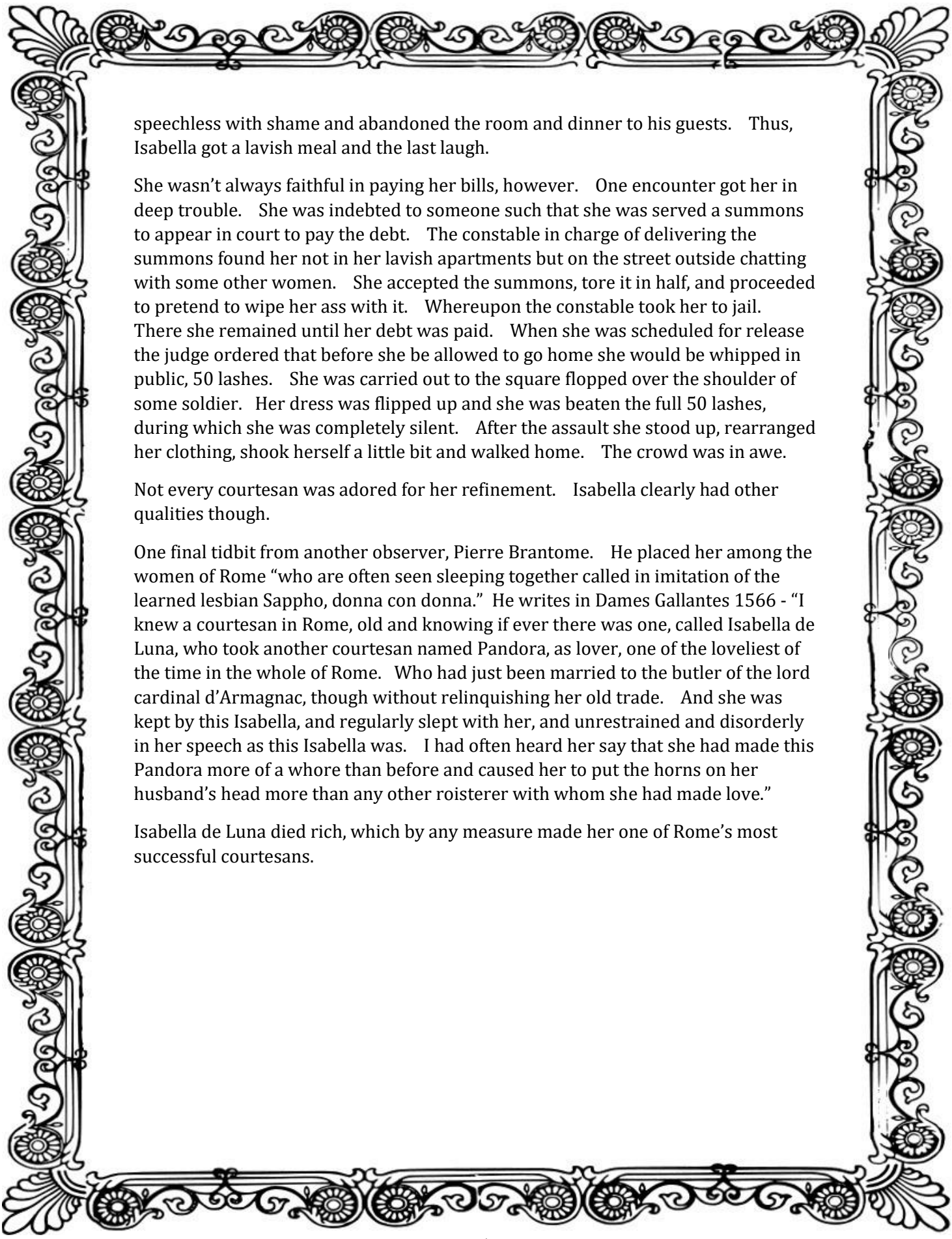
Isabella de Luna (1520?-1564) Matteo Bandello, the author of such famous romantic Italian stories that Shakespeare would eventually steal them for his plays (you don't think he invented Romeo and Juliet by himself, did you?) also wrote novellas based on real people. Two of them were courtesans. The most entertaining concerned the charming and indomitable Isabella.

She was Spanish, from Granada. Her exact birth place and date of birth are unknown. Her story really starts with her becoming a camp follower in Charles V army of the Holy Roman Empire. What is a camp follower you might ask? A woman following an army, willing to do for that army whatever it needs, she could be a prostitute, laundress, cook, nurse, seamstress-a job not for the faint of heart. If there was one thing all agreed on when it came to Isabella, she had cojones and nerves of steel. She eventually found her way to Rome. Cardinal Alessandro Farnesse became her patron. How she rose to such prominence is unclear, but her reputation was such that it was easy to see she was capable of anything.

Two stories to illustrate her prowess:

Isabella had a reputation for telling the bawdiest stories, causing everyone with hearing to blush, while herself never changed color or showed the least discomfort. She could say anything and make you believe she was utterly without shame.

One time she found herself at odds with a man called Rocco Biancalana. His friends were deeply enamored of the courtesan and brought her out with them to dinner frequently. Rocco felt she had no place in such refined company. Rocco's general demeanor is worsened when his boss, a cardinal, brought in a new man, Antonio Romeo, into his office who outranked Rocco. Rocco spent more time with his friends, only now he kept turning the conversation to the subject of Romeo, his stinginess and general lack of class. In his bad humor he also quarreled with Isabella, threatening to say things that would make her blush to the roots of her hair. She reminded him that she was impervious to such things. "Will you call me a whore? Everyone already knows that. I won't blush over it." Considering himself challenged, he then set about collecting anecdotes about her of the most salacious sort and recording them. On the following evening he invited everyone to dinner including Isabella and his nemesis Antonio Romeo. He announced "You shameless dirty whore! Not only will I make you blush I will make you croak!" He refused to serve dinner before the reading of her offences, so Isabella asked for his notes and said that she would read them aloud herself. She also promised not to tear them up if she didn't like what she saw. She held the paper before her face but rather than read the carefully crafted insults to her person she began to recite all the complaints Rocco made night after night about Romeo. Her performance was so brilliant it looked as if she were reading what was on the page word for word. Rocco was



speechless with shame and abandoned the room and dinner to his guests. Thus, Isabella got a lavish meal and the last laugh.

She wasn't always faithful in paying her bills, however. One encounter got her in deep trouble. She was indebted to someone such that she was served a summons to appear in court to pay the debt. The constable in charge of delivering the summons found her not in her lavish apartments but on the street outside chatting with some other women. She accepted the summons, tore it in half, and proceeded to pretend to wipe her ass with it. Whereupon the constable took her to jail. There she remained until her debt was paid. When she was scheduled for release the judge ordered that before she be allowed to go home she would be whipped in public, 50 lashes. She was carried out to the square flopped over the shoulder of some soldier. Her dress was flipped up and she was beaten the full 50 lashes, during which she was completely silent. After the assault she stood up, rearranged her clothing, shook herself a little bit and walked home. The crowd was in awe.

