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Peter Damrau

Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674-1737): From Parsonage to Bestselling Author

Elisabeth Singer Rowe, a highly successful author and role model for women writers in the eighteenth century, owed much of her foundation to her father, a dissenting minister, whose life, teaching, and the environment he created influenced the themes of her most successful works. Elizabeth's mother died early and her father became her admired moral and intellectual role model who supported her literary interests. She often studied to please him and began to write poetry at the age of twelve to deepen her devotion. At the age of eighteen, she possessed the equivalent of an academic education, which distinguished her from other rather fashionably trained women.[1] Elizabeth Singer Rowe became one of the most widely read woman writers of the eighteenth century. Eighty-nine editions of her works were published before 1840; and in a recent study, Bigold has found that in the years after her death up until 1820, almost every year yielded the publication of one of her writings – an accomplishment that cannot be claimed by some of the most significant writers of the time.[2] Rowe was not only a bestselling author but her works also influenced the development of the English novel, the women of the Blue Stocking Society, and highly regarded writers in Germany.[3]

The religious background

Elizabeth's father, Walter Singer, was a Presbyterian minister who was imprisoned for nonconformity in Ilchester Gaol during the reign of Charles II. It was here that he met his wife, Elizabeth Portnell, a devout and dedicated woman, who saw visiting persecuted believers as her religious duty. They were married in Ilchester, and after another prosecution

he retired from his ministry and became successful in the wool business. Elizabeth, the first of their three daughters, was born in 1674. The relationship between her and her father was very close. In a letter to Arabella Marrow, she describes him as a pious man with a strong desire for reading: “The perfect sanctity of his life, and the benevolence of his temper, make him a refuge to all in distress, to the widow and the fatherless: […] The rest of his hours are entirely spent in his private devotion, or books, which are his only diversion.”[4] The following excerpt from a letter addressed to the Reverend Benjamin Colman in 1709 is a rare writing of her father that survived. It provides insights into the Singer household, especially about the religious atmosphere in which Elizabeth was brought up:

> O why has Providence denied me so great a Blessing as the Enjoyment of thy dear Relation and Society! This often makes me, with a melancholly Sigh, with Agford at Boston, or Boston here - But infinite Wisdom and Goodness cannot err, or the Thought would make too deep an Impression. Methinks there is one Place vacant in my Affections, which Nobody can fill besides you. But this Blessing was too great for me, and God has reserved it for those that more deserved it. I cannot but hope sometimes that Providence has yet in Store so much Happiness for me, that I shall yet see you […]. My dear *Philomela* [Elizabeth’s pen name] improves daily in Knowledge and Piety, in the Love of God, and all that is good ; lives above the Fears of Death, or rather under the strong Desires of it.
>
> Your real, passionate Friend
>
> Walter Singer[5]

Walter Singer's description of his daughter touches in only a very few words on some of the main themes that are still associated with her today: knowledge, piety, death, and friendship were all part of what Elizabeth inherited from her religious father and what made her a highly successful writer. Her breadth and depth of knowledge won the respect of her contemporaries and paved her way as a writer; her reputation of being a "pious lady" would remain closely intertwined with her literary success, and the literalization of passionate friendship would constitute her most influential contribution to English literature. In this letter, Walter Singer also emphasizes his belief in providence and shares his reflection of his young daughter's attitude towards death, providing an insight into the role of religion as a focal point of life, and also as a coping mechanism for the tragedies in their family life. One of Elizabeth's sisters died when she was a child, her mother died when she was in her teens, and her other sister when she was in her twenties. No specifics are known about her youngest sister's or her mother's death, but the death of the other sister is recorded in a letter from Benjamin Colman to Isaak Watts, the nonconformist hymn writer who edited Elizabeth's *Devout Exercises of the Heart* (1737): According to this account, when Elizabeth was seriously ill, her sister asked her whether she was ready to die. When Elizabeth answered in the negative, her sister professed the assurance of her own election and willingness to die in her place:

> "And what is almost incredible to relate, from that hour I grew better, and recovered, but she took to her bed and died in a few days." "Conceive, if you can, Mr. Colman," said she, "how astonished I was at this event of Providence, and overwhelmed with sorrow! Yet I recovered health […]."[6]

The Singers' concern with death and providence was reinforced by their reading of nonconformist literature. One of the authors read in the Singer household was Stephen Charnock. In a letter dated 1697, Elizabeth writes about lending an unnamed gentleman some of Charnock's works:

> My service to Mr. ---------; he talk'd of reading Charnock's sermons, but not knowing whether he'll carry them to L ---------. I did not send them now ; but tell him, if he will, he may send for them tomorrow, and keep them as long as he pleases. 'Tis pity, when there's so much divinity in the world, people should be forc'd to read Ludlow's Memoirs on Sundays (II, 106).

Stephen Charnock was, like Walter Singer, a persecuted Presbyterian minister. He, too, stressed the importance of God's providence and wrote the 397 page *Discourse of Divine Providence*. In one of the subsections of this work, titled "Fix not your eye only upon the sensible operations of providence, but the ultimate end" he writes: "We must not only consider the present end, but the remote end, because God in his Providence towards his Church hath his end for after times. God acts for ends at a great distance from us, which may not be completed till we are dead and rotten."[7] In his other works, Charnock also refers several times to deathbed scenes.[8] The shared strong belief in the providence of God, that determines events beyond death, can also be found in Elizabeth's private writing. The following passage is directly linked to her reflections on her father's health and his possible death:

> I dare not persuade my father to change the air, nor undertake a journey to London, for fear what the consequence may be. Our ways are in the hands of

> God, who prevents, or succeeds our designs ; there is a determin'd event to every thing, which 'tis not in the power of man to resist. These thoughts keep my mind from much anxiety (II, 276).

