

Title: Women Who Traffic Women: The Madam in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature  
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Abstract:

Although legally allowed to own and operate brothels under imperial law, the procuress nevertheless found herself demonized in nineteenth-century Russian fiction.[1] In their portrayals of prostitution, writers such as F.M. Dostoevskii and V.V. Krestovskii envision the procuress as a trafficker in human flesh; in works of literature, she is depicted as an unattractive, money-grubbing, duplicitous, older woman who preys on the weaknesses of unattached ladies and impoverished girls. Despite the necessity of her entrepreneurial skills to keep brothels open, she nevertheless entered the cultural and literary imagination as an object of unanimous condemnation. Seen as naturally inclined toward criminal activity and the exploitation of others, authors underscored how the madam engaged in nefarious activities and behaviors that threatened the social order.

This presentation analyzes the representation of madams and go-betweens in works of literature from 1860 to 1890. Building on the study of the Russian procuress by Julie A. Cassiday and Leyla Rouhi, I show how the female go-between operates as a foil to the sympathetic “fallen woman” figure in works of the period. My analysis incorporates popular boulevard literature that unanimously condemns procuresses as “hyenas in bonnets,” as well as depictions in works by Dostoevskii and Krestovskii that locate the go-between in the context of St. Petersburg’s burgeoning sexual economy. I conclude my presentation with analysis of N.S. Leskov’s *Voitel’nitsa* (*The Battle-Axe*, 1889) to show how this work complicates the long tradition of negative portrayals of procuresses. Leskov’s colorful portrayal of Domna Platonovna offers a complex portrait of a wanton woman who works the St. Petersburg market to her advantage.

[1] Julie A. Cassiday and Leyla Rouhi, “From Nevskii Prospekt to Zoia’s Apartment: Trials of the Russian Procuress,” *The Russian Review* 58.3 (July 1999): 413-431.