Not every courtesan was adored for her refinement. Isabella clearly had other qualities though.

One final tidbit from another observer, Pierre Brantome. He placed her among the women of Rome "who are often seen sleeping together called in imitation of the learned lesbian Sappho, *donna con donna*." He writes in *Dames Gallantes* 1566 - "I knew a courtesan in Rome, old and knowing if ever there was one, called Isabella de Luna, who took another courtesan named Pandora, as lover, one of the loveliest of the time in the whole of Rome. Who had just been married to the butler of the lord cardinal d'Armagnac, though without relinquishing her old trade. And she was kept by this Isabella, and regularly slept with her, and unrestrained and disorderly in her speech as this Isabella was. I had often heard her say that she had made this Pandora more of a whore than before and caused her to put the horns on her husband's head more than any other roisterer with whom she had made love."

Isabella de Luna died rich, which by any measure made her one of Rome's most successful courtesans.



Jacopo Palma, Giovane, The Revels of the Prodigal Son



The Making and Keeping of a Courtesan

Defining the courtesan is difficult precisely because she functioned best when she defied any parameters. She was a magnificent flower, a rose, an orchid, growing through whatever cracks noble society permitted her. Her position was whatever she could make of it at any given time. They could act as wives, mistresses, spies, confidants, business advisors, performers, gifts for visiting dignitaries, walking advertisements for dressmakers, jewelers, painters, and sculptors, and of course, potent symbols of licentiousness and luxury.

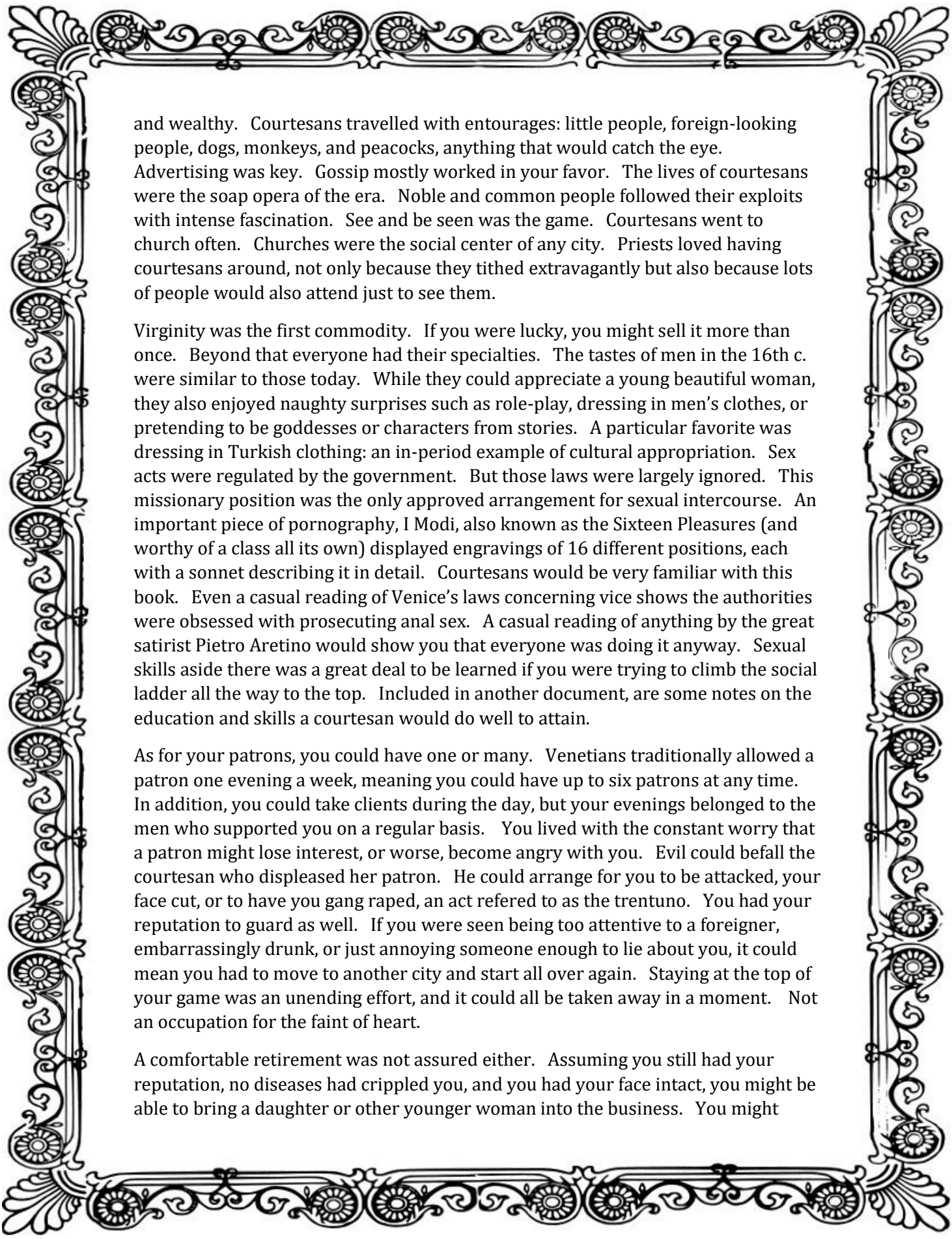
Courtesans were also the most historically documented women of the Renaissance.

But first and always, she had sex for money. Far too often that fact can get lost in the discussion. Our modern sensibilities balk at the idea that sex work can be dignified, respectable, and compatible with a moral life. In her time as well, sex workers (and their patrons) treated each other with disdain depending on where they currently stood on the social ladder. But prostitution was legal, and courtesans were celebrated. Italy was proud of its Cortigiane Oneste, its honest courtesans. Venice, recognizing them as the commercial asset they were, called them "our praiseworthy prostitutes." Civilization is full of these contradictions.

How did a woman come to the profession? Most commonly she was introduced by her mother. Her mother could either have been a sex worker herself or she could have simply recognized a way to increase her family's wealth and social position with a daughter she could not afford to marry off. Women also travelled to Italy to become courtesans. While the rest of Europe and many other countries had their versions of the courtesan, real money and independence could be found in the city-states. There was a market for the exotic and foreign. Courtesans could be married women, either abandoned by their husbands or more often, using the cloak of marriage to avoid the sumptuary laws that kept them from owning things only permitted to married women.

How did they live day to day? If they were successful, they lived in their own houses, because owning property was an important goal of the profession. One flourishing courtesan could support a whole family, along with many servants, multiple residences, and a pleasure garden or two. As it is with most businesses, credit had to be maintained to help with day to day expenses. A subset of women lived in scuola de donne (little schools of ladies), usually when they were just starting out. This involved a few patrons who were friends pooling resources to rent a house for them.

