

WENDY MOORE

## Hostess with the Mostess

Peg Plunkett: Memoirs of a Whore

By Julie Peakman

(Quercus Books 256pp £20)

Women living in the British Isles during the 18th century were almost totally devoid of rights. As daughters they were under the control of their fathers; once they married they became the property of their husbands. Any possessions they owned or earnings they accrued automatically belonged to their spouses. The only women who enjoyed even a modicum of independence were widows – and whores.

Although still reliant on men for income, protection and reputation, some of the era's most successful courtesans and brothel madams lived comfortable and companionable lives freed from the legal and social constraints that hobbled most women. One of the most famous and flamboyant, who enjoyed her independence to the full, was Peg Plunkett.

Far from being apologetic about her profession, Plunkett revelled in her reputation. She flaunted her wealth, hosted extravagant parties and openly paraded her calling in Georgian Dublin for more than thirty years. Her customers included aristocrats, judges, army officers and politicians. Describing herself as the 'reigning vice queen', she boasted of once entertaining twenty men in twenty-four hours. When she found herself down on her luck, she detailed her exploits and her conquests in three volumes of memoirs in a bid to raise funds. She was the first brothel madam to publish her life story and she thereby created a new literary genre: whores' memoirs. Her books and those that followed suit provide us with an invaluable picture not only of the Georgian sex industry but of the domestic, communal and street life of every level of 18th-century society.

Julie Peakman, a historian at the University of London, has done Plunkett full justice in celebrating her extraordinary career while also illuminating the personal tragedies, fluctuating fortunes and

outrageous abuses that she endured along the way. As an academic Peakman has made sex her speciality. She has previously written books on 18th-century sexual perversions, prostitution and pornography, as well as editing an eight-volume collection of biographies of prostitutes. Yet while retaining historical integrity through rigorous research, she always manages to rejoice in the rumbustious, exuberant, even titillating nature of her subject. Although this book is based largely on Plunkett's



own memoirs, Peakman has fleshed out the bare bones of the story by tracking down elusive lovers, determining vague dates and pinpointing places. Even so, Plunkett's biography is still as rollicking a romp as any bawdy 18th-century novel.

Plunkett was born in rural Ireland in about 1742 to a fairly well-to-do Catholic family, but after her mother died and her father descended into ill health, she came under the thumb of a bullying elder brother. Escaping to Dublin in her teens,

she was undone by the catch-22 that ensnared so many young women at the time: she slept with a young man who promised to marry her, but afterwards he refused to walk down the aisle on account of her easy virtue.

Rejected by her family and pregnant, she gave birth secretly to the first of many illegitimate children. Over the course of her career she became pregnant at least ten times; all her children either died young or were given away. Forced to survive on her wits and her looks – she was abundantly blessed with both – she took a lover.

As a 'kept woman' she adopted her lover's name and styled herself Mrs Leeson for the rest of her life. But though she genuinely loved many of her conquests, Plunkett could never be content with one man. She could not resist a handsome face or a charming manner or – for that matter – a full purse. She had a particular penchant for a uniform, even once donning one herself to parade through the city, and was a popular figure at the Royal Barracks. Let down by one lover after another, however, she determined to beat the men at their own game and set up in business herself.

By the 1770s Plunkett and a friend were jointly running the highest-class brothel in Dublin. She lived in a lavishly furnished house with liveried footmen in the city's smartest quarter. Ireland's wealthiest and most powerful men flocked to her door, not only for sex but for fine dining, expensive champagne and sparkling conversation. She had a wicked sense of humour: she disguised herself at one masked ball as 'Chastity'. She even had a racehorse named after her. And for much of the time she led a charmed life. When arrested by an over-enthusiastic constable she simply sent for two military friends, who put the constable in the cell instead.

But Plunkett had her share of suffering too. In 1779 her house was trashed and she was beaten up by a gang of upper-class student hooligans, the Pinking Dandies – a prototype Bullingdon Club. She lost the baby she was carrying and her two-year-old daughter died 'in the consequence of the fright'. At other