

**Prostitution, Brothel-Keeping, and Celebrity:**  
**Examining the Agency of an 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Dublin Madam**



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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in  
History

Tufts University  
May 2018  
Advisor: Professor Cross

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### *Introduction*

Looking out from her balcony, Peg Plunkett could see people lining up down the block, waiting to be let in to her home. Peg had had the house specially decorated for the event, removing all the furniture, except for one bed left in preparation for the Duke's visit. In true Plunkett fashion, she had ignored the government ban on parties and proceeded with her masquerade despite the potential fines and consequences. Plunkett knew, given her position and the powerful men that she was inviting to the party, that she would be able to talk herself out of any problems. She also invited a variety of different people, ranging from the high-up Duke of Leinster to lowly fortune tellers and sailors. In a whore house, all smatterings of society could be seen together, which brought a special exoticism to the party. Throughout the night, Peg flit between her clients, ensuring that they had enough to eat and drink, while also making sure that they were well looked after by her girls. When the sun rose in Dublin the next morning, Plunkett finally sent the last of her guests home, pleased with the knowledge that she had once again lived up to her reputation as one of Dublin's most notorious madams.<sup>1</sup>

Although Peg may have experienced this praise and fame during her lifetime, when I first read about Peg Plunkett, she was nothing more than an obscure two-sentence reference in a book about 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin. One of Dublin's most well-known brothel owners was reduced to a footnote. There was no mention of her celebrity, wealth, or quick wit that had carried her to the top of her industry. Unfortunately, though, it is not uncommon for

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<sup>1</sup>Leeson, Margaret. *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson, Madam 1727-1797*, Edited by Mary Lyons. Dublin: The Lilliput Press Ltd., 1995, 92.

prostitutes to be the background characters to someone else's story. Sex workers are usually not given the complex examination that they deserve and require, and are instead often reduced to their identifiers. However, by doing this, we lose out on an invaluable source with which to examine a woman's position in society. In particular, studying them in different contexts is vital for exploring how much agency that women are able to exercise, and how they obtain this ability. That is perhaps why Peg is so important. When she published her memoirs in 1795, she gave us a window into Dublin society that not only revealed the details of her own life, but also gave us a picture of what life was like for women in general at that time.<sup>2</sup>

Born to a wealthy Catholic landed family, Peg's backstory is not consistent with that of most 18<sup>th</sup> century Dublin prostitutes. However, due mostly to her family circumstances, she quickly found herself involved with a man, and "ruined" for domestic life. As a result of her tarnished status, Plunkett's life was irreversibly changed. From that point onward, Peg bounced between romantic yet discrete relationships, to full-fledged sex work, eventually opening her own brothel, and becoming one of Dublin's most well-known madams. She catered to Dublin's wealthiest men, including Dukes and possibly even the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. After thirty years, she decided to retire, only to find herself unable to cash in her IOUs, and quickly became saddled with debt. She wrote her memoirs in order to raise funds, but died before she could finish her third volume.<sup>3</sup>

What her memoirs show us is that throughout the course of her life, her ability to exercise her agency changed. Although agency is a broad concept, for the purposes of this

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<sup>2</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.,

paper, it will be used to mean Peg's ability to exercise individual choice in her life and the extent to which she was able to overcome the external forces acting upon her. Monitoring when and how she was able to overcome these external forces will also help to track changes to her agency. From there, we will be able to explore whether her ability to exercise agency increased or decreased as a result of her career in prostitution and brothel owning. Moreover, we will also look at the potential reasons that could explain this change, including the financial structure of prostitution, the connections she made, and the social position that it left her in. In 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin, prostitutes did not fit into the existing social order, and as a result were left in social limbo. Throughout this work, we will show what that social limbo meant for Peg, and the implications of this for other women's ability to exercise agency.

Additionally, however successful and notorious that Plunkett became, she was still subject to limitations in her choices, and her profession carried an incredibly high cost. Once Peg entered into a life in sex work, there was no starting over for her. She was branded as a "ruined" woman, and this identifier followed her for the rest of her life. In the cruel hypocrisy of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin's societal rules, it was fine for men to have sex with her, but to become otherwise involved stigmatized them as well.<sup>4</sup> As a result, her interpersonal relations were severely impacted. In examining the cost of her profession, the mental and emotional toll of the work she did also cannot be overlooked.

The point, though, of looking at Plunkett's life so intimately is not just to give us an idea of what life was like for Peg Plunkett in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, but to use it to gain a more complete picture of what life was like for women during that time, and to draw parallels to our

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,

own time. Without trying to equivocate Peg's position with that of all women in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, the portrait that Plunkett's memoirs provide, give us a useful reference to examine how women in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland were able to expand their ability to exercise agency, and the price of this ability. They also show that despite some successes, there were still significant barriers to achieving greater individual choice, which in some cases could not be overcome. Peg's life illustrates these difficulties in her own context, but it also serves as a point of comparison in examining other women of the time, and even examining the current position of modern women.

In order to make this comparison, though, we need to consult a wider base of knowledge. So far, there have been a number of books written on women in Ireland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the changing role of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in general. However, these works generally fall into one of two categories. The first category is modern nonfiction books that focus on the lives of many different women in order to gain anecdotal evidence and provide a more generalized view of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in Ireland. The second category is fiction that was produced about women during the 18<sup>th</sup> century that focuses on a few main heroines, which misrepresents the status of women at the time. In addition to these background works, though, there have also been a couple of books written about Peg herself. These generally concentrate on trying to accurately retell her life story, and verifying some of her claims. Any analysis of agency in sex work, moreover, has been written through a more sociological lens, with again, a variety of anecdotal evidence from multiple sources. To date, there has been very little work done using one specific, historical example of a courtesan as a basis for which to examine other women of the time.

*Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century Europe* by Jennine Hurl-Eamon offers some general insight into the changing roles of women in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hurl-Eamon offers an explanation for the dichotomy in women's roles during this time. The population explosion coupled with the change in biological theory about women helps to explain how women were simultaneously objectified while also experiencing a raise in their political consciousness. The increased importance placed on women's roles as mothers led to a rise in their education and literacy rates. However, this also came with the caveat that their education was for the purpose of raising civically responsible children, thus subjugating them further into domestic roles. Moreover, the new biological trends and studies at the time illustrated a deeper understanding of female sex organs, which, in turn, gave credence to the theory that women's sole purpose for being created was to become a mother. Fashion trends also helped develop this objectification, as women's fashion became more gaudy and lavish, while mens' became more somber and reserved. The reaction to this objectification, though, was a political consciousness that manifested itself most significantly in Paris, during the early stages of the French Revolution. Women demanding respect and rights was not a new concept, but this was arguably one of the first times in Europe that a collective female movement was successful.<sup>5</sup> This is significant for understanding Plunkett's position because all of this was happening in the backdrop of her life and would have undoubtedly been talked about among the political elites that she catered to and interacted with.

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<sup>5</sup> Hurl-Eamon, Jennine. *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-century Europe*. *Women's Roles through History*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010.

Aside from this, there have also been a number of works that discuss women's roles in Ireland during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Women in Early Modern Ireland* by Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd assesses Ireland's own initial attempts at revolution in which Catholics were trying to obtain greater rights and a loosening of the restrictive penal laws that barred many from owning property and voting. Although similar to the French Revolution in that the Irish were seeking to obtain greater rights from the wealthy and oppressive elites, the United Irishmen movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century failed to obtain the scale or success of the French Revolution. Additionally, there was very little support behind advocating for women's rights.<sup>6</sup>

*A History of Women in Ireland* by Mary O'Dowd offers a broader insight into the changing roles of Irish women during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. She touches on the increased frequency with which parliament was meeting as an opportunity for women to play a larger role in politics by hosting social gatherings and lobbying family connections. She also examines the rise in women's literacy during the time and ties this to the expanded role of women within shops and trades. However, she also highlights the limitations that women still faced, including the fact that Catholic women were less involved in businesses and management than the average woman, and that the Catholic Church actually dissuaded female literacy.<sup>7</sup> This is relevant, as Plunkett was a Catholic, although we do know that she was literate. Finally, though, O'Dowd uses employment data to illustrate that women's opportunities were subject to the overall state of the economy.

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<sup>6</sup> MacCurtain, Margaret, and O'Dowd, Mary. *Women in Early Modern Ireland*. Edinburgh : New York: Edinburgh University Press ; Distributed in North America by Columbia University Press, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> O'Dowd, Mary. *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800*. 1st ed. Women and Men in History. Harlow, England ; New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.

In addition to modern studies on women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is also important to understand how women were viewed during this time, and fiction can provide that insight. For example, many of the books written about women during this time either sought to exotify or condemn them. For example, in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, Cleland paints the women he is writing about as sex-crazed and uncontrollable.<sup>8</sup> This was a common view of mistresses and women in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, as many saw prostitutes as sexual temptresses who entered into sex work to appease their ravenous sexual appetites.<sup>9</sup> However, this work fails to explore the mental and physical consequences of this, and it does not talk about the violence or vulnerability that the majority of sex workers experienced.<sup>10</sup>

Another example of a work that explores prostitution in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century is *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe. This work explores the plight of a fictional woman who was born in Newgate prison before being transported to the colonies. Throughout the story, she marries, commits crimes, remarries, and enters prostitution repeatedly. The tale is supposed to be a compilation of the individual experience in London, and yet it is a broad tale which does not humanize the character. In its attempts to be representative of a "type," it fails to delve into the main character's emotions, or to examine the consequences of her actions, both internal and external. The main character is distanced from, and inaccurately portrayed to the reader.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, one of the progressive works to come out of this era is Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria*. Wollstonecraft focuses on a lot of the social conditions that forced women into

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<sup>8</sup> Cleland, John. *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. New York: Putnam, 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Fleming, David. "Public Attitudes to Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Ireland." *Irish Economic and Social History* 32 (2005): 1-18.

<sup>10</sup> Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*.

<sup>11</sup> "Moll Flanders." *Britannica Online Academic Edition*, 2018, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

vulnerable positions and also offers criticism of the legal system that protected abusive marital relationships. However, even with this, Wollstonecraft perpetuates some of the societal notions of women as sex-crazed, when she has her main heroine fixated on sexual fantasies of her abusive husband.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to literature that speaks generally about women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there has also been some work done on Plunkett herself. In *Peg Plunkett: Memoirs of a Whore*, Julie Peakman attempts to reconstruct Plunkett's life using her memoirs. Throughout the book, Peakman pieces together a chronology of Peg's life by rearranging and explaining anecdotes that Plunkett writes about, using other primary sources and memoirs of some of her clients.<sup>13</sup> The result is an abridged version of Plunkett's memoirs, which helps to clarify the events of her life, but does not seek to analyze the agency that she enjoyed. This is an important work, as it provides the factual basis for the analysis that this paper will examine.

Finally, though, another area that provides important context for this work, is the sociological studies of sex work that have been completed thus far. Specifically, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* by Kathleen Barry identifies four ways in which sex work can be oppressive to women, including distancing, disengagement, dissociation, and disembodiment. Throughout these four areas, sex work removes women from the world of social legitimacy, their homes, and their families. Again, these mechanisms are illustrated by using a number of different case

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<sup>12</sup> Wollstonecraft, Mary, Mellor, Anne Kostelanetz, and Chao, Noelle. *Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman ; And, the Wrongs of Woman, Or, Maria*. Longman Cultural Edition. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Peakman, Julie. *Peg Plunkett: Memoirs of a Whore*. London, England: Quercus Editions Ltd., 2015.

examples with a variety of women.<sup>14</sup> This is a useful source, as it opens up the wider discussion about the cost of agency for Plunkett and all women, and the fact that this agency was achieved only on the periphery of society. In Peg's case, she may have gained some individual choice, but it came at the expense of her family and social acceptability.

Aside from the social mechanisms that may have affected agency in sex work, another useful source for this project is *Becoming an Ex-Sex Worker: Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career* by Teela Sanders. In this work, Sanders seeks to explore the various reasons and ways that women leave prostitution. She splits her research into two studies – one of street workers and one of indoor sex workers, and identifies four main ways in which women leave the industry. These include: reactionary, gradual planning, natural progression, and yo yoiing.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly useful, as Plunkett exits sex work at the end of her life, which is one of the reasons that she writes her memoirs. However, once again, this fails to address the larger discussion about the implications of prostitution and brothel owning on agency.

Overall, there has been a lot written about the changing role of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, both broadly and also in Ireland. The plethora of work, therefore, illustrates that this was a time of dramatic change and serves as an important backdrop for this piece. Additionally, the abridged memoirs serve as a useful factual basis for which to conduct this analysis. Finally, though, the sociological lens provided by studies into sex work also provide important context for the social forces at play and the impact that this has on individual choice. While many of these works seek to examine a wide range of women in order to provide a more generalized

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<sup>14</sup> Barry, Kathleen. *The Prostitution of Sexuality*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, Teela. "Becoming an Ex-Sex Worker: Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career." *Feminist Criminology* 2, no. 1 (2007): 74-95.

view, this work takes the opposite approach. In looking at Peg's life, we can clearly see the lengths she had to go to and the costs she incurred in order to increase her individual choice.<sup>16</sup> This, in turn, provides us with insight into the restrictive and patriarchal society that made it so difficult for women to obtain this agency in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland.

In determining whether or not there is a connection between Plunkett's sex work and a greater ability to exercise her agency, we must first see if this ability changed over the course of her life. Once we have shown if there is a correlation between a boost in Peg's individual choice and her success in sex work, we can then extrapolate some of the reasons for this, including examining its specific characteristics, and also the social position that it afforded Peg.