The first task was to buy your way into the places where you might be noticed. The second was to be unforgettable while you were there. Your beauty was important of course, but just as important was your ability to appear glamorous, fascinating,

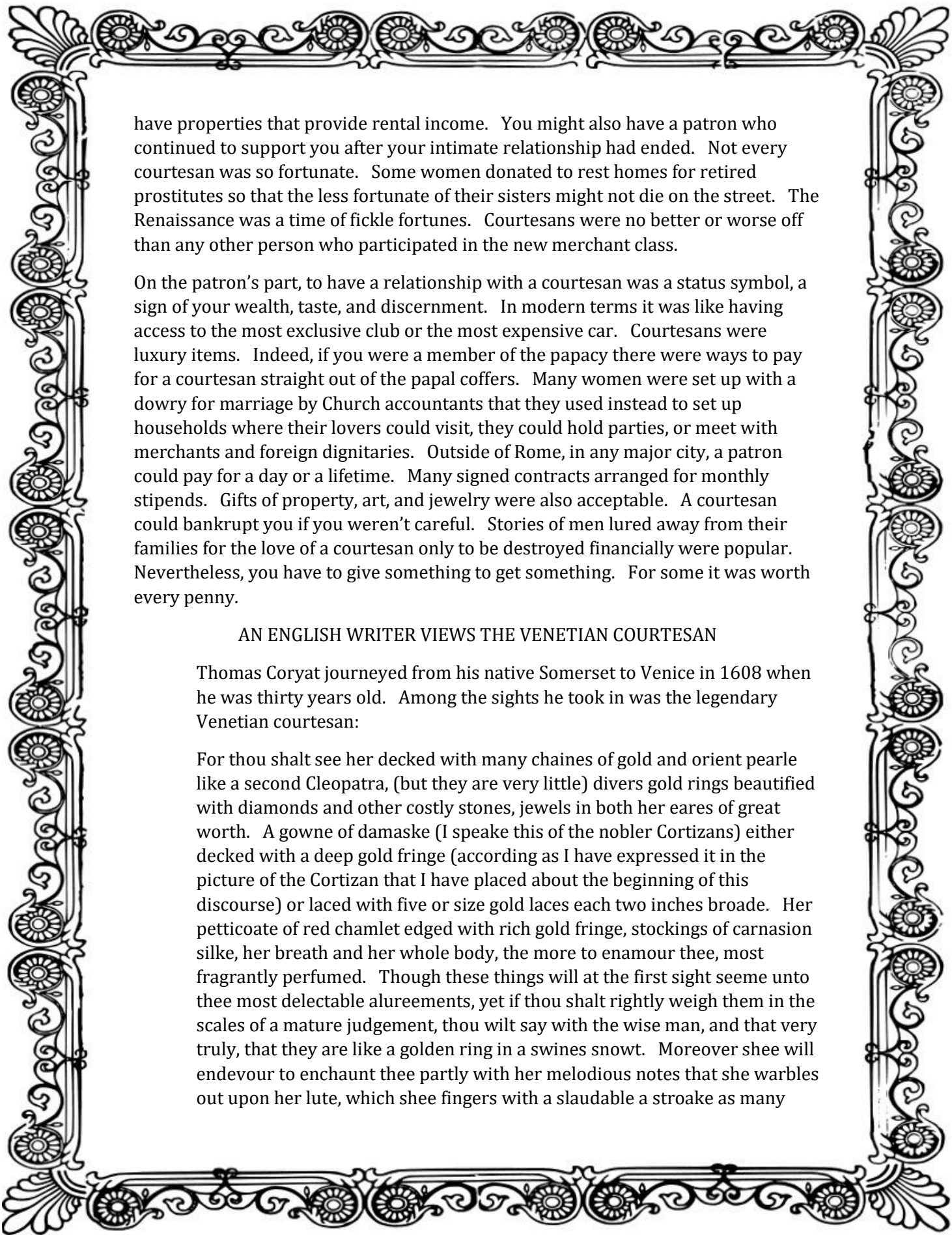


and wealthy. Courtesans travelled with entourages: little people, foreign-looking people, dogs, monkeys, and peacocks, anything that would catch the eye. Advertising was key. Gossip mostly worked in your favor. The lives of courtesans were the soap opera of the era. Noble and common people followed their exploits with intense fascination. See and be seen was the game. Courtesans went to church often. Churches were the social center of any city. Priests loved having courtesans around, not only because they tithed extravagantly but also because lots of people would also attend just to see them.

Virginity was the first commodity. If you were lucky, you might sell it more than once. Beyond that everyone had their specialties. The tastes of men in the 16th c. were similar to those today. While they could appreciate a young beautiful woman, they also enjoyed naughty surprises such as role-play, dressing in men's clothes, or pretending to be goddesses or characters from stories. A particular favorite was dressing in Turkish clothing: an in-period example of cultural appropriation. Sex acts were regulated by the government. But those laws were largely ignored. This missionary position was the only approved arrangement for sexual intercourse. An important piece of pornography, *I Modi*, also known as the Sixteen Pleasures (and worthy of a class all its own) displayed engravings of 16 different positions, each with a sonnet describing it in detail. Courtesans would be very familiar with this book. Even a casual reading of Venice's laws concerning vice shows the authorities were obsessed with prosecuting anal sex. A casual reading of anything by the great satirist Pietro Aretino would show you that everyone was doing it anyway. Sexual skills aside there was a great deal to be learned if you were trying to climb the social ladder all the way to the top. Included in another document, are some notes on the education and skills a courtesan would do well to attain.

As for your patrons, you could have one or many. Venetians traditionally allowed a patron one evening a week, meaning you could have up to six patrons at any time. In addition, you could take clients during the day, but your evenings belonged to the men who supported you on a regular basis. You lived with the constant worry that a patron might lose interest, or worse, become angry with you. Evil could befall the courtesan who displeased her patron. He could arrange for you to be attacked, your face cut, or to have you gang raped, an act referred to as the *trentuno*. You had your reputation to guard as well. If you were seen being too attentive to a foreigner, embarrassingly drunk, or just annoying someone enough to lie about you, it could mean you had to move to another city and start all over again. Staying at the top of your game was an unending effort, and it could all be taken away in a moment. Not an occupation for the faint of heart.

