

Elizabeth Singer Rowe

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Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674-1737) was a talented poet and non-conformist religious writer of her time. Born in Ilchester, Somerset, Rowe was the eldest daughter of Walter and Elizabeth Singer (née Portnell). Her father was a strong non-conformist who greatly supported Rowe in a career that started in her pre-teens.

In her early twenties, Rowe wrote poems and sent them under the anonymous name Philomela to John Dunton's well-known periodical *Athenian Mercury*. He published her collection *Poems on Several Occasions* (1696), many of which were reprinted in the *Athenian Oracle* up until 1704. In this collection, Rowe's spiritual background is strongly demonstrated. For instance, "The Reflection" is a poem in which a female speaker pauses to reflect on the decision to have sex or not. Importantly, on this philosophically passionate reflection depend her life and soul.

Elizabeth Rowe's growing reputation earned her some romantic attention from male poets. However, it was not until 1709 that she met a young scholar in Bath, Thomas Rowe, who suited her and was thirteen years her junior. They married only a year later. Though supposedly a happy marriage, it did not last long. Thomas Rowe died merely five years later, leaving Rowe heart-broken. She would later publish an elegy "On the Death of Mr. Thomas Rowe" in a later edition of her *Poems on Several Occasions* (1717), which was admired by Alexander Pope.

Rowe's religious poetry and especially her collection of fictional letters called *Friendship in Death* (1728) made her extremely popular. Paula Backscheider notes that Rowe "revolutionized the characters, plots, and quests" of the epistolary novel genre (p. 3). Her balance of faith, reason, and a newfound conception of the female as autonomous and capable would be especially revolutionary.

We see such a balance in "The Reflection," a short dramatic monologue in heroic couplets, as the female speaker displays autonomy over her sexual desires and must reason through spiritual convictions to resist the temptation to give in. Similar accomplishments earned Rowe prestigious titles such as "'a Champion' for women against 'the Tyranny of the Prouder Sex,'" the "Pindaric Lady in the West," and the "the richest genius of her Sex" (Lonsdale, pp. 45–46). Several obituaries even noted of her respected work, "She has oblig'd the World with *Friendship in Death*, and *Letters Moral and Entertaining*, besides several excellent Poems in the Miscellanies" (quoted in Backscheider p. 4).

Rowe's influence did not cease in 1737 at the time of her death, but later her work became largely forgotten until the early twenty-first century.

Further Reading

Backscheider, Paula R. *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2013.

References

Backscheider, Paula R. *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2013.
Lonsdale, Roger. *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.

The Reflection⁵³⁶

Where gilde⁵³⁷ my thoughts, *rash inclinations stay*,
 And let me think what 'tis you fool away,
 Stay ere it be too late, yet stay and take,
A short review of the great prize⁵³⁸ at stake.
 Oh! Stupid folly 'tis eternal Joy, 5
 That I'm about to barter for a toy,⁵³⁹
 It is my *God* oh dreadful hazard, where
 Shall I again the boundless loss repair!
 It is my *Soul* a Soul that cost the blood,
 And painful agonies of an humbled God,⁵⁴⁰ 10
 Oh blest occasion⁵⁴¹ made me *stay to think*,
Ere I was hurri'd off the dangerous brink,
 Should I have took the charming venom⁵⁴² in,
 And cop'd with all these *terrors for a sin*,
How equal⁵⁴³ had my condemnation been? 15

⁵³⁶ *Poems on Several Occasions*. First edition, John Dunton, 1696, p.43; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

⁵³⁷ *Gilde* to make something gold, usually with gold leaf; some editions say glide, referencing moving thoughts; later editions also add punctuation not present in the 1696 edition, e.g. ll. 5-9

⁵³⁸ *Great prize* the female speaker's virtue/virginity

⁵³⁹ *A toy* having sex

⁵⁴⁰ *Painful agonies of an humbled God* the crucifixion of Christ that allowed humans the free gift of salvation

⁵⁴¹ *Blest occasion* God prompting her to think and thereby abstain from having sex

⁵⁴² *Charming venom* either the seducing words of the male lover or his semen

⁵⁴³ *Equal* could mean either her suffering will be the same in this life and in damnation if she partakes in sex, or her condemnation would be fair and just



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