“The One Great Drawback to the Life of Women is That They Cannot Act in Politics”? Political Women in Anthony Trollope’s Fiction

Agnieszka Setecka

Abstract Although the nineteenth century in England was dominated by the figure of the female monarch, Queen Victoria, women had virtually no political rights. The voices critical of their political impairment, notably John Stuart Mill’s *The subjection of women*, did not bring any significant change, so that women were granted political rights on equal terms with men as late as 1928. However, women’s political rights and their involvement in the world of politics did become an important issue, which found its way into fiction. This paper is concerned with Anthony Trollope’s *The Prime Minister* and the way he presented women who, dissatisfied with the limitations of their prescribed domestic life, got involved into politics. Although women could participate in politics only through their husbands or fathers, Trollope nevertheless represented them as powerful, if invisible, agents, grey eminences of the political life in England. Not only was the social world dominated by women a shadow of the male political world, social coteries being an equivalent of political parties, but it also influenced the political world. However, although Trollope did grant women a relatively large scope for action in his novels, he nevertheless presented them as limited by the demands of the ideology of separate spheres, especially that their too direct and indiscreet interference into the political world might meet with condemnation. Therefore, far from abolishing the boundary between the private and the public altogether, Trollope nevertheless revealed how blurry and porous it was.

The quotation in the title comes from Trollope’s *Phineas Finn* (1999b, p. II 26).

A. Setecka (✉)
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland
e-mail: saga@ifa.amu.edu.pl

J. Fabiszak et al. (eds.), *Crossroads in Literature and Culture*, Second Language Learning and Teaching, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-642-21994-8_10,
© Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg 2013

1 Introduction

The Victorian period begins with the year of the first Reform Act,[1] and the issues connected with reforming the electoral system and the growth of democracy remain major concerns later in the century. In the 1850s and especially the 1860s the reform debates resurge with the Liberals proposing the increase in the number of voters by lowering financial qualifications, which, finally, led to introducing the second Reform Act in 1867. Significantly, the first Reform Act of 1832, although it doubled the number of voters, absolutely excluded women from participation in the political life of the country as it referred to "male persons only" (Wingerden 1999, p. 8), and the final shape of the second Reform Act disappointed the hopes of the growing host of the supporters of female suffrage. However, the 1860s became the time particularly important in the history of women's movement, as it is the period when it consolidates, which is manifest in the founding of the Langham Place Circle and of *The English Woman's Journal* (Wingerden 1999, p. 3), as well as the time when the debates concerning women's involvement in politics become particularly heated, to grow in intensity later in the period. The debates, the high point of which must have been the Ladies' Petition[2] and John Stuart Mill's address to the House of Commons in 1867, much like other major issues of the period, neither began nor ended in the Parliament, but extended to the press and the novel, Trollope's Palliser novels being a most prominent example.

In Trollope's six Palliser novels, the first of which, *Can you forgive her?*, was published in 1864 and the last, *The Duke's children*, in 1880, politics constitutes the major concern although, as Trollope puts it in his *Autobiography*, "[i]f [he] write[s] politics for [his] own sake, [he] must put in love and intrigue, social incidents, with perhaps a dash of sport, for the benefit of [his] readers" (Trollope 1999a, p. 317). This paper will focus on women's special relation to politics and the available ways in which they could participate in the political life of the country in spite of their inferior position, as represented in Trollope's *The Prime Minister* (1876). Trollope's fiction abounds in strong-minded women who have their own political views and who take deep interest in their husbands' political careers. Paradoxically, however, they are mostly opposed to enfranchising women and do not desire the vote for themselves. Although they would probably disagree with the first of arguments against women's suffrage quoted by John Stuart Mill, namely that "[p]olitics are not women's business, and would distract them from their proper duties", they would not oppose the remaining three, which say that "Women do not desire the suffrage, but would rather be without it: Women are

[1] Chew and Altick (1967, p. 185) claim that "[t]he precisian might limit the Victorian period to the years between the Queen'a accession in 1837 and her death in 1901, but a new era really began with the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832 and closed at the end of the Boer War in 1902.".