A comfortable retirement was not assured either. Assuming you still had your reputation, no diseases had crippled you, and you had your face intact, you might be able to bring a daughter or other younger woman into the business. You might



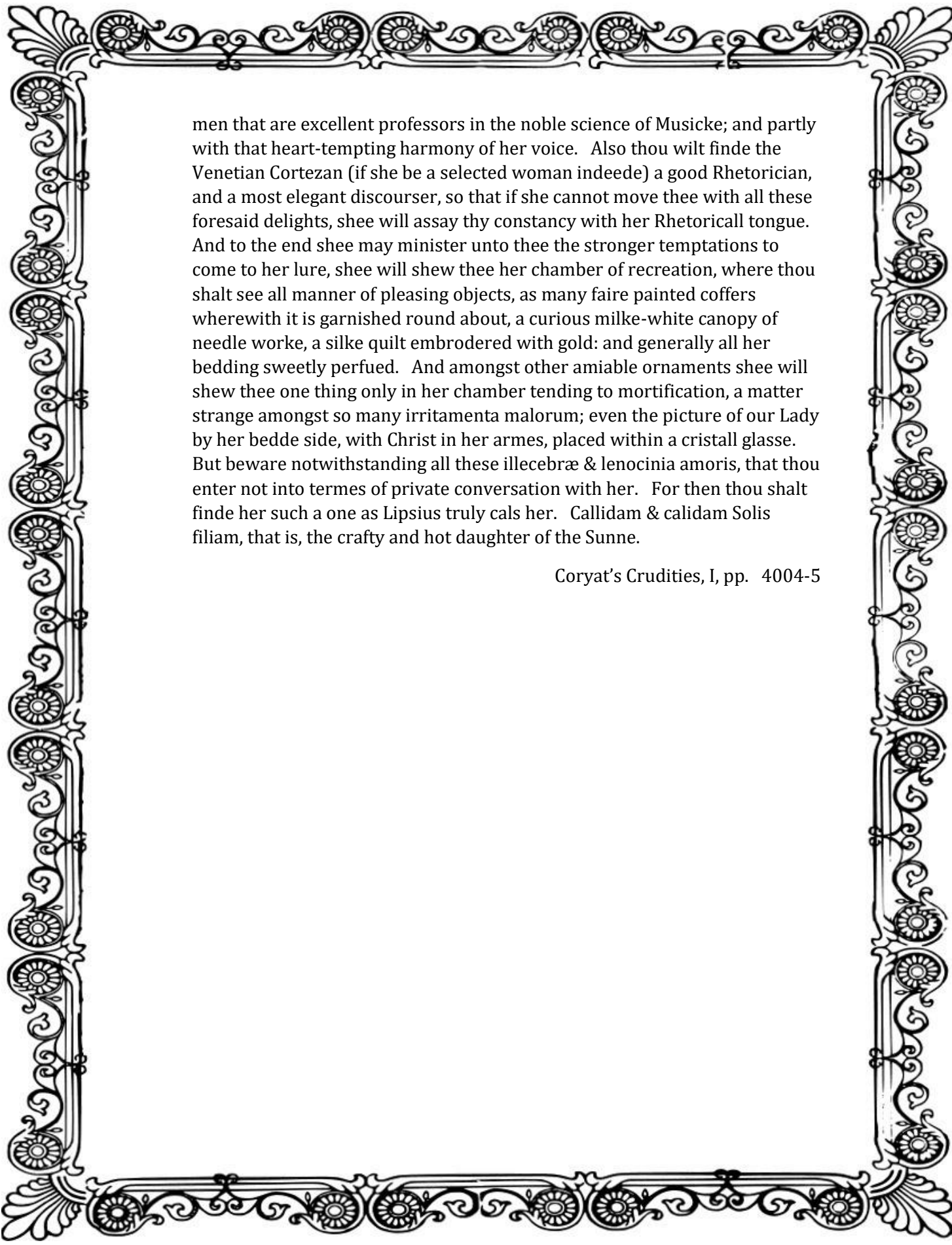
have properties that provide rental income. You might also have a patron who continued to support you after your intimate relationship had ended. Not every courtesan was so fortunate. Some women donated to rest homes for retired prostitutes so that the less fortunate of their sisters might not die on the street. The Renaissance was a time of fickle fortunes. Courtesans were no better or worse off than any other person who participated in the new merchant class.

On the patron's part, to have a relationship with a courtesan was a status symbol, a sign of your wealth, taste, and discernment. In modern terms it was like having access to the most exclusive club or the most expensive car. Courtesans were luxury items. Indeed, if you were a member of the papacy there were ways to pay for a courtesan straight out of the papal coffers. Many women were set up with a dowry for marriage by Church accountants that they used instead to set up households where their lovers could visit, they could hold parties, or meet with merchants and foreign dignitaries. Outside of Rome, in any major city, a patron could pay for a day or a lifetime. Many signed contracts arranged for monthly stipends. Gifts of property, art, and jewelry were also acceptable. A courtesan could bankrupt you if you weren't careful. Stories of men lured away from their families for the love of a courtesan only to be destroyed financially were popular. Nevertheless, you have to give something to get something. For some it was worth every penny.