To begin, though, several external factors will be examined in conjunction with some of Peg's important life events. This is useful, as it allows us to track changes in Plunkett's ability to exercise agency throughout her life, by determining how much these factors limited Peg's choices versus when she was able to overcome them. This, in turn, will help us pin point and examine the causes for this change.

The external factors that we will be looking at generally fall into the categories of: social, familial, economic, political, and religious. The first category, social, refers to both the influence of social stigma and also patriarchal power structures. Social stigma, in this context, can be defined as the way in which Plunkett was treated in society because of her reputation and profession. Public attitudes toward prostitution, while shifting during the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, still fell pretty heavily against prostitutes, as many associated them with crime and sin. Merely being

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<sup>16</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

seen with a prostitute could be enough to be shunned from certain aspects of society.<sup>17</sup> Finally, though, there will also be some modern documentation brought in, concerning the sociology of sex work. In particular, the way in which prostitution and deviant behavior is treated within society and the impact that this has on the individual choices of sex workers.<sup>18</sup> In addition to social stigma, patriarchal power structures will also be examined. Patriarchal power structures can be found in a number of different contexts, but in a social context, they are important as they perpetuated the notion of the ideal woman. Anyone who did not fit into this was a threat to societal order.

Familial structures describes both Plunkett's immediate blood relatives, and also the non-biological family that she developed later on within her own community. This factor is also inextricably linked to other external forces such as patriarchy and socioeconomic status. However, understanding the type of family that Plunkett came from and the specific power structure within that family is essential, as it was a vital influence in Plunkett's decision to enter and remain in prostitution. Furthermore, the fact that Peg was able to develop strong familial ties later on with friends is also significant, as it provided her with a safety net for difficult situations.<sup>19</sup> One important aspect of this safety net was economic.

However, economics also encompasses both Plunkett's own socioeconomic status and upbringing, and also the broader economic trends of the 18th century, specifically with regards to women's employment, and the make-up of the Irish economy at this time. Plunkett's own socioeconomic status is important as it affected the way she was educated and raised. This, in

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<sup>17</sup> Fleming, "Public Attitudes to Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Ireland."

<sup>18</sup> Sanders, "Becoming an Ex-Sex Worker: Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career."

<sup>19</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

turn, affected the type of men she was able to attract, and how much she could charge for her services.<sup>20</sup> These elements are key, as financial independence is an important determinant in choice.

Aside from her own socioeconomic status, though, it is also important to examine the changing nature of women's employment during the 18th century. While domesticity was still the most traditional role, many women began entering the workforce as clothing makers, and domestic servants. There was also a rise in the number of women starting and running their own shops and businesses. In times of economic growth, in particular, more women can be seen entering employment over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> This is important to know for this thesis, because it provides a comparison of other types of female employment available to women and the agency that it afforded them as a result. It also helps to determine what extent her ability to exercise agency was due to sex work.

Beyond this, parliament also began to meet regularly in Dublin during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which contributed to the development of a more consistent social season, and drove noblemen into the city.<sup>22</sup> This allowed for high-class brothels, such as the one owned by Plunkett, to flourish because of the increased demand by these wealthy clients. Again, this contributed to Peg's ability to exercise her agency, as the money she gained from servicing high-brow clientele provided her with more options.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, Deborah. *Women, Marriage and Property in Wealthy Landed Families in Ireland, 1750-1850*. 2009.

<sup>22</sup> O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800*.

Of course, the political context of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland also cannot be ignored. This refers to the way in which laws limited or developed female agency in Ireland, and also the broader political context of the Enlightenment, French Revolution, and the United Irishmen Movement. The laws that concern female agency, include legislation about marriage, property, and divorce. In addition to just looking at the laws themselves, though, it is also important to look at the extent to which they were enforced. In analyzing many of the marital laws and agreements of the time, it is evident that there is a wide range of agency among married women. While the doctrine of coverture existed, in which women's identities were taken over by that of their husbands, many primary accounts of the time tell conflicting stories. Some women were valued business or estate partners, who were given large responsibilities in running the families' affairs. In other cases, though, women were cut out of important decisions, and left simply to run domestic affairs.<sup>23</sup> Getting a clear picture of this variance, though, is also important because it shows that like Plunkett, women's lives during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were largely based on chance, society, and the men around them.

The broader context of the Enlightenment is also important as it led to a change in social attitudes about women. However, this did not always translate into practical change. For example, the limitations of these movements can be seen in the both the French Revolution and Ireland's United Irishmen movement. Parisian women went the furthest in demanding liberties and rights, and for a while actually became part of the larger ideological discussion. However, the reactionary forces eventually saw these rights and liberties scaled back again. In the American Revolution, similar notions of republican motherhood as in Ireland were also

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Women, Marriage and Property*.

emphasized, with the same restrictions of domesticity on female education.<sup>24</sup> Examining Ireland is also an essential component, as the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time of dramatic change in regards to the loosening of the penal laws against Catholics, particularly at the end of the period.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century also saw the rise of one of the first political organizations committed to Irish republicanism. The beginning of the United Irishmen movement sought a re-emergence of the Irish catholic identity and voting rights for Catholics. While the movement sought to remedy injustices for men, though, there was little, if any, talk of helping women obtain greater rights. In fact, while there was an emphasis, on women's roles as educators to bring about the next generation of good citizens, it was confined to the domestic sphere. As a result, educational opportunities were opened up for women, but only as it related to them being able to teach their children effectively.<sup>25</sup>

Another important force that was a critical determinant of one's ability to exercise agency in 18th century Ireland was religion. This is an important area to look at, as Plunkett was Catholic. The penal laws that curbed the rights of Catholics were introduced and strengthened over the course of the 18th century, and as a result they will be an invaluable source for exploring how Plunkett's religious affiliation may have provided limitations to her choices. Furthermore, religion also affected notions of patriarchy, which can be seen in the way marriage contracts were drawn up, and the type of employment Catholic women entered into. The Catholic Church actually became more patriarchal, encouraging women not to read scripture and enforcing stricter notions of purity and morality. This was done as a reaction

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<sup>24</sup> Hurl-Eamon, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-century Europe*.

<sup>25</sup> MacCurtain, Margaret, and O'Dowd, *Women in Early Modern Ireland*.

against the Protestant influence in Ireland, which encouraged the reading of scripture for oneself. However, when patriarchy came in contrast with Protestantism, patriarchy won, which illustrates that while things may have been loosening for women in some respects, Ireland remained very patriarchal, especially among Catholics.<sup>26</sup>

In Plunkett's case, this is an incredibly telling factor, as Peg actually turned away from her Catholic faith while she was working, and then came back to it at the end of her life. Upon her return to her Catholic faith, she refused to continue with her work as a prostitute and brothel owner.<sup>27</sup> This is important as it allows us to compare aspects of her life with and without religion, or more broadly, her life while she was a member of an established part of society versus when she was not. Comparing these times in her life, will allow us to make observations about the relationship between agency and living on the periphery of society, outside of traditional social institutions. This also ties in with some work that's been done on the sociology of sex workers in general. In particular, on the dehumanizing and detachment necessary in order for women to continue with prostitution.<sup>28</sup> This allows us to more fully understand the costs associated with this type of work, and therefore answer some questions about the costs, for women, of obtaining agency.

Overall, this piece is important, as Plunkett's story, while unique to her, offers insights into broader themes. It offers us a rare look into what life was like for the Dublin elite, and the paramount shifts in society that were happening in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Aside from this, though, it

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<sup>26</sup> O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*.

<sup>27</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

<sup>28</sup> Sanders, Teela. "Becoming an Ex-Sex Worker: Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career." *Feminist Criminology* 2, no. 1 (2007).

also tells us what it was like for women at this time. We will see throughout the course of this work that Peg's ability to exercise agency changed throughout her life. From this, we can then draw some conclusions about the reasons for this change, and why this change was possible. Included in this discussion, though, will also be a nuanced examination of the consequences to Peg's emotional and mental health, and also to her interpersonal relationships. In doing so, we will get a clearer picture of the drastic limitations that all women of this time faced, and the ways in which these could be overcome.

## *Chapter 1: Adolescent Turmoil & the First Fall*

In examining Peg Plunkett's ability to exercise agency in her life, we will first start by examining her adolescence and early adult life. The reason we are using this time as a starting point is because that is where Plunkett started her memoirs, and so evidently saw this as the earliest time that was relevant to her career and entrance into sex work. Catalyzed by the installation of her cruel and violent older brother, Christopher, as head of the family, Plunkett's world changed dramatically. It became clear that she had to escape him, although, it appeared impossible through traditional means. As a result, Plunkett slowly fell into an affair, which resulted in other consequences.<sup>29</sup> Peg was by no means a sex worker at this time in her life, but we will show how sex acted as both a liberating and constraining element for her. Moreover, in highlighting these elements now, it will also become clear later on, how this sex differed greatly from the type of sex work she engaged in later on in her life, and what this meant for her individual choice. After looking at these different instances, it will be clear, given Plunkett's lack of opportunity and dependency for the majority of this time period, that she was limited in her capacity to exert power and make individual choices.

One specific example of this can be seen when Peg was a teenager, probably around the age of sixteen. Her father became ill and so decided to give power over the estate to her older brother, Christopher. This decision represented a significant turning point in Peg's life, as he was incredibly abusive toward her. The violence he inflicted against Peg, was both devastating and random. In one anecdote that Plunkett cites in her memoirs, her brother was upset that

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<sup>29</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

she had taken one of the family horses to church. When she returned to the estate, her brother was so mad that he, “beat me with his hose-whip so vehemently that the sleeves of my riding-habit could not be got off my swelled arms till they were slit open: and I kept my bed ten days from the bruises I had received.”<sup>30</sup> This example very explicitly shows us the way in which Peg’s ability to exercise agency was restricted, as she could not even leave the estate without fear of reprisal from her brother.

While it is easy to place blame for Peg’s limited power, at this point in her life, solely on her brother, there are also larger social, political, and religious factors that are responsible for this. For instance, the transfer of the estate to Christopher was due mostly to the patriarchal power structures that existed within 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland’s society, which utilized primogeniture to allot inheritance. In Plunkett’s case, it gave her abusive brother all rights over her family’s estate, which in turn, gave him the power to control Plunkett’s movements. Plunkett, therefore, had to rely on the generosity of family and friends in order to escape the cruelty of her brother. However, Christopher, also had the ability to stop this by refusing to let her leave the estate, which he did on numerous occasions.<sup>31</sup> The violence that Plunkett’s brother inflicted on her, while not legal, would have been widely accepted.<sup>32</sup> As a result, Peg also did not have a strong alternative recourse to curb her brother’s abuse. This demonstrates how the social norms of the time, in this case patriarchal and family power structures, limited Plunkett’s ability to exercise her agency, as she they gave almost complete power to the male family member in charge of her.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>31</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 4-16.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1-13.

In addition to Christopher's control of Peg's movements, though, another way in which he hampered her ability to exercise her agency was by taking away one of her only possibilities for escape. Even though Peg's father had left a sizeable dowry for her, Christopher, as head of the estate, was in charge of managing it. Therefore, he could decide when and how to use the money. This is because Irish property law stated that men had control over all of a woman's assets. Although there were some situations in which women could maintain some of their assets, such as through private settlements made before a marriage, this was often only for women who were already getting married.<sup>33</sup> Men, as heads of estates, exercised the most control.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, though, Christopher had a severe gambling problem, and so wanted to use Peg's dowry for his own entertainment. As a result, he turned away many of Peg's initial suitors for a variety of reasons, until it became clear to all involved, that he was never going to give Peg her dowry. This had an important impact on Plunkett's ability to make choices, as it pretty much dissuaded anyone in her social caste from marrying her. The reason that this is significant is because marriage provided both social legitimacy and economic security. Marriage was one of the main roles for women in 18th-century Dublin, and because of her financial situation, it was a role that was not available to Plunkett.<sup>35</sup> So, this tells us that Plunkett's economic realities also played a part in the extent to which she was able to exercise her agency, as it drastically narrowed her marriage prospects. That is also why the change to who became the head of her family was an incredibly significant event in her life, given the amount of power her brother wielded over her.

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<sup>33</sup> Wilson, *Women, Marriage and Property*, 127-147.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *Women, Marriage and Property*.

The restrictions that Peg faced also drove her into another aspect of her life. After Plunkett's beating at the hands of Christopher over the horse, her father was able to temporarily send her to live with her married sister in Dublin, by giving her forty pounds and helping her to leave the estate while her brother was away.<sup>36</sup> This was important in Plunkett's ability to exercise her agency, as the money allowed her to temporarily remove herself from her brother's influence. In this case, it allowed her to remain in Dublin away from him. However, once again, this agency was only achieved with the help of a man and therefore also demonstrates her dependence at this stage of her life.

Moreover, after numerous unsuccessful attempts to convince her brother to pay her dowry, Plunkett largely resigned herself to the fact that she would not get married. Peg describes this in her memoirs when she says, "this treatment, constantly repeated, joined to the disappointment of every proposition of marriage, and the mocks, jeers and sarcasms cast upon me by my brother on that account, made me very low-spirited."<sup>37</sup> Even with this resignation, though, Peg met a man named Mr. Dardis, through her brother-in-law who she was staying with in Dublin, who she quickly fell in love with. Despite her better judgment and their mutual agreement that they could not get married given her financial situation, she thought of him as a future husband and started having an affair with him, that became sexual.<sup>38</sup> When she is describing the event in her memoirs she says, "I saw my seducer had triumphed, yet how could I call him seducer, when I met the seduction halfway."<sup>39</sup> This shows that Peg was able to

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.,

exercise some choice at this point in her life, as she started the affair willingly. However, it also illustrates the desperation of her position, as she clearly felt that this was one of her only options to get married. Later on in her memoirs she says, “Hope was at hand, that that imprudence might be amended by his marrying me.”<sup>40</sup> In her memoirs, which were written at the end of her life and career as a prostitute and brothel-owner, she describes this relationship as her “first failing,” and “the fatal foundation of all that followed.” In fact, she goes on to provide a morality lesson to her readers by saying, “learn hence my young female readers, cautiously to guard against the first approaches of vice – learn to keep firm that barriers of virtue, and know that if the smallest breach is made in the mounds of Chastity, vice rushes in like a torrent.”<sup>41</sup> This is an incredibly telling retrospection, as it shows a self-awareness that this decision had significant consequences on the choices she was able to make later in her life. Additionally, it also gives us insight into the lack of individual choice Peg thought she had because of her brother’s refusal to pay her dowry.

