

Elizabeth Singer Rowe

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Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674-1737) rose to fame as a poet and writer, excelling in writing novels, poetry, and epistolary forms. Rowe was born in Ilchester, Somerset, to Walter and Elizabeth Singer (née Portnell), and began showcasing her literary talent at the age of twelve. By the time she was seventeen, she was contributing to John Dunton's influential periodical the *Athenian Mercury* under the pseudonyms Philomela and the Pindarick Lady. From 1693 to 1696, Rowe was a primary contributor to the periodical before focusing on her independent works.

In 1709, Rowe met poet and biographer Thomas Rowe (1687-1715) in Bath. She was immediately drawn to him through their shared values and beliefs, particularly their mutual focus on political and religious liberty. They married one year later and moved to Hampstead, but their time together was tragically brief. Thomas died at the age of twenty-eight, just five years into their marriage. His unexpected death, especially considering he was thirteen years younger than Rowe, left her devastated.

Rowe's works are emotional, often delving into themes of love, heartbreak, marriage, and death. One of her most poignant narratives, "Upon the Death of Her Husband," sometimes referred to as "On the Death of Mr. Thomas Rowe" (published in Lintot's *Poems on Several Occasions* 1717), pays tribute to her late husband and expresses her sorrow as a widow. Her most popular work, however, was the epistolary collection *Friendship in Death: In Twenty Letters from the Dead to the Living* (1728), which examines Christian beliefs about the afterlife and the soul's immortality. The work consists of imaginary letters from people who have gone to heaven, with one of the most impactful pieces written by a two-year-old child to his grieving mother. The collection was widely admired, going through nearly sixty editions during the eighteenth century.

As Backscheider observes, Rowe often "drew upon her Nonconformist background to explore her identity" (46). In eighteenth-century England, Nonconformists were Protestant Christians who refused to align with the Church of England, including factions such as Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers. Dissenting originated from the 1662 Act of Uniformity, which "required all those in holy orders, every minister, teacher, lecturer or university fellow, to choose between submission to Anglican authority or the loss of their

livelihoods” (Rivers and Wykes). Before he was imprisoned for his beliefs, Rowe’s father was a Presbyterian minister, and her husband Thomas had similar Nonconformist views. This strong religious foundation heavily influenced Rowe’s worldview and devotion.

One notable example of Rowe’s piety is her Horatian ode “The Expostulation” from her collection *Poems on Several Occasions Written by Philomela* (1696). The collection includes a variety of spiritual pastorals and odes, as well as paraphrases from Ovid and the Bible. Many of the pieces focus on love, nature, and social commentary. “The Expostulation” is written in sestets of iambic pentameter, adding weight to the speaker’s words. The unnamed speaker expresses a deep yearning to break free from earthly constraints and ascend to heaven.

Further Reading

- Backscheider, Paula R. “Introduction: Locating Elizabeth Singer Rowe.” *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel*, Johns Hopkins UP, 2013, pp. 1–45.
- Clement, Jessica. “‘My Bright Love shall All this Blackness Chase’: The Theological Poetry of Elizabeth Singer Rowe.” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 289–301.
- Rivers, Isabel, and David L. Wykes. “Protestant Dissent.” *Dissenting Academies Project*, The Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature in English, Queen Mary University of London.

References

- Backscheider, Paula R. “Elizabeth Singer Rowe: Lifestyle as Legacy.” *New Contexts for Eighteenth-Century British Fiction: ‘Hearts Resolved and Hands Prepared,’* U of Delaware P, 2011, pp. 41–65.
- Rivers, Isabel, and David L. Wykes. “Protestant Dissent.” *Dissenting Academies Project*, The Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature in English, Queen Mary University of London.

The Expostulation¹²

How long, great God, a *wretched captive* here,
 Must I these hated marks of bondage wear?
 How long shall these *uneasy chains* controul
 The willing flights of my impatient Soul?
 How long shall her *most pure intelligence* 5
 Be strain'd through an infectious screen¹³ of gross, corrupted sence?¹⁴

When shall I leave this *darksome house* of clay;¹⁵
 And to a brighter mansion wing¹⁶ away?
 There's nothing here my thoughts to entertain,¹⁷
 But one Tyr'd revolution o're again:¹⁸ 10
 The Sun and Stars observe their wonted¹⁹ round,
 The streams their former courses keep: *No Novelty is found.*²⁰

The same curst²¹ acts of *false fruition*²² o're,
 The same wild hopes and wishes as before;
 Do men for this so fondly life caress, 15
 (*That airy buss*²³ of *splendid emptiness*?)²⁴

¹² *Poems on several occasions. Written by Philomela.* London: Printed for John Dunton at the Raven in Jewen-street, 1696, pp. 12-13; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

¹³ *strain'd through an infectious screen* passed through a contaminated filter

¹⁴ *of gross, corrupted sence* of morally reprehensible sensations

¹⁵ *darksome house of clay* the human body

¹⁶ *brighter mansion wing* fly to the heavenly realm

¹⁷ *entertain* hold my attention

¹⁸ *one Tyr'd revolution o're again* another year passes

¹⁹ *wonted* accustomed

²⁰ *streams their former courses keep: No Novelty is found* no happiness is found in this repetitive routine

²¹ *curst* cursed or damned

²² *false fruition* empty fulfilment, here with emphasis on sexual orgasm and impregnation

²³ *buss* short for "hussy," a brash female, with sexual implications; written as "puff" in Edmund Curll's edition from 1737, meaning to blow out air

²⁴ *emptiness* lack of knowledge or sense

Unthinking sots:²⁵ kind Heaven let me be gone,
I'm tyr'd, I'm sick of this *dull Farce's*²⁶ repetition.



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²⁵ *sot* a foolish person or drunkard

²⁶ *dull Farce* “a dramatic work which has for its sole object to excite laughter, an interlude” (*OED*), but here calling daily life a farce that is not even amusing