AN ENGLISH WRITER VIEWS THE VENETIAN COURTESAN

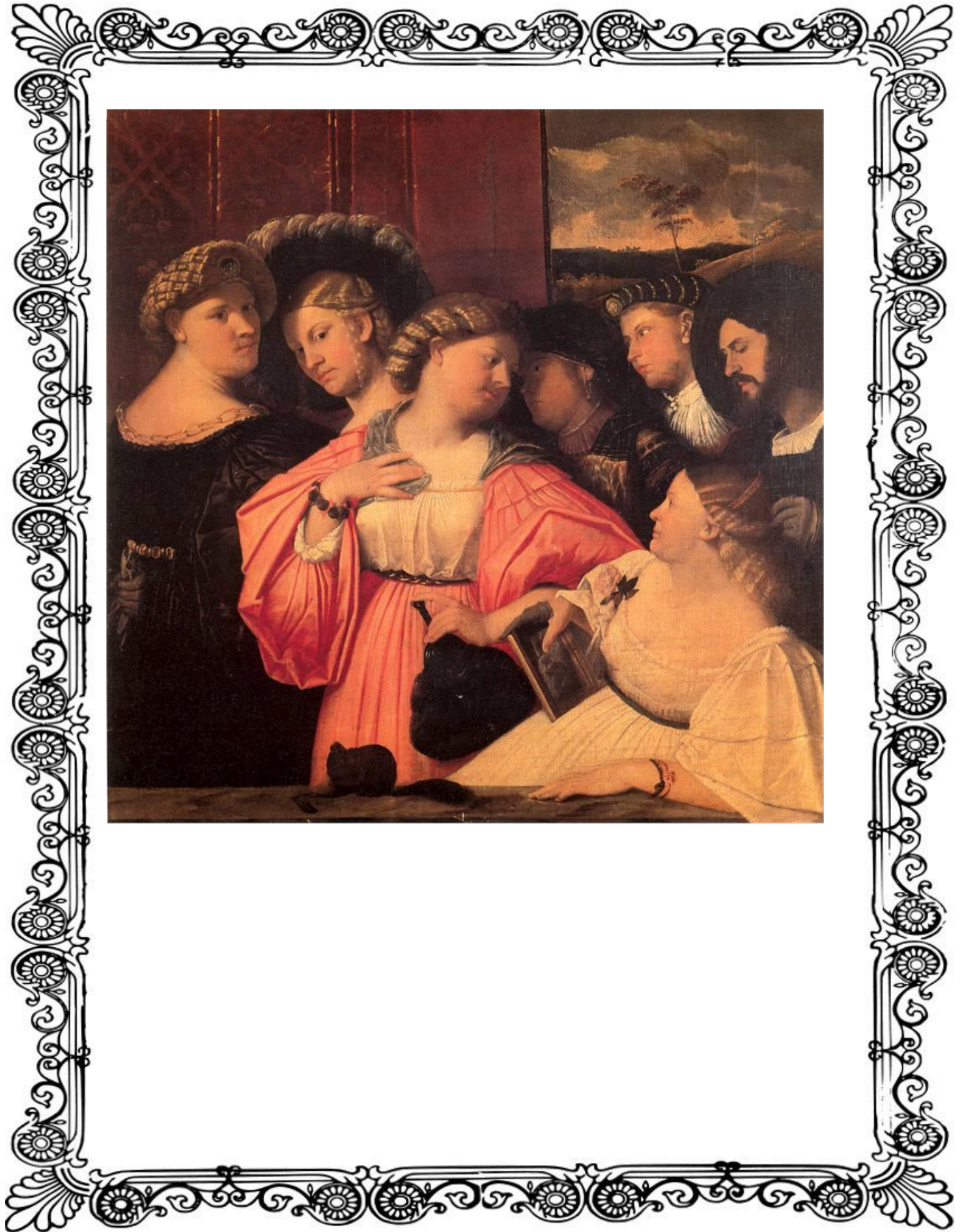
Thomas Coryat journeyed from his native Somerset to Venice in 1608 when he was thirty years old. Among the sights he took in was the legendary Venetian courtesan:

For thou shalt see her decked with many chaines of gold and orient pearle like a second Cleopatra, (but they are very little) divers gold rings beautified with diamonds and other costly stones, jewels in both her eares of great worth. A gowne of damaske (I speake this of the nobler Cortizans) either decked with a deep gold fringe (according as I have expressed it in the picture of the Cortizan that I have placed about the beginning of this discourse) or laced with five or size gold laces each two inches broad. Her petticoate of red chamlet edged with rich gold fringe, stockings of carnasion silke, her breath and her whole body, the more to enamour thee, most fragrantly perfumed. Though these things will at the first sight seeme unto thee most delectable allurements, yet if thou shalt rightly weigh them in the scales of a mature judgement, thou wilt say with the wise man, and that very truly, that they are like a golden ring in a swines snowt. Moreover shee will endeavour to enchaunt thee partly with her melodious notes that she warbles out upon her lute, which shee fingers with a slaudable a stroake as many



men that are excellent professors in the noble science of Musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice. Also thou wilt finde the Venetian Cortezan (if she be a selected woman indeede) a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discourser, so that if she cannot move thee with all these foresaid delights, shee will assay thy constancy with her Rhetoricall tongue. And to the end shee may minister unto thee the stronger temptations to come to her lure, shee will shew thee her chamber of recreation, where thou shalt see all manner of pleasing objects, as many faire painted coffers wherewith it is garnished round about, a curious milke-white canopy of needle worke, a silke quilt embrodered with gold: and generally all her bedding sweetly perfued. And amongst other amiable ornaments shee will shew thee one thing only in her chamber tending to mortification, a matter strange amongst so many irritamenta malorum; even the picture of our Lady by her bedde side, with Christ in her armes, placed within a cristall glasse. But beware notwithstanding all these illecebræ & lenocinia amoris, that thou enter not into termes of private conversation with her. For then thou shalt finde her such a one as Lipsius truly cals her. Callidam & calidam Solis filiam, that is, the crafty and hot daughter of the Sunne.

Coryat's Crudities, I, pp. 4004-5





The House at Pio

In 1514 Lorenzo de Medici, Duke of Urbino, his brother-in-law Filippo Strozzi, Francesco de Nero, a relative of Machiavelli and Francesco degli Albizzi bought a house at Pio outside the Porta San Gallo and installed in it four beautiful courtesans. Camilla of Pisa, Beatrice of Ferrara, Alessandra of Florence, and woman named Brigida lived together in a house that must have been quite elegant if frescoes were painted for it by Rosso Fiorentino, a painter who is now famous for the providing the designs for Caraglio's Love of the God's series.

We still have correspondence between all the lovers, especially from Camilla of Pisa who is some ways was a big sister to them all. A sample below, this a letter she wrote to Francesco de Nero, Alessandra's lover. She signs it "You Sister-in-law.

By 1517 all these women will be in their own houses and on their way to establishing their careers. But for further entertaining reading and a window into the daily lives of these women I recommend reading Camilla of Pisa's letters:

If we wanted to thank you for all your courtesy toward us, gold, silver, and the greatest treasure in the world would hardly suffice. Let us not even discuss the matter, my sweet brother-in-law, since you and the others have beat us at this game. Indeed, even if we searched the whole world, we wold never find two men so nice, so virtuous, so well-mannered, so gracious, and so free-spending as the two of you, merciful as Caesar, liberal as Alexander, and wise as Solomon. If we adore you and have elected to have you as our sole masters, we had an excellent reason for doing so. The only thing we beg of you is to call on your usual humanity reciprocating our devotion with your own precious and most desirable affections . . .