[2] The Petition was a plea that the Parliament grants the vote to all people fulfilling the financial qualifications, regardless of their sex. It contained 1,499 signatures (Wingerden 1999, p. 2).

sufficiently represented by the representation of their male relatives and connexions: Women have power enough already" (Mill 2003). Even the last statement, which met with laughter in the House of Commons, would not seem in any way preposterous for Trollope's female characters, who did not underestimate the power of their feminine influence.

2 "Influence" and de Certeau's "Tactics"

The idea of women's influence or "the true queenly power", as Ruskin described it (2002, p. 69), was often evoked in Victorian writing, and it referred to women's moral authority. According to Ruskin, it both depended on and justified the separation of the spheres, which ensured that women are "protected from all danger and temptation" (Ruskin 2002, p. 77). If men were naturally predisposed for "battle" and "rough work in open world" (Ruskin 2002, p. 77), the woman was to rule, since "her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision" (Ruskin 2002, p. 77). The two spheres, although separate, were supposed to be complementary, so that it is unjust, Ruskin (2002, p. 70) insists, to write of "the 'mission' and of the 'rights' of Woman, as if these could ever be separate from the mission and the rights of Man—as if she and her lord were creatures of independent kind, and irreconcilable claim". Thus, the ideology of separate but complementary spheres, of which Ruskin is so ardent an advocate, does not so much totally preclude women from participation in the political life of the country, as it limits the scope of their action, since they can only affect political life through their husbands. Indeed, as an anonymous (1850, p. 60) author claims in an article to *Eliza Cook's Journal*, "The influence of women on the mind of the country is still great, even in matters of government and justice. They exercise an unseen power and with invisible reins guide the opinions of men", which would probably reflect the sentiments of a great majority of Victorians.

However, if the idea of female influence is so dear to Victorian writers, Michel de Certeau's "tactics" seems a more adequate term to describe the involvement of Trollope's women into politics. Significantly, although many of his female characters evidently do not limit themselves to moral guidance only, they do not either demand the vote or lament the ideology of separate spheres which seems to incapacitate them politically. Rather than rebel against the established order and place themselves outside it, which could jeopardize their social position and respectability, they learn to act from within, employing what de Certeau called "tactics", or "an art of the weak" (Certeau 1984, p. 37). As de Certeau (1984, p. 37) writes, "the space of tactics is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" so that it works "within enemy territory". Through the use of tactical practices, among which de Certeau enumerates "clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, 'hunter's cunning,' maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike" (Certeau 1984, p. xix), women can "turn to

their own ends forces alien to them" (Certeau 1984, p. xix). Trollope's "political women" operate within the world as defined by men but they find the ways of operating that subvert the very principles on which this world is based without openly contesting it. The result is an ambiguity in Trollope's representation of female characters, at once weak and powerful, complying with the ideology of separate spheres and at the same time subverting it from within, blurring the boundary between the public and the private realms.

3 Glencora Palliser: A Political Woman

As she is presented in *The Prime Minister*, the Duchess of Omnium, known in earlier Palliser novels as Glencora Palliser, embodies the ambiguous position of a Victorian political woman: possessed of no direct political power, she is nevertheless one of the wealthiest women in England, which, coupled with her rank, makes her an unexceptionally influential character. In *The Prime Minister* she is presented at the point when her husband is asked to form a new coalition cabinet and becomes "the leading man in the greatest kingdom in the world" (I, 50).[3] Glencora wants to have a share in his political success and offers her support. However, not only does she go beyond the mere moral guidance, but she also seems to play the dominant part in the attempts to strengthen his authority. Most importantly, she superficially conforms to the norms and limitations of Victorian ideology, or, in other words, she tactically turns the Victorian ideas about women's role to her own advantage, paradoxically, by choosing to understand them very literally. She thus exploits the position she holds in the social world, traditionally a female domain, as well as the ideals most dearly held by Victorians: unity between the spouses and a wife's devotion to her husband, whose interest she should serve. Thus, although her scrupulous husband accuses her of vulgarity (I, 177), her behaviour does not seem to go much beyond the scope considered proper for women.

