

Thomas Edwards

Sabeeka Aziz, Simon Fraser University

Thomas Edwards was born in Middlesex England, 1699, the ninth child of a wealthy household and estate. Educated by a private tutor and following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, he became a barrister (lawyer) and began practicing law in 1721. Sparked by the death of his father in 1739 and the money that brought Edwards, he decided to retire from law after only eighteen years and envelop himself in his passion for literature and writing. He was previously involved in the prestigious Lincoln's Inn Court, which has produced many well-known politicians. It was at a small family estate in Terrick, Buckinghamshire, that Edwards wrote many of his known published works before his death in 1757. Edwards began to publish small works at this estate in 1748.

Edwards was best familiar with the works of poet Alexander Pope, and he was a critic of Pope's acquaintance Bishop William Warburton. Edwards's best-known works and rise to prominence were as a result of his long-term criticisms of Warburton's works, in particular his edition of Shakespeare's plays, *The Works of Shakespeare: In Eight Volumes*. Edwards was consistent in his dissatisfaction with Warburton's works concerning Shakespeare, but he never commented on Warburton's more religious writings. Edwards was also well known as an editor of Pope's previous works and spoke with many prominent poets at the time because of this admiration.

As for Edwards's poetic works, he primarily wrote sonnets. Although sonnet writing was uncommon at this time and had been so consistently since the seventeenth century, Edwards played a part in the revival of the genre in the mid-to-late eighteenth century as a mainstream form of poetic expression. Edwards has never received proper credit for this.

Edwards's sonnets were either titled with numerals or addressed to specific men with whom he had close friendships. One such sonnet, "Sonnet II," seems to be an address to an unknown male friend whose name is one syllable long beginning with "C." This poem follows the traditional pattern of an Italian sonnet. The sonnet addresses the importance of the time we have on earth, spending it wisely, and the joy of friendship throughout it. Considering the intimate dynamic of male friendship at the time Edwards was writing, it is no surprise that he writes with such care and concern for his male friend. The poem also addresses ideas of wealth and corruption, which align historically with the emergence of the bourgeois identity and early capitalism in England, and the poem emphasizes virtue and knowledge over commercial pleasures. Edwards's occasional but not prominent mention of God and heaven is typical amongst his sonnets.

Further Reading

Rivers, Isabel. *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: Volume 2, Shaftesbury to Hume: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780*, Cambridge UP, 2000.

Stephanson, Raymond. “‘Epicoene Friendship’: Understanding Male Friendship in the Early Eighteenth Century, with some Speculations about Pope” *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1997, pp. 151–70.

Sonnet II³¹⁹

WISELY, O C*, enjoy the present hour,

The present hour is all the time we have,

High God the rest has plac'd beyond our pow'r,

Consign'd,³²⁰ perhaps, to grief — or to the grave.

Wretched the man, who toils³²¹ ambition's slave;

5

Who pines for wealth, or sighs³²² for empty fame;

Who rolls in pleasures which the mind deprave,³²³

Bought with severe remorse, and guilty shame.

Virtue and knowledge be our better aim;

These help us Ill³²⁴ to bear, or teach to shun;

10

Let friendship cheer us with her gen'rous flame,

Friendship, the sum of all our joys in one;

So shall we live each moment fate has giv'n;

How long, or short, let us resign to heav'n.



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³¹⁹ *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, edited by Robert Dodsley, Vol. II, printed by J. Hughs, for R. and J. Dodsley, 1763, p. 323. *Eighteenth Century Poetry Archive*.

³²⁰ *Consign'd*: "Committed or delivered," in this case to the grave (*OED*).

³²¹ *Toils*: "To engage intensively in hard or prolonged labour or exertion" (*OED*).

³²² *Sighs*: To long for.

³²³ *Deprave*: To corrupt, pervert, or spoil.

³²⁴ *Ill*: Harm or misfortune in life.