Aside from Peg’s love for Dardis, it is also impossible to ignore the other reasons that pushed her into this position. For example, Peg’s social expectations certainly played a role in this. Plunkett was a member of a relatively wealthy, upper-class family, which meant that she would have been brought up with the expectation of becoming a wife and mother.<sup>42</sup> It is highly unlikely that any other possibilities would have even been known to her, and as a result, she may have felt that starting a relationship with Dardis was an opportunity to attain that position.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>42</sup> Peakman, Julie. *Peg Plunkett: Memoirs of a Whore*. London: Quercus Editions Ltd., 2015.

Throughout her relationship with Dardis, he repeatedly told her that he would marry her.<sup>43</sup>

However, once the affair with Dardis turned sexual, her options from that point were severely limited. The consequences of the affair, including the social stigma surrounding the loss of her virginity before marriage, would have made it virtually impossible to get married to anyone else, let alone to someone of her same class. As we will see, this stigma followed Peg for the rest of her life.

Despite the loss of her reputation, this affair with Dardis was liberating in some ways. One key way, was that it allowed her to escape her brother's cruelty. Dardis initially only saw Peg when she was staying with her sister, however, at some point in their relationship Peg left her sister and moved into a room rented for her by Dardis. Although Peg does not cite the details of when or how this happened, it is clear that this is when Peg transitioned into being a kept woman for Dardis. Despite her almost complete dependence on him, this transition does illustrate how she was able to increase her ability to exercise her agency, as she was able to remove herself permanently from her brother's grasp. Before Dardis, Plunkett's own family could not even get her away from her older brother.<sup>44</sup> It is important to note, though, that this expansion in agency was temporary and incredibly case-specific. Plunkett's sexual relationship with Dardis, also meant an overall narrowing of her options because of the damage that it caused her reputation. This is evident because after she began the affair, she could not return to her family nor could she leave Dardis. Unlike later in her life when she engaged in more traditional forms of sex work, Peg was not receiving an independent income from Dardis. She

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<sup>43</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 18-20.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-15.

was provided with food and lodgings, but beyond this was not paid for their sexual encounters.

As a result, Plunkett was unable to save money or provide her own means of escape.

Moreover, at this point in her life, Peg was also still trying to live within the bounds of social acceptability, meaning that she still wanted to hide the kind of life she was living in order to protect her reputation. This added element of secrecy also meant that she was constrained in her individual choices, as she could not live her life openly.

From an outside perspective, Peg's life looks very restricted. However, Plunkett may not have had a greater ability to exercise her own agency had she been married. 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin law followed the principle of legal coverture. Legal coverture is the idea that a wife's legal identity is "covered," or assumed, by her husband. Furthermore, it also stated that all of a woman's property would pass into her husband's hands at the time of their marriage. While there are instances of some women protecting their assets before they got married by creating separate estate agreements, many married women became beholden to their husbands as a result of this law. Moreover, once married, women could not enter into contracts or acquire property of their own.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, this illustrates that, at least legally, marriage severely inhibited a woman's ability to exercise her agency. Of course, every marriage is different, and women certainly carved out their own spheres of influence both within and outside of their marriages. Consequently, it is impossible to tell how much control Plunkett would have had over her own choices if she got married. What is significant, though, is that, in principle, she had more rights as an unmarried woman having an affair than she would have had as a married woman.

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<sup>45</sup> Wilson, *Women, Marriage and Property*, 19-20.

Another way in which we can see Peg's increase in her ability to exercise agency through this affair with Dardis, is through her rejection of her religious upbringing and convictions. The Church was the center of morality in Ireland during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and both the Protestant Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church preached that sex before marriage was a sin.<sup>46</sup> Of course, it was widely tolerated and even expected that men would not adhere to this, but it was taught that women should be virgins at the time of marriage. The prevailing theory in religion, at the time, was that women were divinely created to be mothers, and that if they engaged in sex before marriage, they were temptresses.<sup>47</sup> Plunkett would have been no stranger to these ideas about women's sexuality, as she was a devout Catholic.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, she would have had to overcome her own religious faith in order to start engaging in a sexual relationship with Dardis. Consequently, this example is important as it illustrates a time when Plunkett was not limited by religion, but was actually able to bypass this factor and effectively exercise her own agency and choice. This is clear because, in her memoirs, Plunkett is very explicit about the fact that she entered into this affair willingly and was not forced or seduced.

This expansion of individual choice, because of her affair, was unfortunately short-lived, though. Given that Peg was living in a time without effective birth control, and that she was sixteen or seventeen years old when she began having sex with Dardis, it should be no surprise to anyone that she quickly found herself pregnant. The risk and consequences associated with this affair were only amplified by Peg's pregnancy, as now there was evidence of her misconduct. Dardis sent her to the countryside with a nurse in order to give birth because he

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>47</sup> Hurl-Eamon, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-century Europe*.

<sup>48</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

was afraid that their affair would be discovered, and having a child out of wedlock would tarnish both of their reputations, although hers more so than his of course. In her memoirs, Plunkett emphasizes how scared and alone she felt when she was sent away to deliver her child.<sup>49</sup> She traveled several miles by coach, and when she met a family acquaintance along the way, she had to get off at an earlier stop to match the lie she had told about the reasons for her travel. Peg, therefore, found herself in a strange town with no family or friends to help her deliver. The fact that she felt she needed to do this, evidences the influence of social stigma on Plunkett's ability to exercise agency, as this dictated where she could give birth. Moreover, the presence of a child only made her more dependent on Dardis to look after her, as she had no means to support herself, let alone a child. Both her own ideas about self-preservation and those of Dardis stemmed from the necessity of hiding their affair and their child in order to maintain some respectability in society. This shows that once again, that the lengths Peg had to go to in order to maintain the secrecy of the affair only limited her choices. At this point in her life, Peg's attempts to remain in the metropole of Dublin society, were only decreasing her ability to exercise her agency. Moreover, she was taking on all of the risk of a ruined reputation and social stigma that accompany sex work, without also enjoying the income and connections that it could provide.

Despite her and Dardis's best efforts, though, Peg was unable to keep this affair secret for long, especially after she gave birth. As discussed, Plunkett went to Drogheda in the Irish countryside to deliver her first child, at the request of Dardis, in order to hide her situation. However, on her way there, she ran into a distant family relation who then notified her

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<sup>49</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 21-24.

family.<sup>50</sup> Both of her sisters, Mrs. Brady and Mrs. Smith, refused to see her, or help her when she came back. In fact, not only do they refuse to see her, but they severely rebuked her by calling her a, “vile wretch,” and physically removed her from their homes. While this may seem like an overreaction, an affair like this in the 18<sup>th</sup> century would have been incredibly scandalous, and a child would have only exacerbated the situation. Furthermore, the fact that this was Ireland, also meant that chastity and purity were given high importance in both Protestantism and Catholicism. These rebukes also had a clear impact on Plunkett, as she says, “I returned home with a thousand contending passions and my breast torn, with rage, shame, sorrow, distress, and repentance.”<sup>51</sup> The fact that her recollection of the event included these emotions demonstrates that Plunkett also understood the gravity of her situation. Her sisters’ refusal to see Plunkett was one of the main causes for Plunkett’s continued involvement with Dardis, as she had no alternative aid in Dublin. Therefore, this example evidences how her ability to make choices was hampered by her lack of family support due to the fact that they could have provided her with an alternative place to stay.

The economics of this came into play as, the presence of the child itself as an economic strain further limited her ability to make choices for herself. Dardis was keeping Plunkett housed and was taking care of her and their child financially.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, this demonstrates how the economics of her situation curbed her ability to exercise her agency, as her situation with Dardis was better financially than anything she could manage on her own. As a result,

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<sup>50</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 26-27.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>52</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 25-27.

even though she wanted to leave him and go elsewhere, doing so would have put herself into a bad position.

When she was finally able to leave him, it was only because of her father's financial aid. After Peg gave birth, she wrote to him again asking him for money. He told her to come home in order to help her leave Dardis, as he was providing her with a place to stay in Dublin. However, when she arrived, Christopher refused to allow her inside. Plunkett's desperation, at this point, was obvious as she sat on the front step of her old house and wept, while her father tried to comfort her from his window above. When her father was finally able to convince her brother to open the door, Christopher immediately had a coach take her back to Dublin, and sent her away with a small amount of money.<sup>53</sup> This instance in Plunkett's life is a complex example. Her brother's refusal to let her return home limited her ability to exercise control over her own life, as it forced her to return to Dublin. This decision, in turn, meant that she returned to the life of a kept woman, as she eventually found another man to be her protector.<sup>54</sup> The fact that she was able to leave Dardis only after obtaining a new man to financially support her shows that her options really were confined to moving between men. Plunkett was merely going from subservient and dependent positions between men, as we have seen previously, which tells us that her agency was severely restricted during this time period. However, the small amount of money given to her by her brother allowed her to at least escape Dardis. So, this example illustrates how precarious Plunkett's situation was. She was only able to escape one man with the help of another, and was not really escaping, but

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

rather just moving on to the protection and dependence of another. Therefore, this instance demonstrates both the constraints and liberations of her agency in both familial and economic spheres.

While female employment was increasing during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Plunkett lacked the kind of education that would have been required to enter these kinds of employment, and was also from the wrong social caste to consider these kinds of options. For example, many of the increases in female employment during this time period came in the form of opening food or cloth businesses in rural settings, and in the burgeoning textile industry in urban settings.<sup>55</sup> And yet, Plunkett most likely would not have even considered these forms of employment as an option for her. This is because – given her social, economic, and religious background – she likely would have received a traditional education that would have emphasized purely domestic skills. In short, she would have been educated to entertain and get married; not to work.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, Plunkett's religion also played a role in shaping what kind of education she received. For example, patriarchy was more severely imposed among Catholic families, as it was seen as a defense against Protestantism. In order to combat Protestantism's increasing influence in Ireland during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the Penal Laws, the Catholic Church in Ireland began preaching increasingly patriarchal sermons about a woman's place in the home. This was done to hamper Protestantism's insistence that individuals read scripture for themselves.<sup>57</sup> As a result, many of the afore-mentioned job opportunities were among

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<sup>55</sup> O'Dowd, Mary. *A History of Women in Ireland, 1500-1800*. 1st ed. Women and Men in History. Harlow, England; (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 115-128.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 20-44.

<sup>57</sup> O'Dowd, *A History of Women in Ireland*, 189-225.

Protestant women, and Protestant women often received more thorough educations in bookkeeping and accounting. There are a number of instances in which husbands left their wives in control over businesses and estates, but this was much more common among Protestants of the merchant class.<sup>58</sup> So, this shows how religion also impacted Peg's ability to make choices, as it helped to dictate her education.

Another example of this can be seen in the allocation of social resources. For instance, had Plunkett wanted to lead a different life, and receive some sort of job training or enter into a charitable program for unwed mothers, she would not have been able to because she was Catholic. There were "rehabilitation" centers for prostitutes in order to provide them with job training and get them into new professions. Many of these were created by Lady Arabella Darby who was an eminent philanthropist in Dublin during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, many of these types of charitable organizations would only allow Protestant women to be admitted into their programs.<sup>59</sup> This is important, as one of the few alternative options for a "ruined" woman would have been these charitable centers, but she would have been barred from entering them due to her religion. This affected her ability to exercise her own agency, as it restricted her access to alternative means of education and employment opportunities. Thus, inhibiting her ability to choose or see any other options besides staying with Dardis.

Both politics and religion clearly had an influence on the choices that Plunkett was able to make, and even her ability to make those choices. However, in both of these cases, the picture is incredibly nuanced and complex. In many cases, the extreme patriarchy imposed by

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>59</sup> Fleming, David, "Public Attitudes to Prostitution," 16-18.

her faith left her unprepared and unexperienced for a life outside of the domestic sphere.

Therefore, introducing and restraining her to a life of prostitution. However, it is also important to note that in her role as a prostitute she also may have received more individual power and influence than she would have otherwise, even if she did not receive the same protections.

All three of these examples also illustrate the impact that familial support had on Plunkett's choices. In 18th-century Dublin, as today, a family support system is a key element of success in life. Plunkett's sisters' and brother's unwillingness to help her after her affair with Dardis and the birth of her first child was significant, as it prevented her from exploring other options in life. No one can say whether or not she would have returned to being a kept woman had she been taken in by a family member. However, what is clear, is that by refusing to take her in, her family members took away one of her only alternative options to entering sex work. And yet, this also shows how sex hampered her individual choices, as her status as a ruined woman threatened her family's place in society as well.<sup>60</sup> They could not have taken her in without severe social consequences to themselves. The fact that she has no family to return to, though, meant that every decision she made after she had a child with Dardis was then made with the understanding that she no longer had a safety net. In case of hard times, she could not turn to her family for help. This undoubtedly would have influenced Plunkett's thinking and decision making going forward, as she knew there was no going back to her old life, and her old support system.

