The legacy of reform

This closing chapter returns to my opening image, an aristocratic woman writer sitting at a table with the Prime Minster and a middle-class novelist, to place it in the context of politics in its most specifically institutional sense. I consider the influence of aristocratic women on the political life of Victorian Britain, and the vocabularies and literary tropes that this influence generated. The figure of the ambitious and Machiavellian aristocratic woman allowed men of both upper- and middle-classes to gender and dispel pre-Reform spectres of interested motivation and illegitimate influence. This character type facilitated the defining of a male body politic in a language of disinterested conviction and legitimate authority. Even women of other classes could validate their modes of public involvement in opposition to the negative images of upper-class members of their sex. Upper-class women writers, however, were hardly impervious to the political energies generated by Reform; they could engage with these deleterious representations of influence, drawing from them literary tropes through which to articulate their own distinctive political identities and aspirations.

For aristocratic women, politics encompassed a much broader and more socialised process than that marked out by the limitations of the franchise. An ‘aristocracy’, wrote Thomas Arnold in 1837, ‘acts through the relations of private life which are permanent, whereas the political excitement which opposes it must always be short-lived’.¹ The ‘relations of private life’ for aristocratic women involved not only their
immediate families, but also the people with whom they came into contact in the course of their sociable activities. With high levels of power still in the hands of a comparatively small proportion of society – by 1865, 44 per cent of MPs were still landed proprietors and/or aristocrats – personal interactions within this group retained their potential value. The very nature of aristocratic women’s influence – informal, interpersonal and essentially socialised – meant that it left few visible marks. Supposedly private channels of correspondence formed a usefully unofficial medium for public transactions: requests for patronage, indirect soundings of male relatives as a preliminary to an official offer of positions, indications of changing alliances.² Politics did not simply take place at Westminster. It was an amorphous process that also involved ballrooms, dinners and house parties as well as the responsibilities devolving on the women of landed estates. These latter places and events were not just appendages to Parliament, but key sites of political activity in their own right, particularly given how inadequate the social facilities of the Houses of Parliament were for informal contact between members.³ As hostesses, negotiators, communicators, dispensers of patronage, and canvassers, aristocratic women had essential roles to play. If the politics of deference still influenced post-Reform voting, then the wives and daughters of country estates, on whom fell most of the regular contact with the local community, still had an important role to play in consolidating and invoking this deference.

The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries were the great era of the so-called political hostess. As popular or literary representation traditionally portrayed her, she was a power in her own right, a puppet master (or mistress) whose salons, ballrooms and dinner tables were key sites of politicised exchange. She exerted her influence not solely over male relatives, but over a wide spectrum of men. The conversational rituals of the salon, ‘not exclusively female arenas but...female-managed spaces’, played constitutive parts in cross-Continental politics, particularly in France, and affected constructions of British elite politics well into the nineteenth-century.⁴ The social as an interpretative category comes into its own when we seek to understand the position of women acting in this ostensibly private yet potentially politically charged role. Vickery’s analysis of the eighteenth-century development of behavioural codes of ‘politeness’ notes the assumption ‘that dining-rooms and parlours were fitted for social traffic and cultural debate’, which opened ‘a way of conceptualising an unofficial public sphere to which privileged women could lay legitimate claim’.⁵ The most famous early Victorian political hostess was Elizabeth Fox, Lady Holland, whose house became