



### The world's oldest profession

BY MIKE SAMUDA (ISSUE NO. 64/2007 / OCTOBER 4, 2007)

#### The Medici Archives

The study of history would suggest that while human nature remains fairly constant, attitudes, customs, and institutions change continuously. This certainly rings true in the case of 'Signora Saltarella', a leading courtesan in mid-sixteenth-century Florence and Rome.

Marco Bracci, reporting in the Medici Files from Rome in January 1540, was unable to adequately describe Saltarella's striking appearance and awe-inspiring behaviour: *I cannot describe her beauty: her velvet dress and golden garments make her look like a Venus...she dined with five elderly cardinals just last night...*

Rather than a piece of salacious gossip, the mention of her evening in the company of five senior princes of the Roman Church attests to her resounding success. The outraged modern reader should understand, however, that Renaissance cardinals were seen as political appointees representing regional and familial alliances of the ruling pope. In fact, they were often appointed as children and subsequently 'trained' for their roles as administrators. A cardinal who had mistresses, fathered children or enjoyed the services of a courtesan like Saltarella raised few eyebrows during the 1500s.

The name **Saltarella** was a pseudonym suggesting energetic and athletic bedroom 'performances'. So great were her skills and beauty that she had no trouble capturing

the attention of the Cardinal of Ferrara and other leading high-society gentlemen. Her efforts were generously rewarded with money, clothes, and baubles. According to a letter from Francesco Babbi, when Saltarella left Florence for Rome in December 1539, she carried with *her gifts amounting to over 400 scudi as well as three dresses worth 200 scudi and a further gift of a satin robe lined with white fox fur.*

While the allure of fame, the flaunting of luxury and the appeal of instant celebrity are often depicted as modern 'diseases', the Medici files would suggest that the sixteenth century suffered from similar weaknesses. Indeed, as long as Saltarella continued to secure clients from ranks of the rich and powerful, she would continue to be newsworthy for the informants who reported about her to the Uffizi.

Francesco Babbi wrote of Saltarella in even more detail on Christmas Day 1539: *she has furnished her chambers with blue damask with elaborate fringes; her bedroom is one of the most beautiful that I have ever seen, and she told me that she has spent over 1200 scudi...she showed me other many beautiful and sumptuous things which left me breathless and disoriented, unsure that what I was seeing was a dream or reality. She also said that although she had been carnally intimate only with Signor Don Luigi d'Avila and Messer Lattanzio Roccolini, everyone comes to visit her...*

Though it may seem that Babbi is merely gushing about the charms of Saltarella's boudoir and boasting of his own inside knowledge directly from the 'horse's mouth', there is a possible attempt at political back-stabbing buried within this enthusiastic document. The recipient of the letter, Monsignor Ugolino Grifoni, would have certainly noted with interest the name of the second of Saltarella's two 'carnal' clients. Messer Lattanzio Roccolini held the prestigious and invaluable position as Duke Cosimo de' Medici's agent in Rome. Given the importance of loyalty and the fragility of alliances in 1540 Florence, Cosimo would no doubt have reason to be concerned that his most trusted agent enjoyed the company of a notoriously popular courtesan.

*Text translated and researched by Alessio Assonitis, Research Coordinator and National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow. Comment by Mike Samuda.*