3.1 The Husband and Wife [are] One Subject in Law

After her initial resistance to her marriage described in the first novel of the series, *Can you forgive her?*, Glencora Palliser learns to love her rather reserved and prosaic husband, and becomes a model of a devoted wife. Her devotion is manifest in the interest she takes in politics and in her desire to foster Plantagenet Palliser's political career. Although, as the narrator indicates, "politics were altogether unnecessary to her" because she had "a wider and a pleasanter influence than

[3] All references to *The Prime Minister* will include the information about the volume (the Roman number) and to the page (the Arabic number).

could belong to any woman as wife of a Prime Minister" as well as "a celebrity of her own, quite independent of [her husband's] position, and which could not be enhanced by any glory or any power added to him" (I, 50), she devotes all her efforts and her fortune to ensure her husband's success as the Prime Minister. Glencora identifies her husband's interest with her own, so that when he goes to the Queen to be commissioned, "her heart throbbed with excitement" (I, 50) and when he finally resigns from office after unsuccessful attempts to form a coalition government, she cannot hide her disappointment and considers it to be her own failure, so that she complains that "[a]ll her grand aspirations were at an end" and that "[a]ll her triumphs are over" (II, 343).

Such identification, or unity, between spouses, was one of the major tenets of Victorian ideology, and it was reflected in the law of coverture. It held that "the husband and wife become one subject in law" and that "the very being or legal existence of the woman is in many respects suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband" (Broom and Hadley 1869, p. 543). Not only did it lead to women's financial dependence, as it transferred the rights to a woman's property to her husband after marriage unless special provision was made for her, but it was also a frequently quoted reason against female suffrage, since women were considered to be sufficiently represented by their husbands. In the novel, Plantagenet Palliser takes the idea of the unity between husband and wife for granted, when he identifies Glencora's "ambition of seeing [her] husband a great man" with her ambition to be "a great man's wife" (I, 170), while failing to notice any subtle difference between the two. He also feels personally offended when his wife's name appears in a negative context in *People's Banner*, a radical newspaper exposing what its editor saw as political scandals, after Glencora meddled with the elections at Silverbridge, traditionally in the hands of the House of Omnium. At the same time however, although he claims to be "anxious… that [Glencora] should share everything with [him],—even in politics", he assumes his own dominance by insisting that "in all things there must at last be one voice that shall be the ruling voice", by which he means his own voice (I, 303).

Glencora's identification with her husband might create a misleading impression that she accepts her subordinate status and her disadvantageous legal and political position. Indeed, rather than rebel against them, Glencora tactically turns them to her own advantage. If she and her husband are one, his power and authority might be represented by herself. As Victorian lawyers explain, "[a] woman might indeed act as agent for her husband, for that implies no separation from, but is rather a representation of, her lord" (Broom and Hadley 1869, p. 544). Therefore, acting with the best intentions, and disregarding her husband's scruples, she interferes with the elections for a member for Silverbridge, by showing her preference for one of the two candidates, which amounted to revealing "what

[3] All references to *The Prime Minister* will include the information about the volume (the Roman number) and to the page (the Arabic number).

people call the Castle interest" (II, 102). Thus, Glencora exercises the only form of power available to women especially in the times when aristocratic influence in the boroughs was still very strong. As Reynolds (1998, p. 129) writes, "the return of the landowner's candidate remained a sound indication of the influence of the aristocratic landowner. Despite the changes to franchise carried in 1832 and 1867, and an increasingly vociferous debate on the nature and scope of 'legitimate influence', before the radical extension of the county franchise in 1884–5, the aristocracy continued to play a significant part in the return of members to the lower house". Significantly, aristocratic women could promote the interests of their families and friends by "follow[ing], without intervening in, the election of a particular candidate … tak[ing] a position of ostentatious non-interference… [and] a direct intervention in the constituency" (Reynolds 1998, p. 140).