The Singers believed that it is providence that determines the time of death and that the knowledge of the caring nature of providence eases the believer's concerns about it. For Elizabeth, the acknowledgement of divine providence also became a criterion for the religious quality of a writer: "His remarks on the conduct of divine Providence are a proof to me of the author's piety, and thro' every page the delicacy and justness of his sentiments appear" (II, 252). Even in her later fictional writings, Elizabeth still refers to providence, though the tone in the following example from the very popular *Letters Moral and Entertaining* (1729-33), where an English merchant reports about the adventures of his journeys, appears to be more secular:

> There was something in the air of this young stranger superior to adversity, and yet sensible of the present disadvantage of his fate ; while I felt for him an emotion, soft as the ties of nature, and could not but impute it to the secret impression of some intelligent power, which was leading me to a height of generosity beyond my own intention, and, by an impulse of virtue on my soul, directing it to the accomplishment of some distant and unknown design of Providence. The heavenly instigation came with a prevailing force, and I could not but obey its dictates.[9]

Walter Singer was very concerned with the spiritual wellbeing of his daughter, and she saw in him a Christian role model. He taught her to put her trust in divine providence and

how to become a pious woman, and he was also ambitious for her to gain an excellent education.

Elizabeth's education

As a single parent, the cultivation and learning of his daughters was one of Walter Singer's main objectives. Elizabeth's relatives, Henry Grove and Theophilus Rowe, who wrote and published her first biography "The Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Rowe" with her *Miscellaneous Works* (1739) two years after her death, mention how her father encouraged her appreciation of the arts:

> She lov'd the pencil when she had hardly strength and steadiness of hand sufficient to guide it; and in her infancy (one may almost venture to say so) would squeeze out the juices of herbs to serve her instead of colours. Mr. Singer perceiving her fondness for this art, was at the expence of a master to instruct her in it (I, v).

Elizabeth painted pictures for the rest of her life and Reynolds, who lists her in *The Learned Lady in England* under the category "artists" points out: "Mrs. Rowe's paintings were likewise highly prized by discriminating friends."[10]

In another version of her biography, published with her *Poems on Several Occasions*, there is also an account of Elizabeth's sister, with whom she studied excessively:

> She had the same extreme passion for books, chiefly those of medicine, in which art she arrived to a considerable insight; and if it could not be said of them in the letter, as of the virtuous woman in the Proverbs, That their candle

> went not out by night, yet it frequently burnt till after the middle of it; so great was their thirst of knowledge, and the pleasure they had in gratifying it![11]

The daughters' pursuit of knowledge is linked to the biblical understanding of a virtuous woman.[12] For Elizabeth Singer Rowe, education and virtue would always be inextricably linked. Another account of the two sisters can be found in the biography by Benjamin Colman who recalls a conversation with Elizabeth about her sister, who she considered "equal in Knowledge and Superior in Grace":

> My Sister, said she, was a Year or two younger than I, and her Affection as well as Wit was quicker. I seemed however to my self to think more thoroughly. She desired ever to be with me, and I wanted to be more by my self. We often retired by Consent, each to her Chamber, to compose and then to compare what we wrote. She always exceeded me in the Number of Lines, but mine I think were more correct.[13]

These passages show the seriousness and commitment of Walter Singer's daughters to education and writing in particular. The question in the Singer household was not whether girls should be educated, but rather who was making better progress. This must also be seen in context of their nonconformist church. Compared with Anglican churches, women in dissenting congregations had significantly more opportunities to participate in meetings and to express their views through speaking and writing.[14] It was common in families of nonconformist ministers that great care was given to the education of their children. For dissenting groups, reading and writing was a means to defy oppression, as it was the only way to communicate their beliefs at a time when the public, communicative roles such as

preaching, assembling and teaching were denied them.[15] The following account of a meeting between Walter Singer and another nonconformist in the year 1680 shows the need to put religious convictions into writing. Like Singer, the Quaker John Whiting was imprisoned at Ilchester Gaol for his dissenting beliefs.

> I happened [to fall] into some discourse with one Walter Singer, a Presbyterian in the town, envious enough against truth, who opposed us in several points of principles and practice; and to confirm his opposition the more, produced John Faldo's book, falsly called 'Quakerism no Christianity;' whereas it should have been 'Forgery no Christianity;' which he offered to lend me, I having never seen it before : and though I answered all his objections, as it then arose in my mind according to the understanding the Lord was pleased to give me, as the apostle advised, 1 Pet. iii. 15. Yet afterwards in a sense of their opposition against the truth, I wrote my mind fuller on each head, in a book entitled, 'AThreefold Apology for the People of God, called Quakers, in vindication of their principles and practices, against all their opposers,' directed to him the said W[alter] S[inger].[16]

Like Whiting, nonconformists identified with the apostle Paul, who, as a prisoner, wrote letters to his persecuted fellow believers. The mentioned Bible verse 1 Peter 3. 15 contains Paul's appeal "always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you" (Authorized Version). Elizabeth was indoctrinated with this strong belief of the nonconformist responsibility to witness and was motivated to produce texts with a strong religious, moralistic and educative purpose.[17] In the following letter, written during an

illness, she seems to negotiate her publication with the Almighty, whom she significantly addresses as “My father’s God”[18]:

> My father’s God; if thou wilt now speedily deliver me, and send me an answer of peace, then I will record thy several mercies, and leave the catalogue as a testimony of thy truth, and a seal to the veracity of the scripture promises; and leave it with a charge to be published to thy honour, at my death, that ages yet unborn may rise up and bless thee, and trust in thy word (I, xxxi).