Overall, this time in Plunkett's life is clearly characterized by a reduction in her ability to exercise her own agency. While there are exceptions to this, Plunkett's adolescent life was

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<sup>60</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 27-32.

clearly defined by a series of powerful men forcing her in certain directions, that she was only able to get out of by turning to other powerful men. The patriarchal structure of society as well as the social stigma she incurred by having sex before marriage, meant that the few options she had available to her before the affair were even more limited. Furthermore, her family's lack of support for fear of their own reputations and because of their own cruelty meant that Plunkett also did not have a safety net. This lack of support also further solidified her economic realities and pushed her into a life of prostitution. Finally, though, the political climate in Ireland and Plunkett's Catholic faith meant that she was ill-prepared for a life outside the domestic sphere and was cut off from charitable resources. All of these factors clearly helped to push Plunkett into a life as a kept woman and then a prostitute. Additionally, at this early stage in her life, sex had very mixed results in developing her agency. In some cases, it allowed her to escape difficult situations, that she may not otherwise been able to get out of. However, these escapes were only achieved by becoming beholden to different men.

## *Chapter 2: Rise & Celebrity*

During the height of Peg's career, she was one of Dublin's most well-known madams. She was literally turning men away at her door to make room for the lords and dukes who frequented her house. In true Plunkett style, she was also making and spending money at shocking rates, decorating her houses in grand design and employing an army of servants to look after her girls and her clients. It was a brisk turn away from the early stages of Plunkett's life, during which she had been almost completely dependent on the men around her. While Peg still made her money and achieved her influence through sex work, this time in her life was much more stable and Plunkett appears to be much more empowered. The build-up of her reputation allowed her to not only accumulate a larger income, but also to exercise more control over who she took on as a client, and to exert more influence in society overall. However, all of this grandeur and notoriety came at a price. Peg's continued involvement with prostitution clearly took an emotional toll on her, and she was forced to live within the confines of her position as a woman outside the realm of respectability. In order to demonstrate these liberties and constraints, the same factors that were used to examine Plunkett's early life will also be used to explore this middle stage of her life. The particular life events that this chapter will evaluate include: romances that she had outside of her work, the Pinking Dandies Incident in which her home was attacked, and her life as a brothel owner including vetting clients and taking on girls. These instances will demonstrate that, although Plunkett experienced a greater amount of control over her life because of her celebrity, she was still limited in her ability to exercise agency because of the emotional toll of sex work and also because of the consequences to her personal relationships.

At this point in the analysis, it is also necessary to outline the prevailing sociological theories on sex work. Although these are modern studies and theories, they are still relevant in analyzing Plunkett's ability to exercise agency, as they take a universal approach to sex work, and so can provide insight into Peg's situation. Although views of prostitutes have changed since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and different cultures approach sex work differently, these theories provide a basis for our analysis. While each sociological study takes a nuanced outlook, the prevailing views on sex work generally fall into two distinct categories. These categories include those sociologists that believe that sex work is, for the most part, exploitative, and those that believe that sex work can be liberating for women, or at the very least, the result of independent female choice. The first category of sociologists, who see sex work as exploitative to women, are sometimes referred to as neo-abolitionists. Neo-abolitionists argue that sex work is exploitative to women because it is the product of a patriarchal society, which views sex as a male privilege.<sup>61</sup> They also argue that prostitution is inherently exploitative because of the role it plays in society, which, they contend, is ensuring that men have access to women's bodies.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, the other category of sociologists, known as sex positivists, make the case that women should be free to choose whichever type of work they want to partake in, including sex work, and that it can be liberating, simply because of the options that it provides women.<sup>63</sup> The one thing that both groups have in common, though, is that they agree that economics is a key driver for women to get involved in sex work. No other industry provides

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<sup>61</sup> Gerassi, Lara. "A Heated Debate: Theoretical Perspectives of Sexual Exploitation and Sex Work." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 42, no. 4 (2015): 79-100.

<sup>62</sup>Spector, Jessica. *Prostitution and Pornography : Philosophical Debate about the Sex Industry*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 55.

<sup>63</sup> Gerassi, "A Heated Debate," 79-100.

the same immediate cash flow that sex work does. These competing views on sex work are useful because they raise an important aspect of the argument about Plunkett's ability to exercise agency, which is how does exploitation affect agency. It is clear that Peg gave up control and power in her romantic life in order to gain influence in the social sphere of her life, and that giving these things up clearly had a deep emotional impact.

Some examples, which will help dive into these questions, revolve around Plunkett's life outside of sex work. There are two instances of Plunkett's romantic life that are purely separate from her other clientele and one example that overlaps with her work. The first example that we will look at is her relationship with a man named Mr. Lawless. For context, at this point in Plunkett's life, her main source of support still came from serving as a kept woman for a succession of different men. However, this was incredibly unstable, as she would fall out of favor with the man she was living with, or they would not be able to afford to keep her anymore. As a result, she was constantly transitioning between protectors, and worked as a prostitute for wealthy clients in the times between. When she met and started her relationship with Lawless, she was actually still involved with a different man, named Mr. Leeson, who she took her working name from. One reason that Leeson became a protector for Plunkett was because he was an incredibly jealous and controlling man, and he did not like the idea that she had other clients when she first starting seeing him. Leeson had grand aspirations of moving Plunkett away from all the distractions of city life to the country where he could have her all to himself and ensure that she was not seeing anyone else. He even proposed marriage to her, although it is unclear if he actually would have followed through. If he had, it would have meant retreating from the public eye and giving up his own social acceptability.

Furthermore, although Plunkett wanted to get married, she did not want to do so at the expense of her lifestyle. Always the social butterfly, Peg was not a fan of the proposal and noted, “a recluse and retired way of life was not agreeable to me. I thought it hard to be thus totally deprived of all society with my former intimates.”<sup>64</sup> Leeson also provided her with a luxurious style of living, furnishing a house for her to live in, and allowing her to charge her expenses to him, including things like jewelry and dresses.

Despite living with Leeson, though, Plunkett still managed to continue some of her relationships with former clients – in this case, though, it was not about a need for money, but rather for companionship, and her own amusement. As she put it: “In spite of his [Leeson’s] vigilance, I sometimes enjoyed them to compensate for the external constraint I was forced to assume. I sometimes gave admission to my old friend Mr. Lawless, through the parlour window.”<sup>65</sup> Plunkett also snuck out of the house on several occasions and even cultivated relationships with Leeson’s staff in order to maintain her secret affair with Lawless, who could not afford to be her protector at the time. Plunkett’s views on keeping multiple men at this time in her life were clearly influenced by her profession, as they went against her religious and moral upbringing. For example, she says, “I, at that time, was fully persuaded that Polygamy was not wrong in its own nature, but merely as it was a difference between what was evil in itself and evil by human prohibition.”<sup>66</sup> She goes on to explain that she believed what she was doing was not that bad, given that she was not married. She acknowledges that in Catholicism,

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<sup>64</sup> Leeson, Margaret. *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson, Madam 1727-1797*, Edited by Mary Lyons. Dublin: The Lilliput Press Ltd., 1995, 37.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 40.

marriage is a sacrament and that her profession would have been considered sinful, and yet she saw it as a lesser evil and a lesser sin than if she had been married. While she acknowledges that this was failed logic, it is illustrative of Peg's wit and also her shockingly progressive views for an Irish Catholic woman in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

And yet, it was this exact thinking, and her continued practice of keeping multiple men, which caused her to lose Leeson as her protector. When Leeson had to leave the country for business, he employed someone to follow Peg to ensure that she was being faithful. This spy then quickly discovered Plunkett's affair with Lawless and wrote to Leeson. Once Leeson discovered what she had been doing, though, he cut her off and cast her out of his house. In fact, she discovered that he had found out about the affair when one of the merchants she went to refused to extend her any credit. It is clear, though, thanks to Peg's own scathing introspection, that Plunkett did not have any kind of real attachment to Leeson, because she says, "I candidly confess I was more distressed with the loss of his purse than his person."<sup>67</sup> This shows once again Plunkett's precarious position as a kept woman, as she was completely financially dependent on one man at a time. Therefore, her ability to exercise her own agency was still limited at this point in her life, due to this instability. This can also be seen when she goes from living with Leeson to Lawless immediately after she was found out, as she had no alternative means of supporting herself.

It is important to make the distinction between Leeson and Lawless, though, as Leeson was clearly just a client who she depended on for income, whereas Peg's relationship with Lawless was a romantic one. This is evident because Plunkett saw Lawless when she was

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 42.

involved with Leeson, and her sexual relations with him did not involve the transfer of money. Additionally, Plunkett herself also makes this distinction in her memoirs when she says, “I really loved him [Lawless]... I promised sincerely he should have the sole possession of my heart and my person.”<sup>68</sup> And yet, this example once again demonstrates Plunkett’s dependence on men for protection and support, as she goes almost immediately to live with him after being cast out by Leeson. Furthermore, this example also shows how economic factors constrained her ability to exercise her agency, as she was only able to go and live with Lawless at this point because his older brother had recently died, leaving him a small inheritance. Nevertheless, Plunkett did consider this relationship to be an escape from her life as a kept woman, even going so far as to claim that “I inwardly rejoiced that I should have an opportunity of quitting that kind of life.”<sup>69</sup> It’s statements like these, throughout her memoirs, that speak to Peg’s lack of choice, and also the emotional toll that sex work had on her, as clearly she had to remain in a life that she did not want. Of course, it also shows her continued dependence on men, as she was only able to leave sex work with the help of another man.

What is perhaps most interesting about the example of Lawless, though, is that she lived with him for five years, bore him five children, and yet never actually married him. Her “ruined” reputation made her unfit to marry a gentleman, even someone that she had been in a long-term relationship with one, who clearly cared deeply for her. This situation is clearly different from Leeson, though, as Lawless was not in control of his own finances. Based on the way Plunkett describes the end of their romance, it seems that Lawless did not care about his

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.,

reputation in the same way that his father did. In fact, their relationship only ended when Lawless' father found out who he had been living with, and cut him off. Therefore, this example demonstrates how both social and economic factors still influenced Plunkett's ability to exercise agency, despite having seemingly reached a position of greater overall control in her life. The social stigma that Peg endured because of her profession and because of her past sexual history clearly affected her choices as she was not able to remain with the man she loved. Despite the circumstances, it was still less shameful for Lawless to be sent away and to abandon Plunkett than to marry her and accept the consequences. Therefore, this demonstrates that Plunkett's ability to make decisions in her life – in this case over her marital status – was still severely restricted. It also illustrates that the reason her choices were constrained was largely because of her involvement with sex work and its related untraditional relationships, as it was her tarnished reputation from being a kept woman that made her unfit to marry, in the eyes of Lawless' father anyway.

This also shows us the influence that economics had on her ability to exercise her agency, as the fact that she had no dowry to provide in a marriage meant that she could not choose who she wanted to be with. As soon as Lawless had exhausted his inheritance and his father cut him off, he had no other way of providing for himself, for Peg, or for their children, and so was forced to abandon them and move to New York in order to get back into his father's good graces. Despite all of this, it is important to remember that Plunkett had long been aware of the possible limits here. Moreover, her initial affair with Lawless, while she was still under the protection of Leeson, shows that Peg was able to overcome some of the external factors acting on her at that time. Indeed, when she began her affair with Lawless she had no idea that

his brother would die and leave him with an inheritance. So, when she took up with him, she was risking the financial security provided by Leeson in order to enjoy her life, and to be with someone she actually liked. This kind of attitude is in stark contrast to the way Peg made choices earlier in her life, as we saw with her decision to remain with Dardis after the birth of her first child.

Aside from just the beginning and the end of the relationship, though, it is also important to look at Plunkett's ability to exercise agency while she was entangled in the relationship, and living with Lawless for those five years. In particular, we need to examine the violence that she experienced. In her memoirs, Plunkett describes her relationship with Lawless as tumultuous and jealousy-fueled. She also claims responsibility for the volatile nature of their relationship, and even provides cautionary advice to her female readers.<sup>70</sup> For example, before she describes a fight between her and Lawless, she says, "one particular anecdote of my turbulence and ill behavior, I cannot avoid relating, as it may be a lesson to some of my female readers to avoid a similar conduct, by shewing its absurdity, and that it constantly fails of obtaining the end it proposes."<sup>71</sup> The particular instance she's referring to with this was when she got into an argument with Lawless, and he beat her to such an extent that a surgeon and a doctor had to be called, and she lost the child she was carrying.<sup>72</sup> This is telling of the way in which patriarchal power structures limited Plunkett's ability to exercise her own agency, as it shaped the way violence against women was seen and accepted. There are so many instances of Peg being bold and standing up for herself, and yet it is instances like

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 43-53.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 43-53.

these that remind us that she was still a product of her time and circumstance. In situations of domestic violence, failure to report is not uncommon, nor is blaming oneself, however the wider context of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin may also play a role in her attitude towards her experiences with Lawless. The fact that Plunkett did not try and prosecute him the way she did others who enacted violence against her, indicates that it was not socially acceptable for women to bring their partners to court for domestic violence. However, in order to understand how social and political factors influenced Plunkett's ability to exercise her agency, it is first necessary to understand how domestic violence was treated in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin.