Interestingly, although in the case of Silverbridge elections Glencora acts against the wishes of her husband, who believed that "[t]he influence which owners of property may have in boroughs is decreasing every day, and there arises the question whether a conscientious man will any longer use such influence" (I, 194–195), she considers her action justified, as she claims to be acting for his benefit. Following the "little syllogism… as to the Duke ruling the borough, the Duke's wife ruling the Duke, and therefore the Duke's wife ruling the borough" (I, 196), Glencora can thus exercise her power without actually going against the Victorian laws banishing women from the sphere of politics. Although the Duke sees Gelncora's behaviour as one that might destroy the unity between himself and his wife, so that he begs her not to separate herself from him (I, 302) as he believes that she "intend[s] to put [herself] in opposition to [him]" (I, 301), Glencora interprets her political intervention as an action resulting from the identification between her own and her husband's interests.

3.2 She had Made Herself a Prime Ministress

Glencora's identification with her husband results in her desire to match his political and her social success. Although, as a woman, she is banned by education and custom from holding any official function, she is nevertheless well prepared to take role of the political hostess, a figure extensively described by Reynolds (1998, p. 156–77).[4] As a political hostess, she has the "particular speciality" of "entertaining political connections, exercising patronage, guarding political confidences, and offering advice" (Reynolds 1998, p. 156), and she sets down to her job very seriously. Indeed, when she first hears of her husband's nomination as Prime Minister, she claims that she is ready to "slave" for him (I, 48), which, were it not told in earnest, might be read as a satirical reference to the relations between spouses. In the novel, her work is represented as analogous to Plantagenet's work in the political sphere.

[4] Reynolds distinguishes between a political hostess and an aristocratic political wife, a distinction that is not of great relevance for the purposes of this paper.

> It may be a question whether on the whole the Duchess did not work harder than he did. She did not at first dare to expound to him those grand ideas which she had conceived in regard to magnificence and hospitality. She said nothing of any extraordinary expenditure of money. But she set herself to work after her own fashion, making to him suggestions as to dinners and evening receptions, to which he objected only on the score of time. "You must eat your dinner somewhere," she said, "and you need only come in just before we sit down, and go into your own room if you please without coming upstairs at all. I can at any rate do that part of it for you." And she did do that part of it with marvellous energy all through the month of May,—so that by the end of the month, within six weeks of the time at which she first heard of the Coalition Ministry, all the world had begun to talk of the Prime Minister's dinners, and of the receptions given by the Prime Minister's wife (I, 72).

Thus, Glencora fulfils her promise to "entertain after a fashion that had never been known even among the nobility of England" (I, 51), and the success of her parties seems to exceed the less her husband's less spectacular triumphs.

Plantagenet at first considers Glencora's understanding of her role as a wife of the leading politician to be childish, but he is finally forced to admit that her understanding of the inextricable connection between the social and the political was much superior to his own. He recognizes in Glencora (rather than in himself) the social skills and qualities that would ensure the success of the coalition, which he tries to maintain:

> And now, gradually,—very slowly indeed at first, but still with a sure step,—there was creeping upon [Plantagenet Palliser] the idea that his power of cohesion was sought for, and perhaps found, not in his political capacity, but in his rank and wealth. It might, in fact, be the case that it was his wife the Duchess,—that Lady Glencora of whose wild impulses and general impracticability he had always been in dread,—that she with her dinner parties and receptions, with her crowded saloons, her music, her picnics, and social temptations, was Prime Minister rather than he himself. It might be that this had been understood by the coalesced parties,—by everybody, in fact, except himself. It had, perhaps, been found that in the state of things then existing, a ministry could be best kept together, not by parliamentary capacity, but by social arrangements, such as his Duchess, and his Duchess alone, could carry out. She and she only would have the spirit and the money and the sort of cleverness required. In such a state of things he of course, as her husband, must be the nominal Prime Minister (I, 161).