As nonconformist groups stressed the importance of individual faith, they participated even more in the “Protestant turn away from clerical intermediaries,” and focussed on their own responsibility for the education of their children.[19] Therefore, it is not surprising that in his investigation of the nonconformist literary culture of the late seventeenth century, Keeble has found that literacy rates were higher amongst nonconformists than in other sections of society, and that there were far more books by nonconformists printed as their proportion of the English population would warrant. Nonconformists were more likely to read and more eager to write than their contemporaries.[20] This characterizes the environment of Elizabeth’s formative years.

One of the most popular books of the seventeenth century was *A Token for Children; being an exact account of the conversation, holy and exemplary lives, and joyful deaths of several young children* (1672) written by the nonconformist minister James Janeway. Already in his preface, Janeway asks the young readers:

> Did you never hear of a little Child that died and if other Children die, why may not you be sick and die? […] How do you know but that you may be the next Child that

> may die? and where are you then, if you be not God's Child? […] Now tell me, my pretty dear Child, What will you do? Shall I make you a Book […] Read the most searching Books and get your Father to buy you Mr. White's *Book for little children*, and *A Guide to Heaven*.[21]

Janeway's book itself consists of short biographies of dying children like, for example, Susannah Bicks, born of 'very religious parents', who proclaims on her deathbed the providence of God: "Seeing her Parents still very much moved, she further argued with them from the Providence of God, which had a special hand in every common thing, much more in the disposal of the lives of men and women."[22] Another girl's biography is that of the eight year old and already very spiritual Sarah Howley who prays and weeps for her siblings, loves her parents and spends much time in reading the Bible and devotional works. At the age of fourteen she falls ill but being prepared, "She was exceedingly desirous to die, and creyed out, Come Lord Jesus, come quickly, conduct me to thy Tabernacle."[23]

Considering the untimely deaths of his wife and two daughters, his strong nonconformist convictions, and his belief in God's providence in death, it is very likely that Walter Singer provided his surviving daughter with literature like this. Elizabeth, who was born in the year Janeway died, not only described her father's deathbed scene with almost identical words used by Janeway ("He would be often crying out "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly […] conduct my soul to the skies")[24] but she would also follow in Janeway's footsteps to write another bestselling book on the preparation for eternity, her magnum opus *Friendship in Death* (1728).

Although there can be no doubt that the young Elizabeth benefited from the support of her bookish father, there is very little information on his precise involvement. Many studies have pointed out the wide range of literary references in her works and some even provide a

list of authors. However, due to the fact that her first publication only appeared when she had already moved in highly educated circles including clergy, all of these references could have stemmed from later sources and there is almost no direct reference to her father's library. Finding reliable details in her biography and letters is difficult due to the constructed and idealized nature of this writing. Bigold, who compared transcriptions of Rowe's original letters with those used in her 'fictional letters' and her 'Miscellaneous Works', comes to the conclusion that due to the shaping of her material for religious purposes as well as for entertainment, there is no straightforward access to a biographical history.[25] The same could be said for her highly successful *Letters Moral and Entertaining* (1729-32), where biographical aspects are mingled with nonconformist teaching, topics of contemporary intellectual discourses and romantic stories. Biographically significant, however, is the combination of religion, education and death; themes that not only made Rowe's works highly successful but also mirror important aspects of her childhood, especially when they appear together in a single character. There is, for example, the story of Rosalinda, who writes to Lady Sophia:

> The only intimacy I have contracted is with a daughter of the minister of this parish; they call her Sally; Her conversation is perfectly innocent and agreeable, and has something in it charming beyond all the specious rules and studied elegance of the beau-monde. She has spent her leisure in reading, and has certainly perused all the good books in her father's study, having never opened a page on any subject but religion, except Argalus and Parthenia. […] She believes herself in a consumption, and talks of dying as calmly as most people talk of going to sleep. […] She has a surprising memory, and speaks the finest parts of Milton by heart […]. Mr Pope's Messiah is another of her favourite poems.[26]

These are recurring themes from Elizabeth's childhood: the minister's daughter, the eagerness to read and perusal of her father's books, the interest in heroic romance, the preoccupation with death and the love for poetry. The details of this fictional letter seem to portray a strong similarity to Elizabeth's upbringing in her father's house. However, there are other letters. For example, from Sylviana, who gives an account of her manner of life before her marriage:

> My father was a country-clergyman, a person of exemplary piety […]. I was the eldest of three daughters, which were all the children they had. […] Reading was my prevailing attachment; and I had turned over every book in my father's library, except Latin and Greek. But here was not one play or novel for my entertainment. However, I was supplied with amusements of this kind by my Lady Worthy's youngest daughter; who was our neighbour, and was pleased to honour me with some degree of intimacy. But I perused these authors with great secrecy, and not without some inward remorse; this sort of reading being against my father's severe injunctions, and the pious rules I had been taught.[27]

Here is another example of a minister's daughter (with two sisters) who has an attachment to reading, and another description of the extensive use of a parsonage's library. Whether or not Walter Singer possessed many secular books and how strict he was with his daughter's choice of books, we don't know. Nevertheless, these two accounts confirm the significance of the access to the minister's library, its influence on the education of his daughters, and how it was fundamental for their exposure to and interest in literature.

