

Elizabeth Singer Rowe

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Best known for her religious agency and non-conformist (i.e. Protestant) perspectives, Elizabeth Rowe (1674–1737) was a poet whose profound covenant with God coincided with her freedom of thought. This had remarkable effects on her wide reading audience. The scale of Rowe’s reading public was achieved through seminal poetry and writings inspired by her Dissenting faith.³³⁸ Moreover, it was these works that contributed to the rise of the English novel. Through the eyes of her audience, Rowe’s life and writing canon demonstrated a true example of piety and propriety.

Rowe was born in Ilchester, Somerset in 1674. Her love for writing began when she started composing poetry at the age of twelve. Educated by Henry Thynne (1675-1708) and Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711), she became well-versed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English literature (mainly consisting of poetry and prose), as well as a range of theological works. Rowe later advanced her education through her husband, Thomas Rowe (1687-1715), who was a poet, scholar, and master of Greek, Latin, and French. When she began her career in publishing at age seventeen, Rowes submitted her poetry under pseudonyms such as “Philomela” and the “Pindarickal Lady.” Rowe is known for her formative³³⁹ work, *Friendship in Death* (1728), a series of fictional letters written by the dead to family and friends. Because of her well-received writing approaches, “Rowe became one of the most widely read woman writers of the eighteenth century” (Damrau 1).

Much of Rowe’s work derived from her religious devotion and was inspired by her father, Walter Singer (with whom she had a close relationship). He was a Presbyterian minister who was imprisoned for nonconformity because of his Dissenting faith during Charles II’s reign. It was Rowe’s relationship with him, as well as her religious upbringing that caused her to demonstrate her voice and passion in her poetry through self-expression, scriptural symbolism, and allegories. Her religious poetry manifests philosophical shifts and undogmatic open-minded theologies to convey the struggles of the Dissenting faiths during the Clarendon Code.³⁴⁰ Although Rowe’s writing was devotional, she also used her faith and religious writing to take political stances. These pushed towards broader tolerance and freedoms in speech and faith. Rowe’s boldness in publicly speaking for private political and

³³⁸ *Dissent*: Protestant religious groups and individuals who refused to conform to the Church of England, but who otherwise had very little in common.

³³⁹ *Formative*: based on their creating conversation for the epistolary novel.

³⁴⁰ *The Clarendon Code*: a series of four legal statutes passed between 1661–65 which effectively re-established the supremacy of the Anglican Church after the interlude of Cromwell’s Commonwealth and ended toleration for dissenting religions.

religious sentiment is what caused her to gain popularity both during her life and posthumously and is ultimately what formed her legacy.

Rowe and her husband Thomas were well-matched due to their matched intellect and passion for spirituality and literary works. The couple were married in 1710, a year after meeting in Bath, subsequently settling in London. While their marriage was a happy one, it ended soon after when Thomas died of consumption in 1715 at twenty-eight years old. Rowe returned to her father's house in Frome, Somerset where she spent the rest of her life. When her father died in 1719, he entrusted her with a large portion of the family inheritance, including two properties in Ilchester and Frome.

Considering how little writing recognition women received at her time, Rowe's work stands as an exception, having been read by the critical public and significantly impacting her admirers. Rowe's early work gained recognition and credibility from writers such as Alexander Pope, Matthew Prior, Isaac Watts, and Samuel Johnson. Damrau explains, "Her breadth and depth of knowledge won the respect of her contemporaries and paved her way as a writer" (3). These acknowledgments from famous writers and critics were a large basis for how Rowe achieved her audience growth.

It was the death of her husband that prompted the recurring theme of death in her later writing. The lament of Rowe's work brings to life its existential elements through beautifully written literary verse. This is particularly seen in "Thoughts on Death" (1728), a meditation on death and divine judgement in quatrains of iambic pentameter with an abab rhyme scheme. Through these thoughts on death, Rowe seeks to uncover a divine wisdom by "clinging to her hope in final salvation" (Clement, 292). This incentive spoke to those of Dissenting faiths and encouraged these readers to concern themselves with the salvation of the soul after death. "Thoughts on Death" contrasts the earthly horrors of death with life *after* death as Rowe grapples with the idea that if her faith and prayer be untrue, she is lost forever.

Further Reading

- Bigold, Melanie. "Self-Fashioning and Poetic Voice: Elizabeth Singer Rowe's Authorial Prerogative." *The Review of English Studies*, 2012, vol. 70 no. 293, pp. 74–94.
- Perry, L. A. D. "Missing Lines of Poetry in The Miscellaneous Works of Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674–1737)." *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, vol. 110, no. 3, 2016, pp. 361–364.

References

- Clement, Jessica. "Elizabeth Singer Rowe: Dissent, Influence, and Writing Religion, 1690–1740." PhD thesis, *University of York*, 2017.

Damrau, Peter. "Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674-1737): From Parsonage to Bestselling Author." In: Renker, C.K. and Bach, S. (eds.) *Women from the Parsonage: Pastors' Daughters as Writers, Translators, Salonnières, and Educators*, Edited by C.K. Renker and S. Bach, University of London, 2019, pp. 31–50.

Thoughts on Death³⁴¹

I'm almost to the *fatal period*³⁴² come,
 My forward Glass has well nigh run its last;
 E're a *few moments*, I shall hear that doom
 Which ne'er will be recall'd, when once 'tis past.

Methinks I have *Eternity in view*,
 And dread to reach the edges of the shore,³⁴³
 Nor doth the *prospect*, the less dismal shew,³⁴⁴
 For all the *thousands* that have lanch'd³⁴⁵ before.

Why weep my friends, what is their loss to mine,
 I have but one *poor doubtful stake*³⁴⁶ to throw,
 And with a *dying prayer* my hopes resign,
 If that be lost, I'm lost for ever too.

'Tis not the painful agonies of Death,
 Nor all the *gloomy horrors* of the Grave;
 Were that the worst, unmov'd I'de yield my breath
 And with a *smile* the King of Terrors³⁴⁷ brave.

But there's an *after day*, 'tis that I fear:
 Oh, who shall hide me from that angry brow;
 Already I the dreadful *accents*³⁴⁸ hear,
 Depart from me, and that for ever too.



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³⁴¹ *Poems on Several Occasions: Written by Philomela*. Printed for John Dunton, 1696, pp. 28–29. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

³⁴² *Fatal period*: approaching the time of death.

³⁴³ *Edges of the shore*: the end of life.

³⁴⁴ *Shew*: show.

³⁴⁵ *Launch*: “to be launched into eternity” (*OED*).

³⁴⁶ *Stake*: in gambling, risking money on a throw of the dice.

³⁴⁷ *King of Terrors*: “death personified” (*OED*).

³⁴⁸ *Accents*: the voice of God in judgement on the speaker’s soul.