In 18<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, the legal system that was used was English Common Law, which had been brought over by the gradual establishment of English dominance of the country, most notably reinforced by Oliver Cromwell's military campaigns, and then later when King William III (William of Orange) defeated James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1691.<sup>73</sup> By Plunkett's time, this system had been fully established for over a century. Under this rule, spousal violence was not considered a separate offense from a common assault, and so was treated in the same way. Moreover, each instance of domestic violence with a couple was treated as a separate incident, which made it difficult for women to get recognition when violence became habitual, and it also made it hard to extract harsher penalties for offenders (the usual punishment for assault was a fine). In addition to these issues, though, the problem of dealing with domestic violence was further complicated by the fact that there were no shelters for abused women at this time, and so couples often were sent home together. Many men also saw it as within their rights as

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<sup>73</sup>"Heritage: History of the Law." Heritage: Courts Service of Ireland.  
<http://www.courts.ie/Courts.ie/Library3.nsf/pagecurrent/EA59D61A0CD9C5A680257FC3005B5422?opendocument>.

heads of the household to maintain discipline and compliance, and so argued that beating their wives fell within their own legal rights over them.<sup>74</sup>

In Plunkett's case, she probably would not have even considered going to the police, or trying to bring a suit against Lawless, as she saw it as her fault. Furthermore, even though Peg and Lawless weren't married, the same issues with prosecuting spousal violence would have arisen, as they lived together and Lawless would have probably just been fined for his actions. Moreover, the fact that she was dependent on Lawless at this time to support her, and because the legal system dealt with domestic violence so poorly, this definitely could have contributed to Plunkett's attitudes toward this violence. Therefore, this indicates that social and political factors could have influenced her ability to exercise her agency, as they did not provide viable alternative options to her. This kind of limiting of female agency also was not specific to Plunkett. While there are no reliable statistics on domestic violence in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin, due to lack of reporting and the way in which it was dealt with, many women who were in more socially acceptable roles also experienced spousal violence in their everyday lives.

Another significant relationship in Plunkett's life that demonstrates how she was restricted in her ability to execute her own choices, was with a man named Mr. Gorman. Like Lawless, Peg appears to have actually loved Gorman, but he could not afford to be her protector, so their affair was kept secret. Gorman was clearly infatuated with Peg, and even snuck out of his house at night in order to see her. Their affair continued until Gorman's father

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<sup>74</sup> Walshaw, Aimee. "Accommodating Poverty: The Housing and Living Arrangements of the English Poor, C. 1600–1850." *Housing Studies* 27, no. 5 (2012): 726-27.

found out about the relationship, and once again the rules of Dublin's elite society stood in the way of Peg's happiness. When Gorman's father demanded that he end the affair, Gorman refused. However, his father threatened to cut him off, and had him sent to the East Indies. Peg initially stayed in contact with him, and they exchanged letters for a brief period of time, but Gorman never returned to Ireland and their affair seems to have fizzled out.<sup>75</sup> The lengths that both Lawless and Gorman's fathers went to in order to avoid having their sons associated with Plunkett, though, clearly illustrates the social consequences of marrying or even being associated with someone like Plunkett, who had a "ruined" reputation.

Aside from Lawless and Gorman, which appear to be relationships of love, Plunkett was also briefly married to a man named Barry Yelverton in order to raise her social status. While Peg had received numerous marriage proposals or promises of marriage, these were often disingenuous and fell through. Yelverton was the only recorded instance of her actually being married. While Plunkett did not like Yelverton in the same way as Lawless and Gorman, she agreed to marry him because she knew his father was a well-known lawyer who was about to be made a peer, granting him membership in the House of Lords in Ireland. This was a significant match, as the son of a peer would have had a lot of power, and could have even brought Peg back into the realm of social-acceptability. It also would have meant an end to sex work, without forcing her to abandon the attractions of Dublin society, which we know she loved. It appears that this is why Peg agreed to marry him, as by this point, marriage was becoming something she desperately craved in order to help her escape her life in sex work. However, once his father found out about this, he stepped in and offered Peg the princely sum

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<sup>75</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 95-97.

of five hundred guineas to sign an annulment document.<sup>76</sup> Using her wit and undeniable ability to attract, Peg was able to leverage her social unacceptability into something advantageous for her. Furthermore, this also shows how Plunkett's position on the outskirts of society allowed her to increase her agency, as the threat of association with her was enough to reward her a generous payoff.

While social stigma had prevented Peg from being with men she loved in the past, she was able to use this marriage to her advantage in extracting what was roughly £525 from Yelverton's father by agreeing to the annulment. At the same time, though, Peg wasn't able to achieve the stability that she was attempting to gain with this marriage. She was still barred from entering the center of society through traditional means. Although she was able to use her position, this example once again shows how she wasn't able to fully exercise her individual choice, given the social stigma that came with being a sex worker. Furthermore, because fathers stepped in in all of these cases in order to protect their sons' reputations, it clearly illustrates the severity of the social consequences of her reputation, and also shows how Plunkett's control over her life was constrained by these patriarchal structures. The fact that fathers wielded so much power over their sons' lives had a large impact on Plunkett's life, given that she was not able to continue her relationships with any of these men, once they became aware. To be clear, the issue was not that their sons were visiting a prostitute, but rather that they were carrying on romantic relationships with one. In 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin, that distinction, although hypocritical, would have been very important.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 168-169.

This is a particularly telling anecdote, as in the earlier parts of her memoirs, it appears that Peg is striving to be married, and to achieve the stability that comes along with that. And yet, by the time she actually achieved this, it does not appear to mean that much to her. Plunkett does not spend a lot of time on this in her memoirs, which may indicate that, by this point, she could have realized that marriage would not have given her the same freedoms that she thought before. That is because at this point, Plunkett had a successful brothel and a substantial independent income. With marriage, she would have had to give all that up, and all of her assets would have been transferred to her husband. Despite this, Peg was probably at least a bit disappointed by the quick end to her marriage, as it was something she had wanted for a long time, and a way to exit her life in sex work.

Up until this point in the analysis, there have been brief preludes to Plunkett's life as a brothel owner, but it has not been fully explored. It is necessary to examine this aspect of her life, as it represents an important way in which Plunkett was able to continue to increase her ability to make choices, and gain more power over her life. One important way that opening a brothel gave more choice in her life was that it granted her more stability. For instance, when she was a kept woman, she was incredibly vulnerable to the whims of her clients, and was constantly moving between men. However, as a brothel owner, she had more stability because of the extra income she was receiving. Additionally, it also adjusted Peg's location on the periphery of society. While opening a brothel certainly did not grant her social acceptability, it did allow her to be more open about what she did. Previously, many of the men who acted as her keeper wanted her to remain out of sight, as it would have caused a scandal if it became public that they were living with Plunkett. Becoming a brothel owner liberated Peg, as she no

longer had to follow her protector's rules of when and where she could be seen. It also gave her an alternative entrance into the center of society. It was precisely by challenging and living outside of traditional domestic female roles that she was able to live amongst the nobility and elites of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin society. Like many other well-known courtesans and mistresses throughout history, Plunkett was able to insert herself into the upper echelons of Dublin society, and leverage her position. In particular, she used her clientele to gain respect in society, as the nobles that she was entertaining were very high up, and therefore, her mere association was enough to warrant her acceptance. It also increased her influence by proxy, as many at least feared the power of some of her clients, and therefore were more willing to tolerate her.

This influence came from both the type of men she entertained as clients, and also from her augmented income from being a brothel owner. At the peak of her career, Peg was a very successful brothel owner and entertained a number of powerful nobles within Ireland. In particular, she indicates that in 1784 she even entertained a Duke. In her memoirs, she refers to him only as His Grace, and doesn't give a name, but dukes were at the very pinnacle of noble society, and so he had to have been a very powerful man. While recollecting her visits with the Duke, she talks a great deal about how she and her ladies entertained him and others that came to the brothel as well. It is important to note here that although Plunkett uses the term prostitute and courtesan interchangeably within her memoirs, she was not a common prostitute by any means. She was definitely an upper-class member of the profession, and had very little in common with most of the women who made up Dublin's community of sex workers. Unlike these more common prostitutes, Plunkett was expected to provide a grand

ambiance and entertain, on top of having sexual relations with her clients. In her memoirs, Peg describes preparing her most luxurious house, on Pitt Street in Dublin, which she “had furnished in the most luxuriant style, with lustres, gerandoles, branches, elastic beds, lascivious prints and paintings, and every matter that genius or fancy could suggest.”<sup>77</sup> This also included a full staff to serve the house, including footmen in liveries, a coachman, and an army of servants. In addition to the house, though, Peg was also expected to provide libations to all of her guests, and had champagne, wine, and ale on hand at all times. She also had poker tables set up for her guests, and she and her ladies were up to date on all the gossip and politics of Dublin. Comparable to a modern-day high-end escort service, Plunkett’s ladies had to be well-dressed, well-mannered, and prepared to enter into all sorts of high-class social settings. Plunkett was often taken to the theatre, and to all sorts of parties and gatherings by her clients, and so had to dress and talk the way a “respectable” woman would have.

A big part of why Peg was able to enter and remain in this upper tier of prostitution was because of her socioeconomic upbringing. As Peg came from a wealthy landed family, she would have been taught the proper manners and etiquette to marry into the societal elite. So, her upbringing expanded her ability to make choices, as it was her background that allowed her to enter into this kind of prostitution, which gave her a lot more wealth and influence than strict prostitution would have. The fact that she entertained powerful men also meant that she had increased influence and control, as she was able to infiltrate the metropole of society through an alternative means. This is slightly ironic, though, given the fact that Peg was also Catholic. In a time when Catholicism carried a number of financial and political consequences

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 143.

due to the repressive Penal Laws, Peg, a Catholic woman, was making a fortune from the Protestant elite. In a house of ill-repute such as Peg's, the fact that she was Catholic would have been the least scandalous thing about her. Additionally, while Plunkett knew all about the political changes happening in Ireland at the time, she was intentionally apolitical toward her clients. In this way, she also would have been restricted in her life, as she was expected to operate within certain bounds of entertainment, and not to truly engage with the men she was servicing.

In addition to this, Peg's work also brought about a number of other unforeseen consequences. In particular, in the way that it affected her interpersonal relationships as well as the mental and emotional toll that it took. In her memoirs Plunkett also says, "I was led to look upon the men who surrounded me as tools, made only to minister to my expences, or contribute to my pleasure."<sup>78</sup> This quote is particularly telling, as it parallels a sociological phenomenon identified in sex work, which is known as disengagement. Sex workers often establish an emotional distance with their clients in order to establish boundaries and construct barriers. This is often done as a survival technique in order to deal with their work.<sup>79</sup> It appears that Peg was experiencing this, as she talks about men as "tools." This kind of analysis is also in line with the earlier discussion of sex work being exploitative. The fact that Plunkett had to give up some of her genuine human interactions and feelings in order to continue with sex work clearly shows that some of the choice that she gained from sex work, was tempered by the cost of having to distance herself in her sexual interactions.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 91

<sup>79</sup> Barry, Kathleen. *The Prostitution of Sexuality*. (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 28-34.

Moreover, Plunkett's increasingly lavish lifestyle was also one of the main reasons that she fell into poverty later on in her life, as throughout her involvement with sex work, she never learned to handle money properly, and instead just spent it with the immediacy with which she made it. As she put it herself:

The miseries of poverty, which I had so severely felt, were not forgotten; and their remembrance only urged me the more, to prevent falling into like circumstances, by any means within my reaching. Living in splendor, enjoying every luxury of dress, table or shew, no matter from which source they were derived, made me resolve not to quit the means of gaining the end. Thus, I went on in a circle of pleasures, one commencing where another ended.<sup>80</sup>

In Plunkett's line of work, she was expected to be well-dressed in the latest fashions and to have her house in a luxurious state, and so she was required to spend money continually in order to attract her elite clientele. Moreover, there are very few industries, even in today's economy, that provide the same kind of immediate income as prostitution, and so those engaged in it often do not learn good money management skills.<sup>81</sup> In this way, for all the independence and immediate prosperity that it provided, Plunkett's involvement in sex work can be seen to have ended up decreasing her ability to make choices later on in life, as the habits she picked up during the peak of her fame would come back to haunt her later on.

This same kind of reckless spending and Plunkett's increasing fame and influence, can also be seen when she hosted a masquerade ball, despite a government ban on parties, after a particularly rowdy party resulted in a riot. Peg notes her fame during this time when she says, "I pursue my narrative give another, [anecdote] to shew how far not only impunity, but success,

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<sup>80</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 92.

<sup>81</sup> *Sex Work Matters: Exploring Money, Power, and Intimacy in the Sex Industry*, Melissa Ditmore, 143-156

had emboldened me to proceed to any length.”<sup>82</sup> Peg recognized her power during this time, as she blatantly went against the prohibition in throwing her masquerade at her brothel. Peg invited two hundred people to the party, and according to her it became well-known throughout the city – garnering applause from those invited, and condemnation from those who were not. To prepare for the party, she had her house decorated with five hundred lamps in blue, lilac, and green.<sup>83</sup> She also got the high constable with the guard for her security. As she describes it, her entire block was filled with party-goers. Peg invited an eclectic crowd ranging from fortune-tellers and sailors, to a number of well-known Irish noblemen, including Lord Westport, Lord Headfort, and Lord Molesworth. She also prepared a bed for the Duke of Leinster, who did not end up attending. However, the fact that the government did nothing to stop this, and she was not punished in any way afterwards, clearly indicates her position in society at this time.<sup>84</sup> Given that a number of lords and other nobility attended, the government was probably hesitant to do anything, as she was associated with these influential people. Therefore, we can see that Peg had an increased ability to make choices because of her involvement with these elite clients through sex work. Moreover, it also shows that her footing outside the realm of respectability in society actually allowed her to use these connections, as she was able to be more open about what she did and who she was seen with.

Another reason that opening this brothel gave Peg more independence was because of her friend and eventual business partner, Sally Hayes. Hayes was another courtesan who Plunkett referred her clients to when she was pregnant. Although the exact details are not

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<sup>82</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 92.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

quite clear, Plunkett and Hayes ultimately decided to open a brothel together. This is significant, as having this quasi-familial relationship expanded Peg's ability to exercise her own agency. By opening a brothel, these women were able to boost their income substantially and also to share the risk of owning a business. Furthermore, Plunkett's relationship with Hayes also gave her a support system that she had lacked before, thus reducing her vulnerability to otherwise catastrophic situations.