Elizabeth provides a good example of this influence as she started writing poetry at a young age: “But her strongest bent was to poetry and writing. Poetry indeed was her favourite employment, in youth, her most distinguished excellence” (I, v).

From one of her youthful poems “To one that persuades me to leave the Muses,” it becomes clear that Elizabeth also attended a boarding school. Here, young girls were supposed to gain skills considered appropriate for females. As it was widely believed that intense study was unsuitable for girls, topics such as needlework and weaving were taught rather than academic subjects.[28] Rowe’s thirst for knowledge, reinforced by the religious ideals of her father, and the dual admiration and competition with her sister, set her apart from the average pupil and she demanded more than singing and dancing lessons. When she was discouraged by the school to compose poetry, Elizabeth wrote the following lines, revealing the obstacles that a young ambitious female writer could face.[29] In this poem, she also seems to echo her father’s nonconformity by standing up for her beliefs:

Forgo the charming Muses! No, in spight

Of your ill-natur’d Prophecy I’ll write,

And for the future paint my thoughts in large,

I rob no Neighbouring Geese of Quills, nor flink

For a collection to the Church for ink:

[…]

And let the world think me inspir’d or mad,

I’le surely write whilst papers to be had;

Since Heaven to me has a Retreat assign’d,

That would inspire a less harmonious mind.

[…]

And that my Muse may take no counter Spell,

I fairly bid the Boarding Schools farewel :

[…]

Thy self for me, my dancing days are o're;

I'le act th' inspired Bachannels no more.

[…]

And since the dearest friends that be must part,

Old Governess farewell with all my heart.

Now welcome all ye peaceful Shades and Springs,

And welcome all the inspiring tender things […].[30]

Elizabeth rebels against those who discouraged her to follow her desire of writing poetry and against the traditional female education at her school. She justifies her desire for writing poetry on religious grounds, claiming heavenly guidance. Nonconformists generally believed in the divine origin of poetry. The poem was published anonymously in the *Athenian Mercury*, a periodical that aimed to appeal to both sexes and advocated the education of women. It was edited by John Dunton, a man with dissenting connections who published a good number of nonconformist writers. It was later included in Elizabeth's first book *Poems on Several Occasions* (1696) which, also published by Dunton, contains a preface with a protofeminist agenda:

But when they [men] wou'd Monopolize Sence too, when neither that, nor Learning, nor so much as Wit must be allow'd us, but all over-rul'd by the Tyranny of the Prouder Sex; […] [We] are forc'd to Protest against it, and

appeal to all the World, whether there are not Violations on the Liberties of Freeborn English Women?[31]

The knowledge and education that Elizabeth desired, would be provided by her father's likeminded and well-established friends. Walter Singer used his connections with the Thynne family at Longleat to acquire aristocratic patronage for his daughter which would enable her to embark on a literary career.

Her father's friends

At the end of the seventeenth century, many dissenting authors relied on the patronage of friends who were sympathetic to nonconformity.[32] According to Rowe's biographers, it was Mr Singer's religious fervour and personality that brought him the friendship of Thomas Thynne, the first Viscount Weymouth:

> […] he [Mr Singer] became so well known and distinguished for his good sense, […] and at the same time truly catholic spirit, as to be held in high esteem, even by persons of superior rank: My Lord Weymouth, who was reckoned a very good judge of men, not only writing to him, but honouring him with his visits; as did the devout Bishop Kenn very frequently, sometimes once a week; such a charm is there in unaffected goodness, and so naturally do kindred souls, warmed and actuated by the same heavenly passion, and pursuing the same glorious end, run and mingle together with the greatest pleasure (I, ii).[33]

In order to introduce his adolescent daughter to one of the country's most distinguished families, who had a tradition of being patrons of the arts, Walter Singer took a collection of Elizabeth's first literary attempts and circulated them among the Thynne's household. The family's interest in Miss Singer was awakened and the friendship between them and Elizabeth remained until her death.[34] This connection brought a number of benefits for the young author. First of all, the friendship itself became an important theme of her writing, particularly the later letter correspondence with Frances Thynne, the Countess of Hertford, who had the same interest in literature and religion, but held more moderate views. In one of her letters, Elizabeth apologizes for her nonconformist style: "Your Ladyship will certainly think that I am transcribing some honest Dissenter's sermon for your edification" (II, 185). These letters, however, became the basis for her bestselling epistolary works which she published after her father's death.[35] Another benefit for the young Elizabeth was the learning of new languages:

> She had no other tutor for the French and Italian languages, than the honourable Mr. Thynne, son to the Lord Viscount Weymouth, who willingly took that task upon himself, and had the pleasure to see his fair scholar improve so fast under his lessons, that in a few months she was able to read Tasso's Jerusalem with great ease (I, vii).