Your sister-in-law [Camilla of Pisa]
Lives of the Courtesans p. 49



Paris Bordone, Gilia de Moro

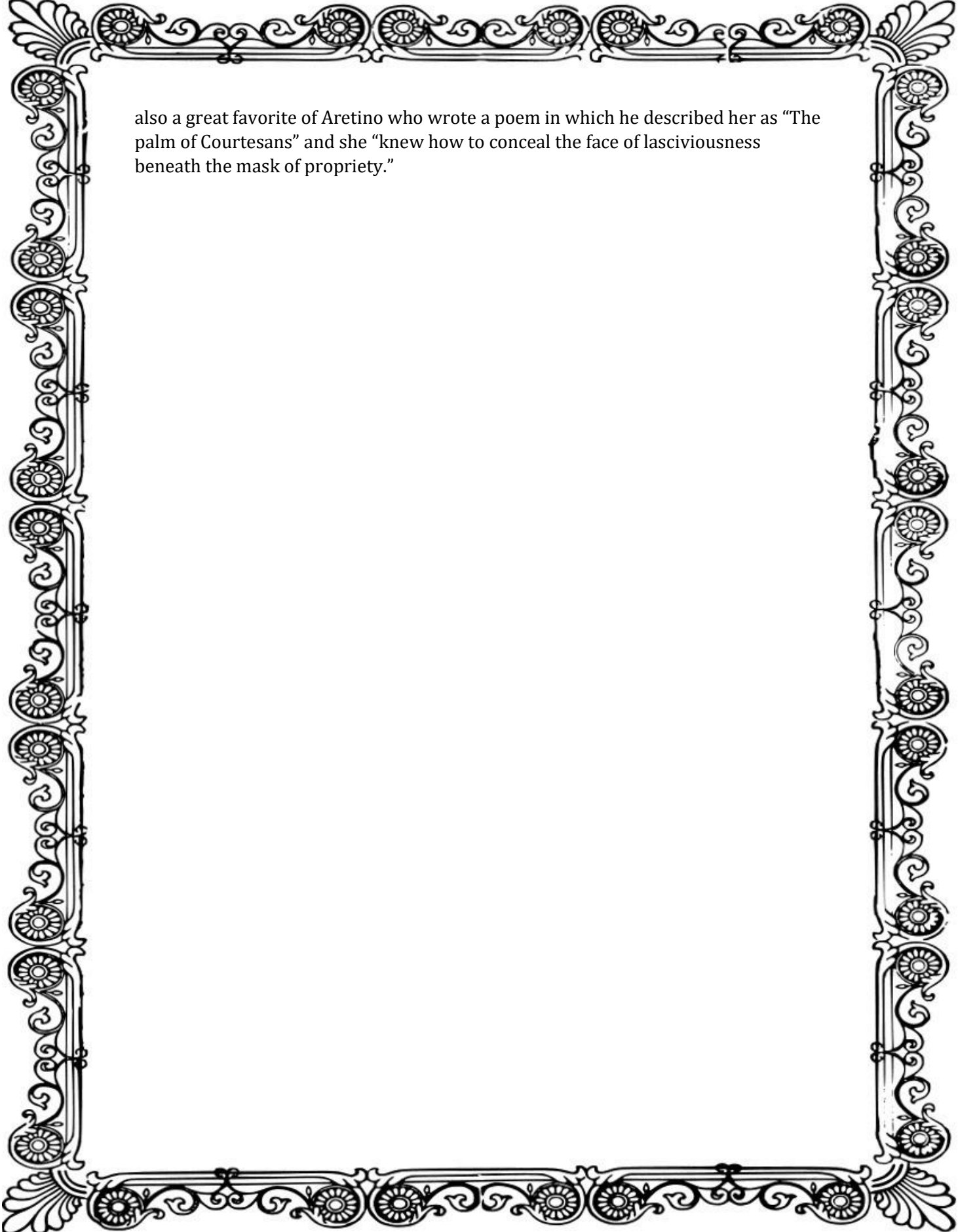
Giulia del Moro

Not all these biographies are happy, but I feel Giulia's story is important for illuminating some the darker corners of a courtesan's life. There are obvious pitfalls. Poverty was always looming. Syphilis could take your looks, health, and life in that order. Your reputation was everything. If you lost your popularity or embarrassed yourself in public that could be the end of your career. Courtesans were celebrated in art and literature, but they were also vilified. "Courtesan" was a respected title, but it was often interchanged with "whore." Part of a courtesan's arsenal was an ability to endure insults.

Giulia del Moro also known as "Zaffetta", a diminutive of zaffo, which means "policeman". Her father was a cop. She lived in Venice in the 1st half of the 16th c.. The way of most venetian courtesans at the time was to have a client spend the night one day a week. One could have as many clients as there were days and also see people during the day. However, the patrons who claimed the right to sleep over were the ones who formed the main source of income for the courtesan.

Lorenzo Venier was a satirist in the tutelage of Pietro Aretino. He was also a patron to Giulia. For whatever reason he became angry with her. He claimed that she had committed an arlasse, a trick, on him by shutting the door on him on his appointed night and instead sleeping with another man. In revenge he wrote the notorious poem "Il Trentuno di Zaffetta," translated it means "Zaffetta's 31." A trentuno is gang-rape, theoretically by 31 men. Some authorities maintain that this assault did not actually happen, that Venier invented the story and wrote the poem to shame Zaffetta for standing him up. He also wrote the rather rude poem "Puttana Errante" (The Wandering Whore). He seemed to have a real problem with prostitutes. Pietro Aretino said that for sheer malice Venier was "four days ahead" of Aretino himself - which was saying a lot. The trentuno is said to have happened on April 6th, 1531 when Giulia was very young. The man who took his revenge planned it very carefully so as not to arouse her suspicion. He said nothing about the arlasse and was even more attentive than usual. They had a feast in which Giulia ate a whole partridge and drank a great deal of wine. She then agreed to travel to Chioggia, where she ate yet again and fell asleep in her lover's bed. He woke her sometime later and announced to her he had arranged for a gang rape. After he assaulted her the 1st of many men appear. The poem claimed most of the men of Chioggia participated. When it was over she crept back to Venice to find written on all the walls "Zaffetta on April 6th, 1531 satisfied everyone."

Regardless of whether any of this happened it did her reputation a great deal of damage. But as a testament of her skill and determination, she eventually climbed the social ladder once more in both Venice and Rome. She was chosen to entertain Ippolito de Medici when he was the Spanish ambassador's guest in Venice. She was



also a great favorite of Aretino who wrote a poem in which he described her as “The palm of Courtesans” and she “knew how to conceal the face of lasciviousness beneath the mask of propriety.”

The Education of a Courtesan

Courtesans knew things.

It was an important part of the package. In addition to satisfying your every carnal desire, entertaining you for hours with her musical skill and ethereal voice, and generally transporting you to a world of fantasy and luxury, she could also listen to you talk about your day and have a working understanding of business, money, trade, and politics, both recent and historical. Courtesans had access to places other women weren't allowed to go-like libraries.

Most Courtesans had tutors hired for them by their mothers, who were usually their business managers. To begin with, a classical education in Latin and Greek, mastery of an instrument, arithmetic, the use of an abacus, geometry, astronomy, logic and rhetoric.

