

Women from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment

The status and representation of women for the majority of Western history was oppressive and restrictive. For thousands of years women enjoyed very few economic, legal, or political rights and, in theory, were expected to be submissive to their fathers or husbands. Women were confined to traditional gender roles, which forced them to remain in the domestic or private sphere of society. Women's roles as daughters, wives, or mothers were considered their most significant function in society. For the elite members of society, the reproductive capabilities of women were an extremely important function in determining inheritances and maintaining the family line. Through all classes of society, the social system of patriarchy evolved as the primary way to regulate women's behavior and maintain social control.

From the Renaissance (ca. 1400–1600) to the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, women were consistently considered to be inferior to men and their role in society continued to be primarily domestic. However, the representation of and attitude toward women started to gradually improve, particularly through the medium of literature. During the Enlightenment women began to take advantage of new intellectual trends, such as the novel and the salon. These social outlets enabled them to have more of a public voice. Furthermore, the Enlightenment, while continuing to promote strict gender roles in general, saw some of the first signs of feminism, through the writings of figures such as the British writer Mary Wollstonecraft.

Dual Representations of Women During the Renaissance

The Italian Renaissance comprised a “rebirth” of culture, literature, and art in Western Europe. The Renaissance combined the ideals of the ancient and classical texts (Roman and Greek) with the medieval values of Catholicism and the contemporary principles of humanism. Leading figures of the Renaissance continued to portray women as they were represented during the medieval period—as either virtuous and chaste or seductive and deceptive. Renaissance thinkers perpetuated this traditional representation of women using iconic images from Catholicism, such as Virgin Mary and Eve.

Although women were oftentimes depicted in Renaissance art or literature, the cultural advancements and political developments that emerged from the Renaissance overwhelmingly neglected women. The Renaissance brought a renewal and rebirth of intellect, culture, art, and social advancement that was seemingly only advantageous to men. Women continued to be used in society only for the benefits of men—as daughters who could potentially help the family through an advantageous marriage, or as wives who took care of the home and produced children to help work on the farm or to carry on a family name. The behavior of women was also an important indication of the social status and reputation of their families. Women's sexuality, particularly among the elite, was highly regulated to ensure chastity before marriage and the legitimacy of heirs after. If a woman was accused of having an affair it could later be claimed that her child was not a legitimate heir to an inheritance, or to the throne.

Effects of the Protestant and Catholic Reformation on Women

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the social standing and the legal and economic rights of women continued to be restrictive, limiting them to the domestic sphere. There continued to be an emphasis on the importance of women's role in the home, and increasingly women were pushed out of the public sphere of society. Opportunities for work diminished and women were increasingly forced into jobs that related to domestic work.

During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the resulting Catholic Counter-Reformation, the depiction of women in domestic roles became increasingly important. The social system of patriarchy matured during the early modern period, particularly during the Reformation. The concept of patriarchy involved male control over nearly all facets of society. Men were considered central in every type of social structure. Under the system of patriarchy, each household symbolized a small kingdom, with the man acting as the king. Men held authority over their entire family, including all property that belonged to the family. Men ran all institutions of society, including social, religious, political, economic, and legal. Over the course of the seventeenth century, men increasingly had nearly absolute power over their unmarried and widowed female relatives, while women were expected to be subordinate to men in every way.

The unstable religious, political and cultural climate during the Reformation led to expressions of social fear and violence. This led to a tragic stretch of female executions in the form of witch trials during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For American students, the witch trials are primarily associated with the events in Salem, Massachusetts. However, Salem was merely one example of many executions of women during this period. From the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the seventeenth century, tens of thousands of women were killed on charges of witchcraft. Throughout the entire span of the early modern period (ca. 1480–1750) an estimated 40,000–60,000 women were executed in Europe and North America.

Women and the Enlightenment

As the chaotic years of the Reformation and the Thirty Years' War passed, Western Europe entered a more rational and relatively peaceful phase in its history. Throughout the eighteenth century Western Europe experienced what is today referred to as the Age of Enlightenment. Broadly defined, the Enlightenment was a cultural and intellectual movement in Europe and America that sought to reform and improve society through the advancement of knowledge and education. Acting as a backlash, in many ways, to the religious wars and witch trials of the preceding centuries, the philosophers and thinkers of the Enlightenment advocated the use of rational thought and science over religion and superstition. Particularly in France, Enlightenment philosophes cautioned against the power and excesses of the Catholic Church, as well as any form of organized religion, as a dangerous vehicle of intolerance.

During the Enlightenment, the development of ideas like individualism and rationality started to challenge women's relegated role in society. Writers, such as

Rousseau, wrote about this but continued to separate women as the opposites of men. Women were still perceived to have designated roles in society, particularly as mothers and wives. Throughout the Age of the Enlightenment women found ways to combine the new intellectual movements evolving in the public sphere with their appointed place in the domestic private sphere. For example, women during this period frequently participated in the salon culture. A salon was a social and intellectual gathering of people who would meet at the house of a well-known or intellectually inspirational person to discuss the latest cultural trends, from literature to politics, from art to philosophy. Salons were meant to be social gatherings for fun and entertainment as well as sources of intellectual stimulation. Traditionally, the bourgeoisie, or wealthier segments of society, participated in salons, which typically took place in urban settings. The fact that the salon took place in the home allowed women to participate and contribute. While salons were primarily popular in Parisian culture during the eighteenth century, they were also found in cities throughout Western Europe, including England, and in the German states as well.

Throughout the eighteenth century many women took advantage of new literary forms as a way to participate and contribute to society. This was especially true of the novel, which became an increasingly popular form of reading during the eighteenth century. Female authors started to emerge during this period and increased in number over the course of the eighteenth century and beyond. Additionally, a few women started to publish writings or tracts that grappled with the new theories of the Enlightenment and the subordinate position of women in society.

The British writer Mary Wollstonecraft is considered one of the earliest feminists in Western history. During her lifetime Mary Wollstonecraft wrote several novels, treatises, and other works of nonfiction. She is best known for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), in which she offered a response to the writings of eighteenth-century theorists who argued that women should not receive a formal education. She viewed female education as an integral aspect of the advancement of society as a whole. Women, according to Wollstonecraft, were important in educating children and, as a result, consequential in furthering the strength of the nation. Wollstonecraft believed that women should receive a level of education that matched their social standing, so that they could be both ornamental figures and intellectual companions for their husbands.

Wollstonecraft did not call for equal rights between men and women—she still maintained that women were naturally suited for lives as wives and mothers. Today Wollstonecraft is considered a proto-feminist. She is not considered a modern feminist, in part because the concept of feminism did not exist during her lifetime. However, Wollstonecraft did maintain that women were human beings, and thus were capable of thinking rationally and receiving a formal education. During the Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke wrote on the principles and tenets of natural rights. Wollstonecraft built on Locke's beliefs and argued that natural rights (such as life and liberty) were given to humans by God, and thus women possessed these rights as well. Ultimately Wollstonecraft was instrumental in building the foundations for future feminist writings.

Summary:

- Throughout the majority of Western history, women were relegated in European society to the confines of the domestic sphere. Women were prohibited from enjoying any legal, political, or economic rights, and were primarily regarded as instruments for men's happiness.
- Women were traditionally depicted as fitting one of two primary stereotypes—the highly sexualized seductress, or the chaste, virtuous mother, daughter, or wife.
- From the Renaissance through the Enlightenment, women did experience some improvement in their social position, particularly through the medium of literature; however, for the most part they continued to be denied access to the public sphere.