For the ambitious Elizabeth, the lessons with Thomas Tynne were important as she was able to discover the poetic language of foreign writers by practicing her translation skills. She was also supplied with foreign books that broadened her horizon:

> The Italian tragedies your Ladyship has been so obliging as to send, will be a most agreeable entertainment in some of my peaceful hours. There is something in tragedy so great, and so superior to the common way of life, that in reading tho' I can't fancy myself a princess, I very often wish for the regal dignity that I might speak in the sublime, and act the heroine (II, 142).

Access to an extensive library was another benefit for Elizabeth and a necessity for any young author. Later in the eighteenth century, most women writers would rely on the use of such private libraries.[36] The library in Longleat had been enriched by a great number of religious works when Thomas Ken, the former Bishop of Bath and Wells, was offered asylum there after his dismissal. Ken had studied with Thomas Thynne in Oxford and had a great love for books. In his biography it is mentioned that "the only companions of his removal from Wells to Long Leat were his beloved books."[37] That Longleat must have had an impressive library can be seen from the description of Ken's lodging: "It is an apartment of most ample dimensions, filled with books, of which some were his own, and others belonging to Lord Weymouth, the overflowings of the great library below."[38] Today, Longleat claims to be one of the largest private book collections in Europe. Thomas Ken did, however, not only provide religious books but he became a good friend of the Singers. Although not a nonconformist himself, he shared with the father the experience of imprisonment and with his daughter the love of religious poetry. Ken's biographer has described his perception of Walter Singer's daughter:

> […] who was in every respect worthy of her parent, and who attracted the peculiar regard of the Bishop; for there existed in her young mind a spirit of piety, and similarity of tastes, so kindred to his own, that he could not but take

> a pleasure in her society, notwithstanding their difference in age, and in ecclesiastical opinions.[39]

After her father, Ken became the second most important religious and literary influence on Elizabeth. Ken had authored religious poetry and meditations, composed hymns and wrote the well-known stanza "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow." His influence on Elizabeth's writing has not been investigated in detail, but by comparing her early and later works, it must be assumed that it was Ken who steered her away from her amorous pastoral style to a more serious and religious kind of poetry.[40] Elizabeth also received a commission from Thomas Ken, when he suggested to her the paraphrasing of the thirty-eighth chapter of the book of Job. Her biographer points out that this "gained her a great deal of reputation" (I, vii). Ken would not remain her only supporter connected with the Thynne family. In 1703, the poet Matthew Prior, also the son of a nonconformist, spent two weeks at Longleat. He advised Elizabeth on her translations and helped her with the publication of her poetry. For the rest of her writing career, Rowe would be supported by a network of ministers and nonconformist literary figures.[41] One of Walter and Elizabeth Singer's friends outside the Thynne's house was Benjamin Colman. He was a preacher and minor poet from Boston who had been offered the opportunity to preach in Bath by the Presbyterian Board in London. Walter Singer encouraged him to spend more time with his daughter. From Colman's biography we learn that "Mr. Singer called himself Argos, having an hundred Eyes upon his Daughter."[42] Colman was impressed with Elizabeth's piety and level of education:

> How she had collected such a Stock of Knowledge and Literature, by reading and Conversation, without a learned Tutor was wonderful. But her Wisdom

> and Discretion outshone her Knowledge. She had only her Mother Tongue, but had made all the Improvement of an Academical Education. She was a Poet, a Philosopher and a Divine. And above all, a most devout Worshipper of God in Secret and in Publick.[43]

Walter Singer showed him the place near his house where his daughter spent her time meditating and writing, and together with Colman's friend Mr Rogers he requested of him "to make a compliment" of the place whereupon Colman composed the following poem:

> So Paradise was brightened, so 'twas blest,
> When innocence and beauty it possest.
> Such was its more retired Path and Seat,
> For Eve and musing Angels a Retreat.
> Such Eden's Streams, and Banks, and tow'ring Groves;
> Such Eve her self, and such her Muse and Loves.
> Only there wants an Adam on the Green,
> Or else all Paradise might here be seen.[44]

How much more must Walter Singer have motivated his own daughter to write poetry when she already composed seriously at the age of twelve and published at nineteen? Although Colman seemed to have been Walter Singer's preferred choice as a future son in law, he never proposed to Elizabeth. Instead he went back to New England in 1699, where he married, and fathered Jane Colman Turell, who herself became a poetess and, being taught by her father, considered Elizabeth Singer Rowe as her role model. Elizabeth remained single and stayed with her father until the age of thirty-six.