Additionally, you would be expected to be familiar with:

Classical literature:

- Virgil- The Eclogues, The Georgics, and The Aeneid
- Homer-The Odyssey, The Iliad
- Cicero- Philosophical Dialogues and treatises
- Pliny's Historia Naturalis
- Ovid- Amores, Metamorphoses
- Martial- Epigrams
- Juvenal- Satires
- Plato- The 4 Socratic Dialogues
- Aristotle- Logic
- A working knowledge of all Greek and Roman Myths
- The Bible with the Deuterocanonical books included (The Catholic Bible--Of course The Song of Solomon would be quite useful ;-)

More recent literature:

- The Three Fountains of Italian poetry:
 - Dante- The Divine Comedy
 - Boccaccio- The Decameron
 - Petrarch-poetry
- Baldassare Castiglione- The Book of the Courtier
- Aretino- Dialogues, Cortigiana, I Modi
- Machiavelli The Prince
- Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantome- Memoirs The work was published in 2 volumes under the title *The Lives of the Gallant Ladies*
- Matteo Bandello-Novellos
- Lorenzo Venier- *The Trentuno della Zaffetta and La Puttana Errante*

- Women Poets (Just so you know who you are competing with ;-))
 - Vittoria Colonna
 - Gaspara Stampa
 - Victoria Franco

Artists you are familiar with (If you are lucky maybe someone will paint you):

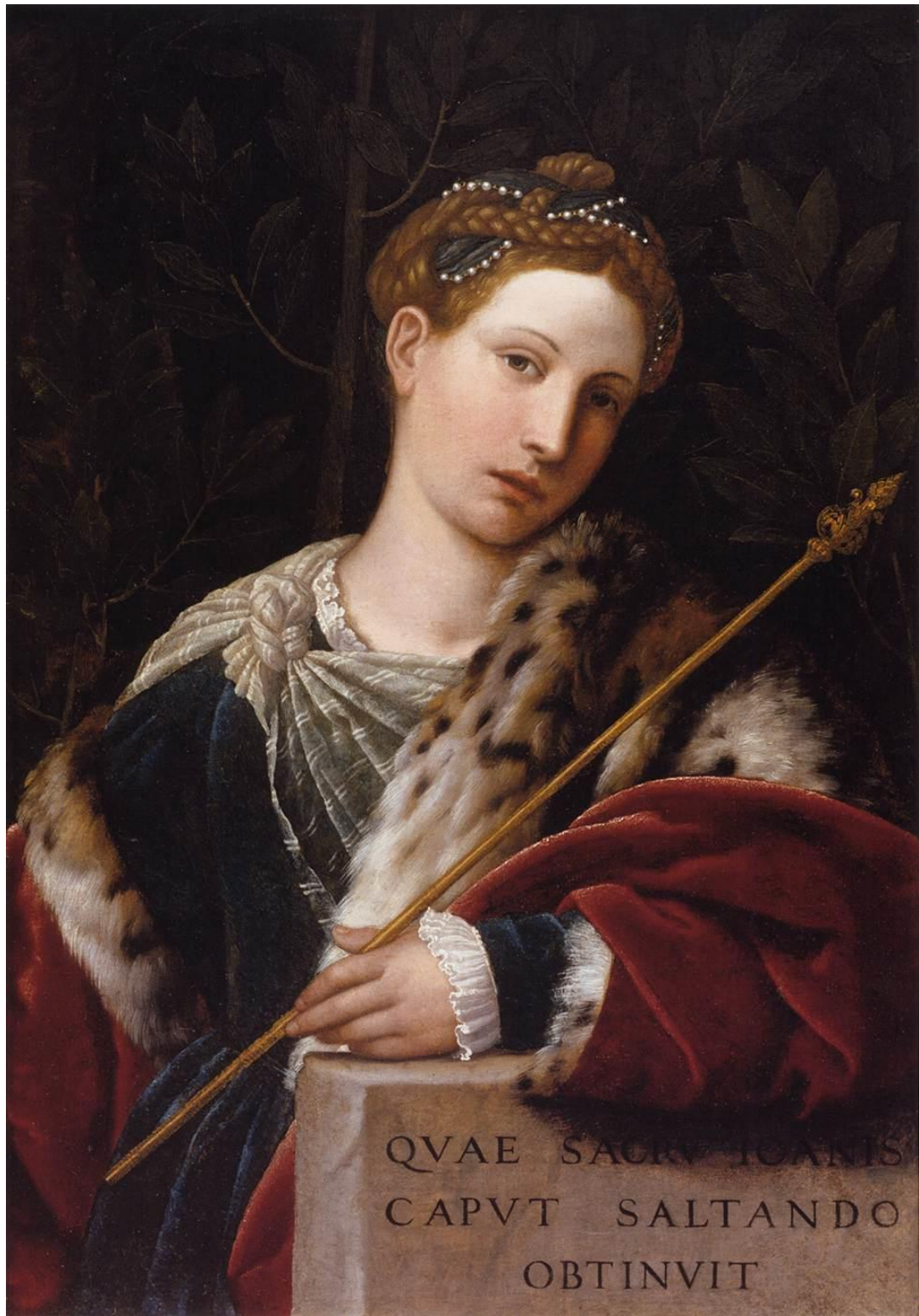
- Titian
- Raphael
- Veronese
- Michelangelo
- Botticelli
- Giorgioni
- Tintoretto

From a persona standpoint learning Italian is very useful. A fantastic resource is Florio's 1611 Italian/English Dictionary: Queen Anna's New World of Words, which praise the gods is actually on-line in its entirety:
<http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/florio/>

Here's a little handy vocabulary to get you started:

- Cortigiana Onesta -Honest Courtesan, the highest tier of prostitution in Italy.
- Cortigiana di Lumi- Courtesan of lights (or lamps) considered less classy than the Honest Courtesan. Available to anyone with enough money
- Meretrice- Prostitute
- Puttana- prostitute
- Lupanari- brothel
- Pompino-blowjob (little pump)
- Culo- ass
- Putta- vulva
- Cazzo-penis
- Fottere-to fuck
- Trentuno- Gang rape, used as a punishment by angry clients
- Scuola de donne- little school of Ladies (a group of courtesans living together)

In all your education you must balance the sacred and the profane. Courtesans could be surprisingly devout. Many of them saved their religious artwork for their bedrooms. Our modern tastes might find this disconcerting to the libido, but 16th c. patrons seemed to like it. Nevertheless, the ability to turn any topic into a reason to fuck was a treasured skill. You must learn, for instance, all the contributions Homer made to literature- but you would do well to remember, especially, the naughty bits.



Moretto da Brescia, Salome (actually Tullia d'Aragona)

Tullia d'Aragona- The Intellectual Courtesan

Tullia was born in Rome in 1510. Her mother, Giulia Ferrarese, was also a courtesan. Her father was Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona. He was very fond of his little girl and provided for her a classical education usually reserved for wealthy boys. Tullia was gifted, a prodigy really. Her grasp of learning came very early and so her parents loved showing off at parties. She could recite poetry and discuss philosophy with adults when she was 6 years old.

Tullia had her debut as a courtesan at 18, a bit late compared to others. She also became famous as a writer and an intellectual. She travelled extensively for several years and visited with poets and other learned men often. In 1531 Filippo Strozzi the Florentine banking magnate became her patron. You may remember him from the collection of men who owned the House at Pio. He has previously had a relationship with Camilla of Pisa. Strozzi was so beguiled by her that he shared state secrets with her and had to flee back to Florence in shame. Emilio Orsini founded the Tullia Society, a group of six cavaliers who protected her honor.