Glencora herself is also fully aware of her crucial role, believing that "[s]he had made herself a Prime Ministress by the manner in which she opened her saloons, her banqueting halls, and her gardens" (I, 264). *The Prime Minister* thus makes conspicuous the inextricable connections between the political and the social spheres, which cannot exist independently. Not only do the numerous dinners and parties serve to secure the support for her husband to make it possible for him to carry out his political work, but, as Plantagenet finally comes to realise, they constitute the essence of political activity. Most importantly, the social world both reflects political alliances, with ladies forming their own "parties" or "cabinets" analogous to the ones functioning in the Parliament, and crucially contributes to the shaping of alliances or even determines them. This is why Glencora attempts to "ha[ve] everybody" (I, 97) to her huge parties, so that "[i]n London there should not be a Member of Parliament whom she would not herself know and influence by her flattery and grace" (I, 51). Indeed, one of the characters' ironic remark that "the country can be ruled by flowers and looking-glasses" (I, 100) is truer than it originally seems.

Glencora's understanding of the complementarily of the political (male) world and the social (female) sphere, or, in fact, conflating the political and the social, contributes significantly to the blurring of the line between them, but it also exposes her husband's deficiencies as a politician. Plantagenet Palliser is described in the novel as an upright and conscientious man, unable to bear even the smallest stain on his reputation, or, as Trollope writes in his autobiography, he is "a perfect gentleman" (1999a, p. 361). Glencora seems to realise that it is only "sufficient audacity, a thick skin, and power to bear for a few years the evil looks and cold shoulders of his comrades" that can ensure political success while "[t]o the man who will once shrink at the idea of being looked at askance for treachery, or hated for his ill condition, the career is impossible" (II, 364). Plantagenet's oversensitivity as regards his honour, or his tender skin (II, 21), as Glencora calls it, seems to make him an effeminate character and prevent him from holding long in office. It is Glencora, "ambitious both on her own behalf and that of her lord" (I, 46), who has to make up for his weakness. Not only does she claim that she "should have been a man, [her] skin is so thick" (II, 21) but she also declares her readiness to do "all the dirty work":

> They should have made me Prime Minister, and have let him be Chancellor of the Exchequer. I begin to see the ways of Government now. I could have done all the dirty work. I could have given away garters and ribbons, and made my bargains while giving them. I could select sleek, easy bishops who wouldn't be troublesome. I could give pensions or withhold them, and make the stupid men peers. I could have the big noblemen at my feet, praying to be Lieutenants of Counties. I could dole out secretaryships and lordships, and never a one without getting something in return. I could brazen out a job and let the 'People's Banners' and the Slides make their worst of it. And I think I could make myself popular with my party, and do the high-flowing patriotic talk for the benefit of the Provinces… a Prime Minister should never go beyond generalities about commerce, agriculture, peace, and general philanthropy. Of course he should have the gift of the gab, and that Plantagenet hasn't got. He never wants to say anything unless he has got something to say (II, 154–155).

Glencora is evidently fully aware of the harshness and corruptibility of the public world, from which women are excluded, as Ruskin claimed, to protect their purity. It is men who were to "encounter all peril and trial" to emerge "wounded, or subdued; often misled; and *always* hardened" (Ruskin 2002, p. 77, original emphasis). Glencora, however, professes herself to be a more competent person to face the dangerous and morally ambivalent world than her husband. Not only does she thus blur the boundary between the male and the female domains, but she also actually reverses the male and female roles, as they were understood in the Victorian period.