The recurring theme of death

Elisabeth married in 1710. According to her biographers, her husband Thomas Rowe, whose father and grandfather were both nonconformist ministers, combined the same ideals as her own father: “a considerable stock of useful learning, joined the talents of preaching” (I, viii). Thomas Rowe is described as a man with a thirst for knowledge and a pleasure in books: “His library, in collecting which he was assisted by his great knowledge of the best editions of books, consisted of a great number of the most valuable authors; and as he was making continual additions to it, amounted at his death to above five thousand volumes” (I, xi). Thomas Rowe, a poet, a classics scholar and a master of the Greek, Latin, and French languages further enhanced Elizabeth’s education. However, he died from tuberculosis only five years after their marriage and in her grief, Elizabeth published the poem “On the death of Mr. Thomas Rowe,” in which she appears to quote her husband’s last poetry, on the subject of death and divine Providence:

> My dearest wife! My last, my fondest care!
>
> Sure Heav’n for thee will hear a dying pray’r :
>
> Be thou the charge of sacred Providence,
>
> When I am gone, be that thy kind defence ;
>
> Ten thousand smiling blessings crown thy head,
>
> When I am cold, and number’d with the dead (I, 114).

The poem won her great respect and in 1720, Alexander Pope added it to the second edition of his successful *Eloisa to Abelard*. After her husband’s death, Elizabeth moved back to her father in Frome. Only four years later, Walter Singer also fell seriously ill and, as it

was the women's responsibility for tending to the dying at that time, she looked after him until his final hours.[45] Her father's deathbed experience is described in her biography:

> My father often felt his pulse, and complained that it was still regular, and smil'd at every symptom of approaching death : He would be often crying out "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly; Come, ye holy angels, that rejoice at the conversion of a sinner, come and conduct my soul to the skies, ye propitious spirits." […] The sight was so affecting, that a person listed among the free-thinkers of the age, as they are pleas'd to compliment themselves, being present, was exceedingly struck with it, and ready to say, *Almost thou perswadest me to be a Christian*; as every one who rightly considers such examples, and how naturally they arise out of the principles of the gospel, firmly believed, and steadily practised upon, must be *intirely persuaded* by them (I, iii-iv).

Her father's proclaimed confidence in the afterlife not only influenced his daughter in her youth but was also an important source for her bestselling work *Friendship in Death*, which would perpetuate her father's mission to preach the afterlife. The direct link between her father's evangelistic views and Elizabeth's major fictional work can be seen, for example, in the very deathbed scene of her work.[46] The freethinker, referred to by Elizabeth in the passage above, who was present at her father's deathbed and who did not believe in a future life, appears also in *Friendship in Death* in the character of Earl of R. who is present at his devout brother's death, "which was all a demonstration of the immortality of the soul."[47] His friend Clerimont describes the deathbed scene:

> With what ready composure did he endure the violence of his distemper ! with what conviction and full assurance expect the reward of his piety ! […] Never was the last, the closing part of life, performed with more decency and grandeur. His reason was clear and elevated ; and his words were the very language of immortality.[48]

After this sight, Earl of R is prompted to confess "that men who flattered themselves with those gay visions, had much the advantage of those that saw nothing before them but a gloomy uncertainty, or the dreadful hope of an annihilation."[49] Inspired by the religiosity of her father, Elizabeth's work asks readers to reconsider the importance of the immortality of their souls in an entertaining way. As Edward Young, author of this work's preface, states:

> The drift of these letters is, to impress the notion of the soul's immortality […] ; But since no means should be left unattempted in a point of such importance, I hope endeavouring to make the mind familiar with the thoughts of our future existence, and contract, as it were unawares, an habitual persuasion of it, by writings built on that foundation, and addressed to the affections and imagination, will not be thought improper, either as a doctrine, or amusement.[50]

Rowe's text also links the theme of death with the importance of a girl's education, when a deceased lady called Amanda writes to her sister to look after her daughter: "This is the Motive of my writing to you that you would take the charge of her education, and protect her infant innocence."[51]

Friendship in Death became a bestseller and was issued thirty-three times between its first publication in 1728 and 1814.[52] From the year 1733, this work was also bound with

Rowe's *Letters Moral and Entertaining* and editions of the combined letters were printed almost every year until 1818.[53] Here again, one of the themes is dealing with death, which is played out in deathbed scenes, dying siblings, and the use of devotional books to prepare for death.[54] However, there is another feature that made these letters very popular: the idealized description of the rural existence. In the following letter, a woman called Sylvia writes about her pious father:

> I spent the last winter in the country with my father, whose pious instructions, confirmed by his own practice, directed me to a refined and immortal happiness: nor could any invitations from the Countesse de R----, nor all my brother's importunity, prevail with me to quit a retirement where I found so much peace, and unmolested tranquillity. […] This sacred ardour, like incense, mingled with the morning fragrance, and cheared in the evening-shades ; the whispering brooks and sylvan retreats witnessed to the heavenly flame; where, in language like this, I often addressed the invisible, but present Divinity.[55]

As Backscheider points out, many of the scenes in Rowe's fictions and private letters are of a pastoral nature.[56] In a letter to the Countess of Hertford, for example, Rowe again combines the description of a rural area with the piety of the people who live in a parsonage:

> You are not more delighted with a country farm, than I am with an old parsonage house, in a little village, where I was lately a few hours; so situated to my content, that I seem'd to want nothing but your reflections and society, to form complete happiness. A large garden and orchard, half modern and half antiquated, long codling hedges, old fashion'd bowers, elms and apple trees, green squares and maple bushes,

> all in the most gay and agreeable confusion imaginable: These scenes infinitely charm'd me; and, with the unaffected piety and politeness of the family, gave me an exceeding favourable opinion of their principles, and sort of suspicion of my own (II, 204).

