

Rome's Courtesans- The Rock Star Prostitutes

by Mistress Magdalena la Sanguigni

Here is where we cover some sexual history that actually gets some use in the SCA on a regular basis. I know many women who have Courtesan personas. We get together for socials at Pennsic, hold classes, have email lists, and Face Book pages. I have also had a woman, a Duchess I greatly admire, ask why I would choose such a persona. It's a fair question. In the vast realm of choices available to modern re-creationists, why pick "whore" as your description? It's bound to cause problems, and it does. We talk about those problems all the time. People will always want to know how far you are willing to take your persona. My snide answer is mostly "In the Society we pretend all the time that we are killing people. We don't actually murder. SCA courtesans can have all the trapping of courtesans, the wealth, the fabulous clothes, the education, the flirting; without actually having sex for money."

But why pick it at all? Well let's face it. Close examination of the roles of women between 100-1600 c.e. aren't really much fun. Sure, life is nasty brutish and short for everybody, but women are almost overwhelmingly subjugated in the time periods that are most popular. Our access to meaningful learning and work is almost completely circumscribed compared to men. But it's "The Middle Ages As They Should Have Been" so we bend the stories of great women to our use and do our best to ignore the nastier stuff. Still, over there in the wings of History's stage, there is this extraordinary creature. Even in her rarity she is hard to ignore. These are women who lived outside of almost every convention. They were independently wealthy, educated, and fabulously beautiful, wore the finest clothing and owned the best things money could buy. They were published poets when no other women were allowed that privilege. And they could be famous, like rock star famous, like everyone knows who you are talking about as soon as you say her 1st name, famous. Fiametta. Tulia. Isabella de la Luna. That's Isabel of the Moon by the way; perhaps the coolest name in all of 16th c Europe. They also had sex for money.

The 16th c. Italian Courtesan, isn't an entirely unique historical figure. There are other examples. The Greek Hetaera and the Japanese Geisha also cultivated an air of exclusivity and magic that allowed them more freedom in their cultures. What they have in common with the Courtesan, what is necessary for this kind of flower to bloom, is a society that almost completely removes women from public life. In their drive to control and keep women as property, some cultures simply stopped letting wealthy women go anywhere. In Italy in the 16th c. once a well born woman was married, she rarely left the house. For a man of power and wealth this makes for some really boring parties.

Courtesan culture was created and began to flourish in a city where there weren't even wives at home to break the monotony; Rome. SCAdians tend to think of Venice as Courtesan Central- and it was. But Venice wasn't the first place these women flourished. It was the last; and so it is remembered.

Rome was the first. It was a perfect storm of money, power, and lack of women. Technically Rome's Cardinals (and the Pope of course) were supposed to be celibate. Most interpreted this to mean they could not marry. But they were hardly chaste. Add to that the need for someone clever enough to hold parties and salons and entertain Europe's Royalty and Merchant tycoons and the Italian Courtesan was born.

In 1479 a Deed of Gift showed up in the Papal Registry. It described the placement of a dowry for a "damsel of singular beauty," a girl with a widowed mother and small brother, and no other means of support. Her name was Fiametta. But despite being in this vulnerable state, Fiametta did not marry. She bought property, lots of it. Some streets and palazzos in Rome still bear her name. What caused the Church to be so generous? The answer becomes clearer 33 years later when she is well known to be the lover of Cesare Borgia. Her will lists very specific instructions for the disposal of her wealth and the preservation of some of her property- some of it going to her brother (who may have been her son) and much of it going to the Church that took such good care of her. What goes around comes around. Fiametta is one of the 1st examples of the elusive Courtesan. She was nice enough to leave a paper trail.

Eventually Courtesans become easier to identify as their influence began to permeate art and culture. Songs were written and plays were made. The great satirist Pietro Aretino, himself the son of a courtesan, wrote a Comedy entitled **La cortigiana**, about the lives and intrigues of these women. I could probably teach a class on just that play.

Their lives were by no means easy but they were exciting.

A typical courtesan's life depended on her reputation. They cultivated their persona, appearing at social gatherings with an entourage of curiosities- peacocks, monkeys, Moors, dwarves, musicians, etc. They were dressed lavishly and spoke like the educated women they were. This was very rare in a culture where most women couldn't even read. Church was the place to see and be seen, and courtesans had their own place to sit in the Cathedrals. Priests loved them, not only because these ladies gave lavish gifts to the Church, but also because their beauty and fame brought parishioners into church just to gawk at them.

They began their careers early, many as young as 14. Their 1st pimps were usually their mothers, though women from other stations periodically took up the profession. If you were a beautiful widow, the courtesan life could be open to you. Some ladies were even married, though their husbands tended to live elsewhere; a marriage in name only. After a kind of "coming out" period where their virginity was the thing most prized, many settled into a life of support from four or five patrons. Occasionally they would become the exclusive partner to one man, particularly if he believed she had given birth to his children. This allowed them to set up households and participate in society more as the pseudo-wife of a cardinal. Of course they had none of the limitations put on actual wives.