In her great ambition on behalf of her husband as well as herself, her lack of any scruples in achieving her goals and in her "masculine" thick skin, Glencora might remind of Lady Macbeth, to whom she compares herself several times in the novel. Like Lady Macbeth, who notoriously prays to be unsexed and to have "the access and passage to remorse" stopped so that "no compunctious visiting of nature [might] shake [her] fell purpose" (Shakespeare 1992, p. 37), Glencora takes on the qualities considered to belong "naturally" to men and urges her weaker husband to action.

Glencora is obviously properly toned down to fit a realistic novel rather than a great tragedy, and she seems to be talking about her being like Lady Macbeth in jest; she says "I feel myself to be a Lady Macbeth, prepared for the murder of any Duncan or any Daubeny [a former Prime Minister and a conservative] who may stand in my lord's way. In the meantime, like Lady Macbeth herself, we must attend to the banqueting. Her lord appeared and misbehaved himself; my lord won't show himself at all,—which I think is worse" (Shakespeare 1994, p. I, 96). Yet, the comparison leaves the reader with the feeling, that, like Lady Macbeth, she entered a forbidden territory of the male world, from which she cannot return unstained. Glencora is fully aware of a kind of moral degradation that any political career might involve, and yet, to keep her husband in power, she was ready to undergo ridicule and accusations of vulgarity. Paradoxically, even through her unfeminine behaviour she only proved her truly feminine devotion to her husband.

4 Conclusion

In the light of Lady Glencora Palliser's political activity, the quotation that was used in the title of this paper—"The one great drawback to the life of women is that they cannot act in politics" (Trollope 1999b, p. II, 26), a sentence spoken by Madame Max Goesler (later Mrs Finn), seems ironic and, indeed, it was not spoken in earnest. The very same character, when asked in *The Prime Minister*, whether she would "go in for [women's] 'rights'" answers: "Not by Act of Parliament, or by platform meeting. I have a great idea of a woman's rights; but that is the way to throw them away (I, 103–104) and she jokingly suggests that women might achieve political goals without spending her days getting bored in the House of Commons. Although the idea of influence might justify women's exclusion from the political life, Trollope's political women redefine it and tactically use to their own advantage. Therefore, far from abolishing the boundary between the private and the public altogether, Trollope nevertheless revealed how blurry and porous it was.

References

Anonymous. 1850. The vocation of women. *Eliza Cook's Journal*, 3, 56: 59-61 http://archive.org/details/elizcooksjournal03cookrich Accessed 27 May 2008.

Broom and Hadley. 1869. *Commentaries on the laws of England*. 4 vols. London: William Maxwell &Son, Henry Sweet, and Stevens and Sons. http://books.google.pl/books?id=thitAAAAMAAJ&dq=Broom+hadley Accessed 12 February 2010.

Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The practice of everyday life*. (Translated by Steven Rendall). Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Chew, S. C. and Altick, R. D. (ed.) 1967. *A literary history of England. The nineteenth century and after*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Mill, J. S. 2003. *The admission of women to the electoral suffrage*. http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/book-sum/js_mill2.html. Accessed 16 January 2010.

Reynolds, K.D. 1998. *Aristocratic women and political society in Victorian Britain*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Ruskin, J. 2002. *Sesame and lilies*. (edited and an introduction by Deborah Epstein Nord). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Shakespeare, W. 1994. *Macbeth*. London: Penguin Books.

Trollope, A. 1999a. *An autobiography*. (Edited by Michaels Sadler and Frederick Page, introduction and notes by E.D. Edwards). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trollope, A. 1999b. *Phineas Finn. The Irish Member*. 2 vols. (Edited with and introduction and notes by Jacques Berthoud). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trollope, A. 1999c. *The Prime Minister*. 2 vols. (Edited with notes by Jennifer Uglow, instroduction by John McCormick). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wingerden, S A. van. 1999. *The women's suffrage movement in Britain, 1866–1928*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.