Elizabeth remained in her hometown for the rest of her life and before her own death, she requested to be buried in her church "near the pulpit under the same stone with her father."[57]

Her legacy

Elizabeth Singer Rowe's seemingly exemplary life and works went beyond her writing, and extended to the education of young people; first of all, in a very practical sense. Having received an extensive education herself and the opportunity to achieve literary success, Elizabeth believed it was her duty to help others to benefit from the privileges she experienced. In Thomas Ken's biography it is mentioned that, like the bishop himself, she loved to take care of the education of children by providing them with books.[58] In her own biography this is expressed in more detail:

> […] when she met in the streets with children of promising countenances, who were perfectly unknown to her, if upon inquiry, it appeared, that thro' the poverty of their parents they were not put to school, she added them to the number of those who were taught at her own expense (I, liii).

From the time of her death until the second half of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth's texts and life story were used as a role model and included in books for young people, in

England as well as in America. In religious publications, they would be used as guidance to live virtuously, and to consider the afterlife. In this way, her works had a similar function as the aforementioned *Token for Children* by James Janeway. In *The Children's Magazine and Missionary Repository* (1848), for example, a list of "Serious questions" for children is added to the story of Elizabeth and her sister: "There is a glorious heaven. Are you in the way to it?" and "You must soon die. Are you prepared for the solemn change?"[59]

Elizabeth's texts were also included or recommended in books for young ladies because they were seen as ideal and proper instructions for youth. A biographical sketch of her appeared, for example, in James G. Gregory's *Women of Worth: A Book for Girls* (1863) and in William Henry Davenport Adams' *Child-life and Girlhood of remarkable Women* (1883). Clara Reeve recommended Elizabeth's works for young ladies in *The Progress of Romance* (1785) and she was included in the list of books suggested for young ladies in *A Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughter* (1817) by Lady Sarah Pennington. Elizabeth's letters were also used as literary role models, for example, in Elizabeth Frank's *Classical English Letter-writer; Epistolary Selections; Designed to improve young Persons in the Art of Letter-Writing and in the Principles of Virtue and Piety* (1814) which, according to its preface, was

> […] designed for the instruction and amusement of young persons. By presenting to their view, some of the best models, both with respect to language and sentiment, which English literature affords, it will render them considerable assistance in acquiring the epistolary art. […] without endangering their moral.[60]

During her lifetime, Elizabeth Singer Rowe influenced the careers of many English women writers, like her friend Mary Chandler, who was also a poet (*A Description of Bath*, 1733) and daughter of a nonconformist minister. Penelope Aubin dedicated *The Life of Charlotta Du Pont, An English Lady* (1723) "To My much honoured Friend Mrs. Rowe" and praises her as "the best Friend, the most prudent, most humble, and most accomplish'd Woman I ever met withal."[61]

Elizabeth Singer Rowe's works also influenced women of the Blue Stockings Society. Elizabeth Carter, for example, the daughter of a clergyman, adopted her as her moral and literary role model and in the elegy "On the Death of Mrs. Rowe," she reveals her ambition to emulate her success as a writer.[62]

> Fix'd on my soul shall thy example grow,
> And be my genius and my guide below;
> To this I'll point my first, my noblest views,
> Thy spotless verse shall regulate my muse.
> And oh! Forgive, tho' faint the transcript be,
> That copies an original like thee :
> My justest pride, my best attempt for fame,
> That joins my own to PHILOMELA'S Name.[63]

Elizabeth's influence extended beyond the English speaking world. In Germany she was celebrated in the moral weeklies and considered a genius. Her *Friendship in Death* was translated by the very influential Johann Mattheson and imitated by Meta Klopstock (*Briefe von Verstorbenen an Lebendige*, 1757). Martin Wieland, who himself was brought up in a parsonage, saw in Elizabeth a role model for the progressive and educated woman, and he

confessed: “The first book I attempted to write was an imitation of Mrs. Rowe’s *Letters from the Dead to the Living*.”[64] His *Briefe von Verstorbenen an Hinterlassene Freunde* was published in 1753. Wieland became the champion for women’s writing in Germany and published his cousin Sophie La Roche’s epistolary novel *Die Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (1771) which has been widely regarded as a watershed for female German authors.

Recent literary research on Elizabeth Singer Rowe has suggested that her prose texts had a significant impact on the development of the English novel. Backscheider, in particular, has shown how her works fill the gap between the fiction of the earlier eighteenth century and, for example, the works of Samuel Richardson.[65] Her epistolary form started to create the illusion of natur al feelings, introduced psychologized novelistic protagonists, and she depicted women as virtuous and discreet characters in harmonious friendship with each other. This instigated a literary trend followed by numerous writers of novels.

At the end of the seventeenth century, academic education for young females was provided not by schools but by supportive parents or patrons. This was particularly true for nonconformist circles, where religion could be used as a catalyst for young women to express their intellectual potential. Elizabeth Singer Rowe is a good example of a nonconformist minister’s daughter, who benefitted from her father’s religious fervour, commitment to education, and his relationships with liked-minded friends. This provided her with the foundation and motivation to rise above the fashionable education available to women at that time. The religious nature of her writing, with the themes of friendship, death, and the afterlife, was influenced by her father’s nonconformist convictions, and enabled her to sidestep the literary limitations for women, and establish herself as a bestselling writer. In this way, she became a role model for female virtue, women’s writers, and the epistolary novel.

