

Thomas Edwards

Rebekah Galpin, Simon Fraser University

Thomas Edwards, one of nine children, was born in 1699 in Middlesex, England and never married. He was privately educated, and there are no official records of him attending any universities.³²⁵ Thomas Edwards followed his father and grandfather into the legal profession, studying law at Lincon's Inn. According to Chalmers's *The General Biographical Dictionary*, he had trouble with his speech and therefore was dissuaded from practicing much law ("Edwards" 56). After the early death of his father, and gaining his inheritance, Edwards left Middlesex and retired around 1740 to a small farm at Turrick, Ellesborough, Buckinghamshire where he lived out the rest of days until "a violent attack of pleurisy"³²⁶ ended his life on 3 January 1757 (Matthew 970).

After his retirement, he went on to become a literary critic and poet. In life, Edwards was well known by the public for his criticism of William Warburton's edition of Shakespeare and by his peers for his sonnets and letters. Many of his fifty sonnets were passed around as manuscripts within his circle of friends (this kind of coterie writing was common among the gentry in the eighteenth century), so the public was not as aware of his poetry; however, it was Edwards's poems that helped revive the sonnet, which had fallen from popularity. While several of his sonnets were published in his lifetime, it was not until he was deceased that they became widely accessible.

Sonnet V "On a Family-Picture" is an Italian sonnet in iambic pentameter. The rhyme-scheme is abba abba cde cde. By the time Thomas Edwards was in his early forties, his four brothers and four sisters had all passed away, and Sonnet V "On a Family-Picture" is addressed to his departed family. In the first part of the poem, Thomas Edwards is wistfully looking back to a happier time when he was surrounded by his siblings, and by the end he is comparing himself to a lone column, the only remaining piece of what was once a great house. Along with the crumbling building metaphor, the sestet of the sonnet refers indirectly to the fall of the Roman Empire as emblematic of the decease of Thomas Edwards's family. He also hints to the fact that he never had children of his own, which is another ending of a family line; however, after the passing of his siblings Thomas Edwards maintained close ties to his two surviving nephews, Joseph Paice and Nathaniel Mason, whom he named as his heirs. When he was planning to publish this sonnet, he considered having an engraving of a portrait by Arthur Pond of his family to be printed alongside it. Sadly, the engraving was never added, and the original portrait has since been lost.

³²⁵ Both in a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* and in his *Select Collection of Poems* volume 6, John Nichols stated that Edwards received education from Eton College and King's College, Cambridge; this was later corrected by Nichols in *Literary Anecdotes* where he amends his previous statement to "His education was at a private school; nor was he ever a member of either of the Universities" (Nichols, 199).

³²⁶ Pleurisy is defined as pleural (chest cavity) inflammation, and symptoms include pain, chills, fever, and dry cough.

Further Reading

- Retford, K., and Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England*. Yale UP, 2006.
- Feldman, Paula R., and Daniel Robinson. *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic-Era Revival 1750-1850*. Oxford UP, 2002.

References

- “Edwards.” *The General Biographical Dictionary containing Historical and Critical Account of the Lives and Writings of the Most Eminent Persons in Every Nation; Particularly the British and Irish; From the Earliest Accounts to the Present Time*, Vol. 13, Chalmers, 1814. *Archive.org*.
- Nichols, John. *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*. Vol. 2, 1812. *Archive.org*.
- Matthew, H. C. G., and Brian Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography in Association with the British Academy from the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*. Vol. 17, Oxford UP, 2004.

Sonnet V, “On a Family-Picture”³²⁷

WHEN pensive³²⁸ on that portraiture I gaze,
 Where my four brothers round about me stand,
 And four fair sisters smile with graces bland,³²⁹
 The goodly monument of happier days;

And think, how soon insatiate³³⁰ death, who preys
 On all, has cropp’d³³¹ the rest with ruthless hand,
 While only I survive of all that band,
 Which one chaste³³² bed did to my father raise;

It seems, that like a column left alone,
 The tott’ring³³³ remnant of some splendid fane,³³⁴
 ’Scap’d³³⁵ from the fury of the barb’rous Gaul,³³⁶
 And wasting Time, which has the rest o’erthrown,
 Amidst our house’s ruins I remain,
 Single, unprop’d, and nodding³³⁷ to my fall.



[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

© Rebekah Galpin, 2024

³²⁷ *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. 326. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

³²⁸ *Pensive*: thoughtful and reflective, often with melancholy implications and undertones.

³²⁹ *Bland*: gentle, soft, mild, genial, balmy, soothing.

³³⁰ *Insatiate*: something that is never satisfied.

³³¹ *Cropp’d*: cropped, to cull or remove.

³³² *Chaste*: “pure from unlawful sexual intercourse; continent, virtuous (of persons, their lives, conduct, etc.)” (OED).

³³³ *Tott’ring*: unsteady movement; to wobble or stagger.

³³⁴ *Fane*: “a temple” (OED).

³³⁵ *’Scap’d*: shortened version of escaped.

³³⁶ *Barb’rous Gaul*: barbarous Gaul, uncivilized person(s) living outside of the Roman Empire; barbarian outsider.

³³⁷ *Nodding*: “to let the head fall with a quick, short, involuntary motion, esp. when drowsy or asleep; to doze, esp. in an upright position” (OED).