One example of this can be seen when Plunkett went after Lawless when he got back from America. After Lawless's father died, he moved to London and convinced Peg to come and live with him. She initially declined, saying, "I thought it much better to stay where I was, immersed in all the pleasures of the world, and to be entirely my own mistress, than to go with him, and pinch upon his pittance; or to expend what I had saved in inching it out."<sup>85</sup> But, Peg eventually changed her mind and decided to go after him. However, when she got to London she found out that Lawless was keeping another woman. Peg was heartbroken and embarrassed, but she decided to stay in the city and enjoy herself, saying, "I resolved not to balk myself of any desire or amusement."<sup>86</sup> The reason that Plunkett was able to do this was because she owned the brothel with Hayes, and had a considerable income. At this point, she said she also had a couple of hundred pounds in the bank, which was a substantial sum at the time. This clearly shows how sex work expanded Peg's choices, as she was able to live however she wanted, at least for this brief period in time. And yet, unfortunately, this part of Peg's story did not end well, as she wound up contracting pleuritic fever, and being robbed of most of her

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<sup>85</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 79.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

possessions, while spending the rest of what she had.<sup>87</sup> For anyone without a support system, this would have been truly calamitous, but she was able to borrow money from Hayes and get back on her feet. Therefore, all of this shows how Peg's non-biological family support system increased her ability to make choices, as it provided her with the safety net that she lost when her biological family cast her out. Moreover, Plunkett was able to quickly make this money back, as she still had her brothel with Hayes and was able to go back to entertaining clients in Dublin. Once again, the financial structure of prostitution and brothel-owning allowed Peg to gather a sizable income, and thus afforded her numerous options.

Aside from the support system that opening a brothel with Hayes gave Plunkett, another aspect of her brothel owning that needs to be looked at is the freedom it gave her to choose her own clients. This gave Peg some ability to protect herself, both financially and socially. One instance in Plunkett's memoirs that illustrates this is when she describes a stranger coming to her brothel that neither she nor Sally recognized. Therefore, Plunkett refused him by saying, "Sir, I have not the pleasure of knowing you, nor can either of the ladies I sent in. I therefore must wish you a good night."<sup>88</sup> This refusal, and his subsequent expulsion from her home, gives us an idea of Plunkett's expanded ability to make choices in her life, as she was at a point where she was wealthy and well-known enough that she did not have to take whatever business that came her way. Beyond just refusing people she did not know, though, Plunkett also describes her vetting system in her memoirs when she tells the man, "whenever you shall do me the favor of another visit, that you will bring some gentleman with whom I am

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 130.

acquainted to introduce you, for I never admit any strangers unless they are properly recommended.”<sup>89</sup> Again, tells us how her support system in Sally Hayes and her increasingly stable financial situation gave her more control over who she took on as a client, and afforded her business greater protections, as she was only took men who were recommended.

Finally, another key aspect of Peg’s brothel-keeping to understand is the way in which she handled the girls that worked for her. While there are not any ongoing accounts of who these specific girls were, Plunkett does provide a few anecdotes that illustrate the way in which she chose them. For instance, she was very specific in that she would only accept girls who were already working as prostitutes, going out of her way to claim that “I never in my life was accessory or instrumental to the corruption of any girl; nor ever received in my house anyone who had not already been deluded.”<sup>90</sup> This shows that Plunkett was in a stable-enough position to turn potential workers away, and also that she still saw prostitution as a corrupting influence. The fact that she saw it in that way is important, as it tells us that Plunkett felt, at least to some extent, trapped and upset about the way her life had gone in sex work. However, Peg also wrote about these instances at the end of her life when she had stopped working as a prostitute and madam, and so may have unintentionally or even intentionally misrepresented her process for accepting new girls. This could have stemmed from her religious beliefs, also, as we know that she had to set aside her Catholicism during her time as a sex worker because she could not reconcile it with her job. However, she had returned to her faith by the time she wrote these memoirs.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 103.

In addition to her non-biological family, the role of her children is also an area of Peg's family situation that needs to be explored. It is estimated that Plunkett had anywhere from nine to thirteen children, although it is thought that only one of them survived to adulthood.<sup>91</sup> Plunkett does not mention them much in her memoirs, aside from when she is in a stable relationship or when it fits into a larger story. Despite this, we know through subtle examples that Plunkett cared about her children and that when they died, she was deeply affected. For example, when she lost one of her children in the Pinking-Dandies Incident, it was too painful for her to remain in her brothel, and so she left.<sup>92</sup> One possible reason that she does not talk about her kids very much could be that she considered her family to be a more intimate and personal topic than her sex work. Given that it was her profession, and that she probably distanced herself in order to continue working, it is not surprising that she may have become desensitized to talking about it.<sup>93</sup> However, she may have seen her children as more off-limits and personal. Additionally, infant mortality was incredibly high in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin, and therefore, she may not have felt that discussing her children's deaths would have been that novel, nor would it have fit in with the theme of her memoirs.

However, her children undoubtedly affected her ability to exercise her agency. For instance, as we have previously discussed, Peg's first child was an important catalyst for her remaining in sex work. Additionally, later on in her life this also influenced her decisions, as she would not have been able to continue with sex work when she was heavily pregnant or nursing.

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<sup>91</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*.

<sup>92</sup> Leeson, 79.

<sup>93</sup> Barry, Kathleen. *The Prostitution of Sexuality*. (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 28-34.

During these times, she would have been in a more vulnerable position, and so would have had less choice, because she would not have been able to personally service clients. Despite this, though, pregnancy also introduced her to the idea of being a brothel owner. When Plunkett was a kept woman, she was not able to have sexual relations when she was heavily pregnant and nursing, and so she gave her protectors to other courtesans for her confinement period. So, having children also opened her up to an alternative profession, which ultimately boosted her ability to make choices.

Another important example which sheds light on Peg's ability to make decisions can be seen in an incident involving a gang known as the Pinking Dandies. The Pinking Dandies were a violent band of Trinity College students, that roamed the streets of Dublin and wreaked havoc and destruction. In particular, they targeted prostitutes and brothels.<sup>94</sup> When Peg was attacked, she was in her brothel, awaiting her first round of clients. It was early in the evening, and so it was just her, one of her children, and a maid helping her prepare. As she describes it, "On my refusal [to let them in] they smashed all my windows, broke the hall-door, and entered through the shattered panels...They then demolished all the furniture of the parlors;" While this was happening, Peg lay in a fit of shock, while they brutalized her (Peg does not go into detail of the assault). The gang only stopped after the Parish Watch was called, and fought them off. Peg was also heavily pregnant during the attack, and not long after gave birth to a stillborn child with a broken leg, undoubtedly because of the attack. The other child that was with her was also killed.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 77-80.

<sup>95</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 69-70.

It is unclear what year exactly this took place, but it was before the development of the Dublin police force in 1786, as she refers to the Parish Watch and military being called in to control the situation. Before the establishment of a centralized police force, Dublin relied on the Parish Watch system to control crime, and used the military when things got out of hand. Unfortunately, the Watch were no match for larger groups such as the Pinking-Dandies and therefore protection in the city was dramatically lacking.<sup>96</sup> As a result, the failure of the city of Dublin to protect her demonstrates a constraint on her ability to exercise her agency. This affected her ability to make choices due to the emotional impact, and the disadvantaged position that it put her business in. The attack severely hampered her business, as the brothel she co-owned was severely damaged. Additionally, this incident also resulted in the death of one living and one in utero child she was carrying. This violence took away her sense of security and affected her business.

The incident also demonstrates how sex work put her in an increasingly vulnerable situation, and therefore did not increase her ability to exercise her own agency. Because Peg was a brothel owner and prostitute, she was specifically targeted for this attack. The reason for this targeting lies in social attitudes toward prostitutes in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin. Many saw prostitutes as sexual temptresses who threatened modern society and promoted crime.<sup>97</sup> While this is one explanation for prostitutes being targeted, another is merely that many lacked influence and their profession meant that they were often ignored and overlooked in the criminal justice system, so there was little fear of reprisal. Beyond this, many in Dublin society

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<sup>96</sup> Fleming, David, "Public Attitudes to Prostitution," 7-12.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 1-4.

adhered to traditional gender roles and male violence was often widely tolerated. Prostitutes or courtesans were also seen as a threat to these roles due to their financial independence and the fact that no man was legally responsible for them.<sup>98</sup> Like widows, prostitutes did not have a clear place in society. As a result, they were often looked at with suspicion, as there was no one “in charge” of them nor was there anyone to ensure that they were staying in their place. Because of this view, prostitutes were often the targets of attacks. Therefore, this example illustrates how the pervasive social attitudes of the time limited Plunkett’s power, as they increased her vulnerability to violence, hindering her personal safety.

However, another aspect of this example which provides a more nuanced view of Plunkett’s ability to exercise agency, can be seen in her litigation of the case. In particular, she filed suit against seven of her attackers, and even offered large rewards for apprehending them. Furthermore, when threatened by one of the ring leaders for taking these actions, she brazenly announced that she would shoot them if they approached her, and vowed to keep a pistol on her person at all times.<sup>99</sup> One of the men Plunkett filed suit against was the leader of the Pinking Dandies, a man named Richard Crosbie.<sup>100</sup> She successfully had him locked up in Newgate Prison, and sued him twice in order to get recompense for her property damage.<sup>101</sup> In this sense, Plunkett’s political influence in the form of high-up clientele provided her with the ability to pursue successful restitutions. This shows how the rise in Peg’s prestige, because of the income and the connections she had formed through sex work, expanded her voice and

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<sup>98</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 81.

<sup>99</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 70.

<sup>100</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 78-79.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-83.

power. However, the same friends she made as a prostitute and brothel owner, including several sheriffs, persuaded Plunkett to drop the murder charges for her in-utero child that had died as a result of injuries she sustained during the attack.<sup>102</sup> Crosbie was a member of a noble family, and they did not want to see him hung for his crime. Therefore, this also demonstrates how the internal politics of the criminal justice system and the politics and money eventually prevailed over Plunkett.

At this point, Plunkett enjoyed the most amount of agency that she was able to garner throughout her life. This is evident due to the power and influence that came with her celebrity, as well as the stable position that she had as a brothel owner. While this increased ability to exercise her agency was due to sex work, it is important to distinguish this from the previous times in her life. As a kept woman, Peg was moving from protector to protector in almost complete dependence. Acting as a kept woman also severely constrained her future options, as her reputation as a “tarnished” woman ruined her future romantic relationships. While she did have significantly more options as a well-known courtesan and brothel owner, she still faced a number of barriers. Specifically, she could not marry either of the men she fell in love with, and she also began to recognize the trap of sex work, and the emotional toll of disingenuous relationships. As a brothel owner and courtesan, Plunkett had a lot more choice over who she took on as a client, and had significantly more influence in society because of her association with Dublin’s powerful elite. Furthermore, by becoming a more well-known figure, it also liberated her and provided her with an alternative means to enter into mainstream society, and move away from the periphery. However, the lifestyle habits that she picked up

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 82.

during this time period also severely impacted the way in which she would live out the end of her life. This end period, which we will see, can be characterized as an incredibly difficult time in which Peg had very little ability to exercise her agency, as she lost a lot of her notoriety and wealth.

Following Plunkett's rise to celebrity status in Dublin, she enjoyed many years of comfort and stability. However, the fame and influence that she experienced during that time did not last. Peg experienced a re-emergence of her Catholic faith, and retired from her life as a courtesan. It was also during this time in her life that she started writing her memoirs, both as a means to support herself and also in order to enact revenge against those who failed to pay her their debts after her retirement. Unfortunately, though, this time in Plunkett's life was also marred by a series of tragic events. Peg experienced the loss of a number of close friends, and she began to fear being forgotten and ill-treated after her death. She was also violently beaten and raped, which resulted in her contracting a venereal disease. After months of agony in poverty and isolation, she finally died before finishing the third volume of her memoirs. Throughout this time in her life, it is clear that Peg's ability to exercise her agency diminished because of her loss of income and position. The external factors that she had successfully been able to overcome or work around during the peak of her career, overcame her during this final stage of her life. Furthermore, many of the lifestyle and spending habits that had helped her gain and keep her notoriety, eventually caught up with her, and resulted in drastic consequences. These consequences can be seen in the lack of opportunity she had as an ex-sex worker, and the severe emotional toll of her work that revealed itself particularly at the end of her life.

Despite all of this power and control that sex work had afforded her, it is clear that this was all still dependent on her continued involvement in the life. As Peg notes, "My capital error was, in the entering into the course of life I led; for once when in, I had no means of getting out

of it. Nor do I even now, know one single line, situated as I was, I could have embraced for support.”<sup>103</sup> Although these may not have been Plunkett’s feelings at the exact time she was at the height of her fame, as these memoirs were written at the end of her life, it is still important that Plunkett recognized the limitations of her choices. Although sex work did provide her with lots of money and influence, at least temporarily, this quote illustrates that she saw sex work as a trap.

