

# Section 11 – Turning the Tide

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## The Enlightenment and Literate Women

The circumstances that led to the Protestant Reformation, particularly the questioning of authority and the dissemination of information through the printed media, were as huge a catharsis to the development of our culture as the arrival of the first monumental cities. They led to cultural initiatives that changed the world completely.

The speedy communication of ideas that printing allowed led directly to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the burgeoning of Science and the Industrial Revolution. Questioning became widespread, and Reason became, increasingly, the philosophical foundation of a broader intellectual culture, one that challenged the monolithic social structure imposed by church and state, and upon which their authority depended. Indeed, Martin Luther had predicted this and fulminated against reason in several treatises in an effort to maintain control.<sup>1</sup>

The exclusion of women from political representation, the denial of their equal status with men, and their situation as literal possessions of their fathers and husbands continued in the West until the twentieth century. The concept of the ‘ideal woman’ had not changed much from the Roman vision of Atia and the ‘humble vessel’ straitjacket of the early Jahwists. They were expected to be silent, demure, and house-bound and were represented as weak and insipid, with delicate sensibilities that should not be troubled by the harsh realities of the outside world. Women took their husband’s names when they married, and virtually disappeared as their former selves.

Nonetheless, education for women became widespread in the 19th century and so they were able to read. Both women and enlightened men were influenced by the ideals that developed from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and led into such social movements as the French Revolution and rapid changes in medicine, astronomy, physics, philosophy and art. Both women and men re-examined the roles of women in light of these developments.

Suffragettes began to appear, protesting in public and arguing for inclusion of women in governance and improvement in their legal status. Finally, women were enfranchised under the law and were allowed to vote. In the US this happened with the 19th Amendment, in 1920 while,

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<sup>1</sup> Luther’s aim was not that people should question all religion, only the ones he was opposed to.

in Canada, it was 1929. In Europe, the timing ranged from Finland in 1907 to France in 1944, Italy in 1946 and Greece in 1952.

The change in legal status was helpful, but even that did not significantly change the everyday lives of most women. Married women stayed home to tend the children and the house, and unmarried women who had to find employment were restricted to jobs classed as 'women's work' such as domestic servants, factory workers, nurses or teachers. These were low-paying jobs, and the best way for a woman to find security in life continued to be to find a husband and give up her independence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pair bonding in marriage can be a beautiful thing, but only if the partners are, in fact, partners and are in the union by choice. This will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.