

Title: The “Camellia” and the “Camel”: Dostoevsky’s Borrowings from the Courtesan Legend in *The Idiot*’s Nastas’ia Filippovna  
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Like few other figures in world civilization, the courtesan possesses the power to captivate, to titillate, to fascinate, and to shock. Although stories of their successes, excesses, and suffering continue to astound listeners, the courtesan is particularly associated with the excesses of the French Second Republic (1852-1870). The activities of the Parisian *demi-monde* engendered a great deal of notoriety through tangible venues (newspapers and literary texts) and unofficial means (reminiscences and gossip). In 1852, Alexandre Dumas  *fils*’s play about his own relationship with the courtesan Marie Duplessis, *La Dame aux camélias*, debuted at the Théâtre du Vaudeville. The play enjoyed international acclaim as it toured Europe, and in two years, it inspired Verdi’s operatic rendition of the story, *La Traviata* (1854). Like any reasonably well-read and culturally-aware person, Dostoevsky must have been aware of the play, and it undoubtedly led him to refer to it in his novel, *The Idiot* (1869). Several critics have commented on this reference (Sakulin, Al’tman, Frank, Rayfield, Terras, Young), but they limit their investigation of the theme to Totsky’s own fascination with the story or his attempts to manipulate Nastas’ia Filippovna into playing the self-sacrificing role of the courtesan.

Critics have overlooked Dostoevsky’s more subtle use of the *demi-mondaine* in his creation of the novel’s notorious protagonist, Nastas’ia Filippovna, who possesses the more positive traits of Marguerite from *La Dame aux camélias*, including her appearance, her piety, and her modesty. Dostoevsky borrows the more negative aspects of Nastas’ia Filippovna’s character from the story of the notorious La Païva, a Russian Jew from Moscow named Esther Lachmann, who became one of the wealthiest women of the Second Empire. They share the same mercenary attitude towards the men around them, the same sense of hauteur, and the same scandalous act of burning a huge sum of cash. Dostoevsky draws from the two primary types of courtesan: the prostitute with a heart of gold (“*la camélia*”), and the heartless “camel” (“*la chameau*”). Like the courtesan, Nastas’ia Filippovna captivates, titillates, fascinates, and shocks those around her, but she rejects the possibility of becoming a kept woman. As Dostoevsky stresses in the text, she remains at heart a “чрезвычайно русская женщина” (VIII: 104).

In creating a courtesan-like woman who ultimately rejects that hedonistic lifestyle, Dostoevsky sets up a subtle opposition between the moral bankruptcy he saw in France of the Second Empire and the spiritual beauty he believed existed in the Russian people. The idea of the courtesan touches upon a society’s ideas about women, vice, family life, money, honor, social behavior, and personal freedom, all burning issues to which the author returns again and again in his work. Although the figure of the courtesan initially seems tied to only one literary allusion, associated with a minor character of the novel, a deeper investigation of this theme reveals its greater significance as a component of Dostoevsky’s discussion of Russia’s identity *vis-à-vis* the West.