This feeling of being trapped in her life, also undoubtedly played a role in the way in which she decided to leave sex work. In her memoirs, this decision appears to come out abruptly. However, given what we know about the way in which Peg was distancing herself from her clients, it is much more likely that this was the result of a build-up of emotions over time. This is evident when we examine the incident that Peg cites as her reason for leaving the industry, in conjunction with a sociological examination of the ways in which sex workers leave. According to a modern-day sociological study on sex work, there are four main ways in which sex workers leave their industry, including: reactionary, gradual planning, natural progression, and yo-yoing.<sup>104</sup> Reactionary refers to sex workers who leave the industry as a result of a specific incidents, such as a violent attack or an unplanned pregnancy. Gradual planning means those that plan and save for a transition out of sex work that generally happens over a period of time. While natural progression is similar to this, it is different, as it describes a more organic transition, that results from things such as old age, or disillusionment. Finally, though, yo-yoing is another type of exit wherein the individual moves in and out of sex work for unplanned

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>104</sup> Sanders, "Becoming an Ex–Sex Worker: Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career," 81.

reasons. Although this study is modern, its implications are universal, and in Peg's case, she fits with the natural progression model of leaving sex work. This model says that sex workers often leave prostitution when the life becomes too much of a burden. It is the accumulation of negative incidents that triggers them to leave.<sup>105</sup> In her memoirs Peg only attributes one event to her leaving sex work. However, a closer examination of this one event reveals that it is not the event itself, but rather the combination of her life choices and disingenuous sexual encounters that is the true cause of her leaving.

One of the catalysts for this decision was when Peg witnessed the deaths of a number of her colleagues and friends. A typical sex worker in Dublin at this time, generally had a short life expectancy, as they often became victims of violence, or contracted venereal diseases. Given that Plunkett was in a similar position to many of these women, it is not surprising that Peg was deeply affected by their loss. In particular, the two deaths that she specifically mentions in her memoirs, are those of her friends Moll Hall and Sally Hayes. Moll Hall was a courtesan who Peg had known for several years. Although Plunkett does not go in depth in her memoirs about how Hall died, she does talk a lot about the aftermath of her death, and poses an interesting question at the end of the anecdote. Specifically, Peg talks about how disturbed she is by the actions of Hall's creditors following her death. In her memoirs Peg describes this when she says, "a few days before she took ill, her word would go for any sum, nor was there a wine-merchant, a grocer, a mercer, a milliner, or an haberdasher in Dublin, who would refuse her any credit she desired."<sup>106</sup> Much like Peg, Hall relied on credit in order to continue to be clothed in

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 85-87.

<sup>106</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 172.

the latest fashions, and to be able to properly entertain her clients with food and drinks. Hall and Plunkett then charged their clients for these additions, and even allowed them to wine and dine on credit occasionally. Plunkett describes how she carefully maintained her accounts, and even successfully sued clients who refused to pay her for her services, at the peak of her career. However, this system then allowed Hall's creditors to repossess all of her belongings as soon as she died. Peg was horrified by this, as she says, "No sooner had the last breath quit the body of my friend,..., and every creature she was indebted to came down upon the house, and seized even upon the very bed she lay waking on... leaving poor Hall upon the bare ground with three or four of her girls sitting weeping over her body, not knowing how to dispose of it."<sup>107</sup> Clearly, Plunkett was deeply impacted by the way her friend was treated after she died, and so Peg took it upon herself to ensure that she got a proper burial, and funeral procession. She sent over chairs, wine, candles, cake, and even hired coaches to take people to the cemetery. One interesting thing to note, too, is that when she was describing who attended the funeral, she says that there were many of the "sisterhood" who attended.<sup>108</sup> By sisterhood she means other prostitutes and brothel owners. This, therefore illustrates that Plunkett viewed this community as being mutually supportive, given that she used such a familial term. In true Peg fashion, she even wrote a colorful epitaph for Hall, "Here lies Moll Hall, Who once had a great call, and a fig for you all."<sup>109</sup> Although not as famous as Plunkett, Hall was still a wealthy and notorious courtesan, and so to see her treated in that way after her death, scared Peg, as she did not want that to happen to her. This is evident when she says, "In the case of my own

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 172.

dissolution, and that I died as poor as Hall, would any human being do the like for my remains?"<sup>110</sup> Putting this quote into context also reveals a deeper meaning, as at the time she witnessed Hall's death, she was at the peak of her career, but when she wrote about it, she was retired. At that time, she had lost a lot of her wealth and influence, and so she must have been afraid that no one was going to ensure that she was treated well after death.

The fact that she was feeling this fear, shows how her ability to exercise her agency had changed, as when she was writing about this, she no longer had the same support system as she had in the past, which would have looked after her. A big part of why this support network disappeared, was because of the loss of another one of her friends, Sally Hayes. As previously discussed, Hayes opened a brothel with Peg, and was one of the only consistent companions throughout her life. However, sometime around 1784, Hayes died. Although Peg says that she died of a broken heart at the loss of her favorite captain, it is much more likely, that she died of some sort of venereal disease.<sup>111</sup> This loss deeply affected Plunkett as she describes Hayes as, "my constant companion whilst she lived, and the woman I loved best."<sup>112</sup> Although Peg did not spend a lot of time on Hayes' death in her memoirs, it is clear that this impacted her, and could perhaps be another detail, like the lives of her children, that she felt too intimate to share in her memoirs. However, it is evident that this had an effect, as Peg no longer had a partner in her business, and so was responsible for the brothel on her own. This limited Plunkett's individual choice, as she was required to spend more time being vigilant over the brothel. She

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>111</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 135.

<sup>112</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 113.

describes one event in which she went away on a trip for a few days, and returned to find her house in disarray.

Despite this, the specific incident that Peg gives as her rationale for leaving sex work is when two men who she did not like, came to her brothel, and she gave them a lecture on their low morals. These men had apparently cheated another man out of some money, and forced him into bankruptcy. The way she describes the incident, she was admonishing them for their behavior. In particular, she says, "I absolutely refused entertaining such unprincipled fellows, telling them freely my mind, and giving them as good a lecture on their heinousness of such gross dishonesty...I doubt if Kirwan's admonitions would have struck so great a panic into the hearts of my depraved beau."<sup>113</sup> However, as she was yelling at these men, she had a sudden epiphany. She was overcome with the idea that she was a hypocrite given her line of work. In what appears to be some sort of emotional reckoning, she acknowledged that she had abandoned her faith and morals. Specifically, she says, "I took an horrible retrospective view of the course I had run, and all of my past life; and falling on my knees, addressed myself most devoutly to the God of nature."<sup>114</sup> Clearly, this incident was not the actual reason that she left sex work and returned to her faith, but rather illustrates the build-up of her feelings about her profession, which resulted in this outburst. One particularly telling aspect of this episode is that when she prayed for forgiveness, she used her given name, Plunkett. She makes note of correcting herself away from using her working name, Leeson. This clearly indicates not only a rejection of her life in sex work, but also illuminates the emotional toll of her work. The

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<sup>113</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 221.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*,

expulsion of her working name demonstrates a loss of identity for Peg in order to assume another. This incident is also a forceful metaphor for Peg's ability to exercise her agency. Plunkett had power and influence because of her involvement in sex work, as is evident in the fact that she could not only refuse clients, but also openly admonish them. However, this choice was only available to her because of sex work, which required her to deny herself her emotions and feelings about what she was doing, and to give up her faith. So, through this, we see some of the repercussions that Peg faced because of her life as a prostitute. It is also significant that Peg achieved this agency by operating on the periphery of society, and yet we will see what happens to her when she tries to reassert herself into institutions at the center of society, such as with the Church by returning to her faith.

In order to see just how devastating these consequences were, though, we can look to what Peg did following this realization. After yelling at these men, Peg fell into a frenzied state. She locked herself in her room, and began drinking heavily. In addition to alcohol, though, Peg also took a significant amount of opium, probably with the intent of killing herself. In her memoirs, Plunkett says, "in a fit of delirium I drank four ounces of thebiad tincture<sup>115</sup>, and thought I had at once made my own quietus."<sup>116</sup> The fact that she says this, though, after describing the deep shame and guilt she felt looking back on her life, would indicate that there was at least some intent behind her actions. Aside from shame and guilt, though, it is impossible to know what kind of mental health problems that Peg have been experiencing which could have contributed to her suicide attempt. Another important aspect of this

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<sup>115</sup> Thebiad tincture refers to Opium.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 222.

episode, though, is when she revealed that she thinks she would have been happier if she had just gotten married. Specifically, she says, “Had I been married young to some worthy man, I might now have been blessed with a smiling happy progeny, whereas I shall leave nothing behind me but the traces of my infamy, to hand down my abandoned name to posterity.”<sup>117</sup> This is a poignant statement, as we have seen that Plunkett was consistently robbed of her chance to get married because of her involvement with sex work, and that she felt trapped in the life. Additionally, even though she may have gained more freedom and choice in other areas of her life, the fact that she did not gain this in her personal life illustrates that sex work did not give her choice in the areas of her life that really mattered to her. While this pales in comparison to the toll that it had on her mental health, it is still an important example because it was very important to her, and so demonstrates another consequence of her former life. Moreover, the fact that she attempted to kill herself as a result of guilt and shame, mostly induced by her religious beliefs, also highlights the societal and religious factors acting on her at this time. Peg’s deep embarrassment and humiliation because of her life choices, also indicates the way that society and the Catholic Church viewed sex workers, even if they were forced into the life because of their circumstances.

We have clearly seen that Peg’s involvement with sex work had severe emotional and social consequences. However, this was not just limited to her time as a sex worker. In fact, after Peg left this life, these problems and others emerged, as Peg lost her ability to exercise agency in other aspects of her life, that prostitution had previously bolstered. For example, because of the immediacy with which Peg decided to retire, she did not have time to plan for

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid.,

this retirement, and even if she had, it is unlikely that she would have known how to. Although Plunkett was very wealthy, this money was constantly being put back into her business in the form of more luxurious furnishings, dresses, jewelry, etc. As a result, she had very little cash on hand, and instead often relied on credit from grocers, merchants, and milliners. These vendors would allow her to buy things on credit, as they knew her reputation and knew that she would make good on her accounts. However, once she decided to leave sex work, she could no longer access this credit as easily.

One of the only true assets she had was her house, which she did not really know what to do with. It appears that she never considered renting it out, which would have provided her with a consistent income. The fact that she did not consider this, though, illustrates Peg's lack of financial planning skills. In her line of work, she was never forced to learn how to budget, as she could easily earn a lot of money in the course of one night. So, this demonstrates how the economics of prostitution resulted in her loss of ability to exercise choice, as this lack of planning drastically limited her choices at the end of her life. Aside from this, she also had IOUs and promised annuities, but these became virtually useless, as when she retired, she no longer had the influence to collect.<sup>118</sup> In her memoirs, she says, "I certainly had in bonds, promissory notes, and IOUs upwards of two thousand pounds due to me; but what value could be set upon the obligations of unprincipled men of fashion, and a parcel of abandoned prostitutes."<sup>119</sup> While she had successfully sued men for IOUs in the past, she now lacked the influence to be successful in these suits. This is evident due to the fact that she retained a number of

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<sup>118</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 175.

<sup>119</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 229.

attorneys, but was never able to collect. Moreover, she just added to her debts, as she could not afford to pay these attorneys because she could not recall her IOUs. This shows how Peg's loss of connection took away many of her individual choices, as it impacted her ability to collect money, which, as we have seen, was a huge determinant in choice for Peg. As a result, Plunkett sold all of her dresses, jewelry, furniture, and even her house. While this held her over temporarily, it is clear that Plunkett had some unsustainable spending habits, as she quickly ran out of money. Constantly cold, and surviving on the generosity of strangers, Peg got herself into a dire situation. However, it was in this situation that she decided to write her memoirs. As she describes it, "Thus circumstanced, my only source for profit and revenge was the publication of my unfortunate life; resolving to punish the names of several persons to whom I was indebted for my ruin."<sup>120</sup> Peg also successfully blackmailed many former clients who refused to pay their debts or IOUs to her, by threatening to name them in her memoirs.

Despite Peg being in a desperate situation, the fact that she had this option open to her does prove some semblance of choice. Because Peg had been such a well-known courtesan, it gave her the option of publishing these memoirs, as had she been a common street prostitute, no one would have been interested in her story. It was her notoriety and status in society that provided her with this choice. So, in this case, social factors actually increased her ability to exercise her agency, even if it came at an exploitative cost. This was all due to her sex work, and the promise of a scandalous exposé that could be sold as a shocking tell-all of the Dublin elite allowed this to happen. Furthermore, it is also important to note that she had developed such unsustainable spending habits due to her lifestyle as a courtesan, which is what forced her

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.,

into this position to begin with. Therefore, her particular lifestyle and type of sex work that she participated in, also simultaneously diminished her capacity to make choices.

One aspect of Peg's poverty that is revealing, though, is the way that people came to her aid. Plunkett was not a saint by any means, but it is clear, given a number of her anecdotes, that she was generally kind to those who worked for her, and were loyal to her. For instance, in her memoirs, she recounts when a black former footman found out about her situation and gave her a quarter of his wages. This was a shocking act of generosity, especially given how little this man made. However, he did so because he had fallen ill while working for Peg, and she had looked after him.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, Peg also encountered several other instances of kindness when she was in poverty. She received visits from former clients and was gifted food, shawls, and tea. However, throughout this time, she refused to see or associate with any of her former friends who were courtesans and prostitutes, as she saw them as representations of the life she was trying to escape. This would have been incredibly isolating for Peg, as she had many friends in the industry, and once again illustrates some of the repercussions of her life in prostitution. This is because she refused to see them as a result of her own notions about morality, which stemmed from religion and society. Had she been indoctrinated with different beliefs in a different society, she may not have felt the need to disassociate from her community.