In 1535 when Tullia was 25, her daughter, Penelope d'Aragona was born. When she was 30 Tullia moved to Venice and began a relationship with Bernardo Tasso, a courtier and celebrated poet.

In 1536 she was in Ferrara. She achieved her greatest fame here. A capital of Arts and Culture, Ferrara celebrated her for her brilliance and sharp wit. Girolamo Muzio, a literary rockstar of sorts, wrote no less than five eclogues in her honor. Another famed writer of the day, Ercole Bentivoglio, carved her name in a tree. When she left Ferrara four years later, more than one man attempted suicide. In 1543 she married Silvestro Guiccardi of Ferrara. This marriage was in name only and allowed her to exempt herself from living in the neighborhoods designated for prostitutes and to skirt the sumptuary laws. At some point after the marriage she had a son, Celio, but the father was unknown. In 1546 she became an attendant in the court of Cosimo I de Medici the Grand Duke of Tuscany. While she was there she composed her 1st volume of philosophy, **Dialogues on the Infinity of Love (1547)**. At the same time she wrote a series of sonnets in praise of the Florentine noblemen of the time.

At 40 Tullia continued writing and, with the patronage of the philosopher Benedetto Varchi, she opened a philosophical academy in her home. Tullia died in Rome in 1556. After her death her literary works continued to be published right up to the 21st c.

Elizabetta's Worldly Goods

Elizabetta's Worldly Goods and Other Luxurious Inventories of Venetian Courtesans:

- Contents of the house of Elizabetta Condulmer listed in her Last Will and Testament 1538
- 12 Ducats to various family members and all her worldly good to her children:
- Her apartment contained 3 chambers in addition to the portego, kitchen, and utility rooms
- Many paintings, beginning with a Flemish painting in the Portego
- Portrait of Elizabetta with a timpano and a frame with a curtain to draw across it.
- A framed map of the world
- 2 more portraits -one in alla forestiera, one in alla fiandre a man in a barrel
- A painting of Pyramus and Thisbe
- A painting of a woman and a nude man
- A painting of a nude woman tied to a tree
- A painting of an old man with a cage
- Eight small ink drawings in paper on metal frames
- A painting of the Adoration of the Magi
- The Magdalene (Flemish)
(These foreign paintings were banned but may have been painted by immigrants).
- 24 chairs
- Pinewood dining table
- 3 painted portego benches
- 5 black strongboxes with gilded fittings
- Walnut credenza with a broken door
- A hanging lamp of brass and glass
- Wall sconces
- 2 cradles walnut and pine
- In her Bedroom:
- Here the artwork is sacred, not secular
- A large painting of Our Lady with St John the Baptist and Jerome
- A half size painting of Judith
- Gilded bird cage of wire and silver
- A large round basket with 50 pieces of majolica and other ceramics
- 75 pieces of glass of various sorts
- Walnut bed with gilded columns "alla courtesana"
- Down filled mattresses

- Coverlets
- Cushions
- All described as snowy white
- 6 gilded chests filled with linens and a considerable wardrobe
- Wall tapestry
- Little pine chest
- Fan- all with her arms on them
- A locked walnut cabinet (scrigno) holding:
 - Silver forks
 - Knives of Brescan iron, incised and gilded
 - Silver spoons
 - Silver gilt cups
 - Silver toothpick with a handle
 - Carving knives
 - A bronze table bell
 - A small clock
 - 3 large tassels of silk and gold
 - Jewelry:
 - 4 crowns, 2 with amber 2 with crystal with strands that she would have woven in her hair
 - A silver casket containing 4 gems all in gold settings
 - A cameo
 - A sealing ring
 - A gold ring with an inscription
 - A gold medal of the Madonna of Loreto
 - An envelope containing pearls and coral to make a child's bracelet
 - Kitchen:
 - A 2nd Birdcage, walnut
 - Another 92 pieces of majolica
 - An abundance of pewter dinnerware and copper pots
 - Many of these things with her family coat of arms
 - Spinning wheel
 - Thread, yarn, fabric remnants
 - Mezzando (storage area)
 - 4 lutes
 - 4 books
 - Men's apparel- 3 shirts of fine linen, 2 with black silk 1 with gold
 - 3 pairs men's shoes, 2 velvet, one leather
 - A leather covered box with combs
 - A writing cabinet
 - A walnut table with trestles
 - 4 door curtains of scarlet cloth embroidered

- A green and yellow satin cape lined with squirrel skins
- A 10-piece bed ensemble of green and orange ormesino silk
- 5 spalieri (back) wall hangings
- She was also able to buy out her brothers stake in the family home

Random objects from other sources:

- A standard accoutrement was a red velvet cushion with gold braid used for resting one's arms while leaning out a window.
- A manuscript dated to 1575 depicts a courtesan's bedchamber. It contained:
 - A bed featuring elegant fluted columns resting on lion's paws
 - A set of purple curtains
 - White sheets and bolsters
 - 6 mattresses

Julia Lombardo's inventory 1543-

- 2 parrots
- 1 small dog with a collar that had 8 silver bells
- A portrait of Dante
- 18 books
- A green harpsichord

Coryat's Observation's of the home of Margarita Emiliana-

"Walls round adorned with sumptuous tapestry and gilt leather"

"A picture of the noble Courtezan most exquisitely drawn"

"Painted coffers"

"Curious milke-white canopy of needle-worke"

"A silke quilt embroidered with gold"

"A picture of our Lady by her bedde side, with Christ in her armes, placed within a cristall glasse"



Timeline

- 1479 - Fiammetta Michaelis is given a dowery from the Papal coffers
- 1481 - Imperia is born
- 1490 - Venice bans prostitutes from taverns and public spaces
- 1502 - John Burchard's account of the Lucrezia Borgia's wedding, likely the 1st time the term "courtesan" is used in an official document
- 1510 - Tullia d'Aragona is born
- 1514 - The House at Pio is formed
- 1512 - Imperia Dies
- 1517 - Martin Luther nails the 95 theses on a church door
- 1527 - Sack of Rome by troops of the HRE who had not been paid, mutinied. Many troops were protestant and considered the sacking a moral act against a corrupt Catholic Church.
- 1538 - Elizabeth Cundulmer's last will and testament.
- 1546 - Veronica Franco is born
- 1547 - Tullia d'Arigona's Dialogues on the Infinity of Love is published.
- 1556 - Pietro Aretino dies age 64
- 1564 - Isabella de Luna dies
- 1565 - Veronica Franco is listed in the Catalogo de tutte le principal et più honorate cortigiane di Venetia
- 1566 - Pope Pius V attempts to remove prostitution from Rome.
- 1611 - Thomas Coryatt's "Crudities" is published



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