Things could go bad quickly however, if a client was angry or jealous. Stories of faces cut or the dreaded *trentuno reale*, an arranged gang rape, were the stuff of nightmares for courtesans. A social faux pas too could ruin a career. At the height of her fame the great Tulia danced too long and too

often with a German dignitary. Her lack of respect for the “True Men of Rome” caused her to have to flee to Florence for almost a year.

And let's take a moment to talk about Tulia briefly, because she is an amazing example of what a courtesan could accomplish given some luck and some skill. Her full name was Tulia d'Aragona. If you Google her name you will see she is listed as a poet and a philosopher. She was born with an amazing mind. She was very accomplished by any Renaissance standard. But to be clear, if she had not had sex for money she would not have a page on Wikipedia.

Tulia was born in 1510 to Giulia Campana, a courtesan. Her father was Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona. There will always be some speculation about that, but nevertheless, he was the one who loved and doted on her and paid for her classical education usually, something usually only given to boys. She was a literary prodigy. They trotted her out at parties to perform poems and stories of her own devising. She “came out” at 18, and quickly rose through the ranks to become the most celebrated courtesan of her lifetime. Among her lovers were Sperone Speroni, (a renowned satirist) and Pope Clement I. She had a relationship Fillipo Strozzi a Florentine banking magnate. He let slip state secrets with his pillow talk and had to be called back home for a reprimand. Emilio Orsini was so in love he formed “The Tulia Society” for her, which was a group of cavaliers sworn to protect her honor. She traveled all over Italy extensively. She wrote poetry the whole time. She is the only woman published in Rome at that time. Eventually the life of a courtesan lost its appeal and Benito Varchi, another patron, helped her start a philosophical society in her palazzo. She ended her life wealthy and continuing to thrive as a writer and her works were published posthumously.

By and large the institution of the Courtesan was celebrated in Rome. But that time would come to an end. Periodically there were attempts to rein them in. A Papal dictate by Pope Leo X stated that courtesans were to be buried outside the city where the impenitent were interred. Most courtesans retaliated by buying expensive private tombs. Sumptuary laws were constantly written but sporadically enforced. All attempts to curb the influence and popularity of the Courtesans went to the wayside again and again until the ascension of Pope Pius V in 1566. This was the death knell of glamorous life of the courtesans. His acts would end the existence of courtesans in Rome. It would however, create many more prostitutes.

Pope Pius V believed it was his sacred calling to rid Rome of vice. He took the throne in Jan 1566 and in July issued a decree that stated within 6 days all courtesans were to leave Rome. Within 12 days they were ordered to be out of the Papal states altogether. The first wave of Courtesans left the city in an absolute panic, carts of valuables and money on their persons. Because this exodus had been announced, thieves lay in wait for them outside the walls of Rome, sacked their caravans, raped them and threw them in the Tiber River to drown. It was a public relations disaster for the Church, but Pius was oblivious. Cardinals beseeched him to let the women stay, pointing out that so many of them held credit with the banks and employed servants that the economy of Rome would collapse in their absence. He pushed back the dead-line for the next purge. They managed to get him to move the deadline two more times, but he would not be swayed from his ultimate goal. Alas once again the known departure date caused the river to fill with corpses. He finally relented somewhat and allowed the rest to remain in the city. He relegated them to a red light district and

forced them to wear black veils from head to toe. The Era of the Great Courtesans of Rome was at an end.

For the rest of Italy, particularly Venice, the courtesans still flourished for another hundred years. Venice was particularly suited to it, with its wealthy merchant class and constant influx of tourists. Some of the bloom was off the rose by then though. A tourist book was published listing the available courtesans of Venice, their addresses, attributes, and prices. Sort of takes the exclusivity out of the equation, really. Not that there weren't some amazing women there.

There were two types of Venetian courtesans, The Cortigiana Onesta (Honest Cortesan) and the Cortigiana de Lume (Cortesan Light) The honest courtesan was considered the highest form and Veronica Franco was the most famous among them. She might be the most famous courtesan ever. It's helps that a biography of her life was made into a movie. But nevertheless, like Tulia d'Aragona she too was a published poet. She is also famous of spending a night with King Henry III of France in a successful effort to gain favor for the Doge of Venice.

I am often asked after class what I might consider the modern version of the courtesan. Truthfully I don't think there is one. While it is possible to have the services of a 4,000\$ call girl for the weekend "girlfriend experience", and it's also possible to have a mistress whom you support, we no longer have the kind of culture that suppresses the presence of women in public so fully that a truly outstanding prostitute would have to emerge. I'm ok with that. We have no use for a man who can kill multiple people with a sword. But in the SCA we still find it engaging to celebrate some of the skills that go along with that, so too with the courtesan. We all benefit from having beautiful, brilliant, well dressed women at a party.

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