All of this was not enough, though, and before Peg could finish her third volume of her memoirs, she was thrown in jail. She was sent to a sponging house, which was a specific type of jail for people in debt. As she describes it, "I now found myself in the very abyss of misery,...I

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<sup>121</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 176.

was arrested for £15 at the suit of a Grocer in Grafton-street, by Matthews my quandom friend, who had once figured away at one of the masquerade balls...He carried me to the sponging-house without a shilling in my pocket.”<sup>122</sup> The humiliation of being sent to a sponging house would have been crushing for Peg. The poverty and instability that she had desperately sought to avoid all her life, finally reached her. As if this was not enough, she was also forced to tell others about her situation in asking for help. Sponging houses had reputations for being corrupt and mis-managed, so Peg appealed to her former client, Mr. Matthews, to be sent to his sponging house. In this way, her former life and the people she had met through that, did afford her some choice, as otherwise she would not have had the connections to be sent to one of the better debtor’s prisons in Dublin. Moreover, it was also her former clients that eventually freed her from prison. Plunkett wrote in desperation to many of the men who owed her money, as she no longer had the means or influence to sue them over their debts. While many ignored her, some did send her the money they owed her. Word also spread to one of her former clients, named Mr. O’Falvery. O’Falvery, realizing her plight, consolidated and paid off her debt by fundraising among the Whig faction in the House of Commons. This illustrates how Peg’s prostitution afforded her more options, as it gave her the connections that eventually freed her from this situation.<sup>123</sup> Once released from prison, though, Peg’s situation became desperate for other reasons.

During Peg’s retirement, it was common for her to have female companions who lived with her, helped her to write her memoirs, and to organize her affairs. One such companion,

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<sup>122</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 232.

<sup>123</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 179.

known as Peggy, was with Plunkett through the end of her life. However, one night, they were both out walking when they were overrun by a gang of violent men. In her memoirs, Peg describes the attack when she says, “one evening I took it in my head to take a walk towards Drumcondra, to see my old poetical friend Mrs. H---, and took poor Peggy with me as a safeguard; and on our return in the dusk of the evening, we were attacked by five ruffians, who dragged us into an adjoining field, and after stripping us to our shifts, and robbing us of what cash we had about us, actually compelled us by force to comply with their infamous desires,”.<sup>124</sup> The attack was clearly a humiliating experience for both women, and added to their poverty as it robbed them of the few possessions that they still had. Peg illustrates this when she says, “after they severally satiated their brutal appetites, they left us as I said before, stripped to our shifts, carrying off even our shoes and stockings.”<sup>125</sup> While Peggy managed to stab one of the attackers with a pair of scissors, none of them were ever caught. In a brutal irony, the attack also infected both women with what was most likely syphilis. This instance marked a turning point in Peg’s health, but also demonstrates the extent to which she had lost her influence at this time in her life. While Plunkett had been robbed and subject to sexual violence at other points in her life, she had always been able to recover and achieve some recompense. However, at this stage in her life, Peg was short on friends, money, and physical strength. From her memoirs, it is evident that she felt beaten down and violated by this experience, and that she did not have the strength or the resources to try and track these men down. The difference between the way she handled this incident and the Pinking-Dandies

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<sup>124</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 247-248.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

incident discussed in the previous chapter, for example, demonstrates this lack of power.

While Peg had been injured and robbed in that example, she was able to go after the men who were responsible and hold them accountable, given her wealth and the influence she held from her clientele. By contrast, in this situation, Peg lacked both of these things and so was unable to do anything about the attack. This, therefore, shows how economic and social factors limited her ability to exercise her agency, as it was the loss of her wealth and connections that made her unable to seek justice.

The irony only continued for Peg, though, as she and Peggy were put on a course of salivation for their infections. Salivation treatment was essentially just a mercury treatment, that could be given in the form of ointments, put in a bath, or taken as a pill. It was called salivation treatment, though, because it caused the patient to sweat profusely. This occurred because the mercury was poisoning the body. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, salivation was considered to be the only “cure” for venereal diseases, but it was actually ineffective, and caused immense suffering in the patient.<sup>126</sup> Today, we know that high concentrations of mercury attack the nervous system and that it induces kidney toxicity.<sup>127</sup> Peg and Peggy underwent this treatment for three months, and suffered intensely for it. Peg describes her and Peggy’s condition after their treatment ended when she says, “we found ourselves reduced to skeletons, all our money exhausted, deeply involved with our landlady, and our clothes in pawn.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Peakman, *Peg Plunkett*, 184-185.

<sup>127</sup> "Mercury and Health," World Health Organization, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs361/en/>.

<sup>128</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*, 248.

Finally, though, on March 22, 1797, after years of suffering, poverty, and poisoning her own body, Peg finally succumbed to her death. Her memoirs claim that she was 70 years old, but this is highly unlikely given her profession and the time period. It is much more likely that she was in her 50s. Her death was announced through her companion Peg, who writes, “This morning at about four o’clock, my poor friend paid the great debt of nature, she died without the smallest evident of pain, nature being completely exhausted.”<sup>129</sup> Even through her death, Peg continued to see the kindness and generosity that had seen her through the last years of her life. In the end, it was not the Dukes or noblemen that she had seen, but rather the footmen and laymen who expressed the most kindness. Her funeral was paid for by a grocer who afforded her credit in her final days, and a number of other merchants. The support system, or “sisterhood” she had when she was a celebrated courtesan had long since disappeared, partially by her own isolation and partially because many she had known in that life had died. However, in an homage to her earlier fame, her death was widely reported, and an obituary even appeared in the *Dublin Evening Post* in 1797. She was interred at St. James’s Church, but her gravestone and final resting place have been lost to time.

Unfortunately, though, despite Peg experiencing some peace in her final hours, we know that the lead up to her death was terrible. Not only did she endure years of poverty, but she also suffered a brutal attack. It was her leaving sex work that made her more vulnerable and powerless, and also left her infected with a disease that she faced exposure to every night of her life as a prostitute. Due to both her own volition and society’s failings, Peg was left isolated and in a desperate financial situation. She did not know how to manage money,

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<sup>129</sup> Idib., 250

because she had never been taught to, and her role as a courtesan and female brothel-owner meant that she never had to learn. In many ways, her return to faith also signaled the end of her power and control. Peg was unable to reconcile her profession with her faith, and so when, at the end of her life she chose her faith, she gave up her ability to exert a lot of her influence, both through her connections and from the wealth she could have gained. She also gave up her “sisterhood” when she turned her back on her community in order to reacquaint herself with her Catholic faith. Despite this, she did encounter friends and generosity along the way. Like any of us, Peg was complicated. She got angry and lost her temper and she sought revenge over petty things, but she was also incredibly generous and kind to those around her. This kindness then repaid itself when she was ill and in poverty. She believed in honor and loyalty, and desperately wanted what she could not have – marriage. Ultimately, the price of her life as a sex worker became too high, but it also proved to be the end of a lot of her freedom and independence, given the position it left her in. Peg was in the best possible situation both among sex workers and arguably even among Dublin women in terms of independence, finances, and legal rights. However, despite this, the choice it granted her was not enough to overcome the cost of her life in sex work.

## *Conclusion*

When people hear the words, 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin prostitute and female brothel owner, they usually give one of two responses. A quizzical and uncomprehending look, or an “oh that’s interesting.” People are either mystified by the exoticism or annoyed at the scandalous nature of the topic. Neither response reflects a complex understanding of the topic, or a nuanced interpretation. What is unfortunate about both of these responses, though, is that they lack understanding because they cannot identify with the character. I hope that in writing about Peg, I have helped to show that she is so much more than just a sex worker, and that people can identify with her struggle because they can find some aspect of her life that is similar to their own. Whether this be in the loneliness that she experienced in her life, or the feeling of being trapped, or through the various heartbreaks she had. As I said at the beginning of this piece, sex workers are usually the background characters to other people’s stories, which is an unfortunate reality. It is an unfortunate reality, not just because it leaves out these voices, but also because we lose what their stories can provide us. History is about grey area and complexity, and by not looking at these narratives more in depth, we are only seeing in black and white.

Peg Plunkett was anything but black and white. She lived her life through a swirling array of contradictions that make absolutes impossible. However, what we can conclude is that her life was full of moments of empowerment, frustration, and heartbreak. Fueled with teenage hormones and facing an impossible situation, Peg made one of the only choices she thought she could as a sixteen-year-old with no dowry. However, because of a combination of family obstacles and the way that society viewed these choices, Peg had few alternative options

than to become a kept woman. From there, she moved in a dependent position between different men who could provide for her. Eventually Peg found her way and even fell in love. Nevertheless, these relationships, while significant, did not give her the domestic stability that she craved. Her past sexual history meant that it would be too scandalous to marry her. As a result, she remained in sex work, eventually making the most of her situation and rising to a position of prominence. With this, she was able to obtain a significant income and gain connections with Dublin's elite. It was in this situation, out in the open, that she was able to exercise the most agency in her life.<sup>130</sup> By operating outside of the traditional rules of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin society, she did not have to make any pretenses about her work. This lack of secrecy, while liberating in its own sense, also opened up many of Peg's choices in other aspects of her life. Because of the success granted her by her profession, she had more legal rights, and more general freedom over her life than the average married woman in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin.<sup>131</sup>

Of course, this time in her life was not without its consequences. From the outside, it may have appeared that Peg had everything going for her, and had no reason to be unhappy. However, we know that living in this way was taking a toll on her, as it was keeping her from having genuine relationships. This, along with the loss of her friends and colleagues, became too much for Peg. Her outburst at her clients and subsequent suicide attempt clearly demonstrate the cost of being in her line of work. Moreover, her life after retirement paints a stark contrast to her life during the peak of her career.<sup>132</sup> It is ironic that her reconciliation with

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<sup>130</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

<sup>131</sup> Wilson, *Women, Marriage and Property*.

<sup>132</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

the Church, an established institution in the metropole of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dublin, caused her so much anguish. This part of her life was incredibly painful, both because of the loss of her support network, but also because of the poverty she experienced, and the brutal attack she suffered at the end of her life, which left her infected with the venereal disease that ultimately killed her. When Peg died, she died badly, in relative isolation and poverty.<sup>133</sup> Given the treatment she was on, she also would have died in pain, as the mercury caused her body to shut down.<sup>134</sup> What is perhaps most tragic about her story, though, is that she died with regret. She felt so strongly against the way that she lived her life, that she completely rejected it. The very thing that provided her with choice in her life, ended up also destroying it. Peg's involvement with sex work meant that she had the money, connections, and position to live comfortably and successfully. However, it was also this profession, that came with a number of severe consequences, that Peg was ultimately unable to accept. It was this same profession that left her with poor financial planning skills, damaged interpersonal relationships, and an unrelenting stigma that followed her for the rest of her life.<sup>135</sup> After all was said and done, for all of the increased agency that Plunkett had in her life, the consequences eventually outweighed the benefits, and as Peg distanced herself from the life, she was left with little to show for it.

While Peg's memoirs give us a clear picture of what life was like for her, they also provide insight into what life was like for other women of her time. What it tells us is that the life of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Irish woman was complicated and nuanced. Some women were able to

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>134</sup> "Mercury and Health."

<sup>135</sup> Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs. Leeson*.

carve out their own spheres of influence in their marriages, and operate within traditionally-accepted roles for women. However, they were also forced to live within the confines of social-acceptability. While others, like Peg, were able to operate outside of this sphere, which also came with its own consequences. Others, were left somewhere in between. Peg's story tells us that regardless of where on this spectrum women fell, their lives came with compromises. Women were forced to operate under a different set of rules because of the way that society viewed and treated women. Women were not given the same education or opportunities as their male counterparts. They were viewed as second-class citizens, who were to be controlled by their male relatives. The law did not protect them from abuse, nor did it provide them with much recourse. If they wanted to obtain agency in a way that was not dependent on a man giving it to them, they had to find a way to work around the system that was stacked against them. While this may have worked in opening up one area, though, it often had repercussions in other areas of their lives. Independent women were a threat to the status quo, and as such, were the targets of abuse and intentionally discredited. In a society that was hostile to female empowerment, women were punished for trying to find their own voices, regardless of profession. Although the winds of change were sweeping through other parts of Europe, most notably in France, Ireland was not part of the discussion. The fight to gain Catholic rights, came first, and women's rights hardly even entered the discussion.

Since Peg's time, there has most certainly been progress made for women. However, it would be a lie to say that her story is irrelevant or that it draws no parallels to today. For sex workers, specifically, it appears that very little has changed since Peg published her memoirs. We have yet to find another profession that provides the kind of immediate income that sex

work does, nor have we been able to effectively tackle the social stigma that comes along with being a sex worker. Women in this profession are viewed through their identifiers, and we have yet to combat that. Take, for instance, a figure like Stormy Daniels and her recent revelations about her experiences with President Trump. She was given a platform because of her fame and status as a result of her sex work, and yet it is also her profession that draws doubt into her story. Because of the work that she does and the stigma attached to it, it opens the door for increased criticisms about her moral integrity and trustworthiness. Over two hundred years after Peg's death, sex work still has the same debilitating stain attached to it, and we remain unable to separate the person from the kind of work that they do. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of sex work does not appear to have changed at all. Women enter and remain in the life often times because it is their best option, and because of a lack of support networks and financial stability. Where we continue to fail them is in acknowledging the emotional impact of this kind of work, and the cost to themselves.

In general, though, Peg's experience is also incredibly reminiscent of that of many women who are merely trying to carve out their own spheres of influence in an often-unsympathetic world. From the women of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement to the modern-day woman, we see that women in all contexts face repercussions when they do things to try and increase their own agency. Women in both cases, faced and continue to experience personal and professional reprisals for demanding an end to hostile workplaces, equal pay, and other rights that their male counterparts enjoy. Beyond this, they also encounter unforeseen consequences that either limit agency in other ways or simply make the price too great to endure. No matter what choice is made, it comes with liberations and constraints on our

agency. As women, we are constantly trying to find the balance between getting what we want and giving up a part of ourselves to get it. Additionally, in trying to work within a system that is in many ways fundamentally stacked against us, we too have to find ways to work around those barriers, that often have drastic consequences for us.