Notes

1 See in more detail Henry F. Stecher, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe, the Poetess of Frome: A Study in Eighteenth-Century English Pietism* (Frankfurt/M: Lang, 1973), p. 32.

2 Melanie Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century: Elizabeth Rowe, Catharine Cockburn, and Elizabeth Carter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 62.

3 In recent years, Rowe has been rehabilitated in the literary history of the eighteenth century. While research of the twentieth century focussed mainly on her biography, more recently there have been numerous studies of her poetry and prose writing. See, for example, Dustin D. Stewart, 'Elizabeth Rowe, John Milton and Poetic Change', *Women's Writing*, 20(1), 2013, 13-31.

4 Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *The Miscellaneous Works, in Prose and Verse*, ed. by Theophilus Rowe, 4th edn, 2 vols (London: Henry Lintot, 1756), II, 328. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

5 Ebenezer Turell, *The Life and Character of the Reverend Benjamin Colman* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1749), pp. 48-49.

6 The letter is published in *The Children's Magazine and Missionary Repository*, ed. by. Joseph Foulkes Winks (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co, 1848), XI, 285.

7 Stephen Charnock, *A Discourse of Divine Providence* (London: John Harris, 1685), p. 365-66.

8 See, for example, Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, 4 vols (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), I, 167, 197 and 566.

9 Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Friendship in Death in Twenty Letters from the Dead to the Living. To which are added, Letters Moral and Entertaining* (Edinburgh: William Gray, 1755), p. 207.

10 Myra Reynolds, *The Learned Lady in England 1650-1760* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), p. 87.

11 Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Poems on Several Occasions. To which is prefixed an Account of the Life and Writings of the Author* (London: Midwinter, 1767), p. 5.

12 Proverbs 31. 10-31: "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies […] her candle goeth not out by night […] she openeth her mouth with wisdom."

13 Turell, *The Life and Character*, p. 37.

14 Patricia Crawford, 'The Challenges to Patriarchalism: How did the Revolution affect women?', *Revolution and Restoration*, ed. by John Morrill (London: Collins and Brown, 1992), pp. 112-128 (p. 124).

15 Sharon Achinstein, *Literature and Dissent in Milton's England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 4.

16 John Whiting, *Persecution Exposed: In Some Memoirs Relating to the Sufferings of John Whiting, and Many others of the People called Quakers*, 2nd edn (London: James Phillips, 1791), pp. 61-62. There was another Walter Singer living in Frome, who, however was a Victualler. It is likely that this account refers to Elizabeth's father, as she also distanced herself from the Quakers in a letter to the Countess of Hertford: "I am afraid you will think I am turned Quaker." (II, 130).

17 Paula R. Backscheider, 'Elizabeth Singer Rowe: Lifestyle as Legacy', *New Contexts for Eighteenth-Century British Fiction: "Hearts Resolved and Hands Prepared": Essays in*

Honor of Jerry C. Beasley, ed. by Christopher D. Johnson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), pp. 41-65 (p. 43).

18 She also refers to “the God of my pious father”. See, for example, Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Devout Exercises of the Heart in Meditation and Soliloquy, Prayer and Praise*, 2nd edn (London: R. Hett, 1738), p. 129.

19 Susan Staves, ‘Church of England Clergy and Women Writers’, *Reconsidering the Bluestockings*, ed. by Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 2003), pp. 81-103 (p. 86).

20 N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), pp. 128, 136, 137.

21 James Janeway, *A Token for Children*, ed. by Robert Miner (New York: Garland, 1977), unpaginated preface. In his introduction of this reprint of the 1676 edition, Robert Miner refers to the great popularity of the work when he suggests that these early editions of the book “were read to pieces those hundred times each by increasingly intense little children.” (p. viii).

22 Janeway, *A Token for Children*, p. 33.

23 Janeway, *A Token for Children*, p. 16.

24 A more detailed account can be found on p. 20 of this chapter.

25 Compare Bigold, *Women of Letters*, p. 24.

26 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 213-17.

27 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 237-38.

28 Marjorie Reeves, *Pursuing the Muses: Female Education and Nonconformist Culture 1700-1900* (London and Washington: Leicester University Press, 1997), pp. 18-19.

29 See also Stecher, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe*, p. 33.

30 Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Poems on Several Occasions. Written by Philomela* (London: Raven, 1696), pp. 6-9.

31 Rowe, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1696), pp. 2v-3r.

32 Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, p. 144.

33 The term "catholic" does not refer to the Roman Church but is used in the original Greek sense of "universal" or "general Christian" as in the Nicene Creed.

34 Norma Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 174.

35 Sarah Prescott, 'Provincial Networks, Dissenting Connections, and Noble Friends: Elizabeth Singer Rowe and Female Authorship in Early Eighteenth-Century England', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 25(1), (Winter 2001), 29-42 (p. 36).

36 Susan Staves, '"Books without which I cannot write": How did Eighteenth-Century Women Writers get the Books they read?', *Women and Material Culture, 1660-1830*, ed. by Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 192-211, (pp. 199-200).

37 John Lavicourt Anderdon, *The Life of Thomas Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1854), II, 624.

38 Anderdon, *The Life of Thomas Ken*, II, 626.

39 Anderdon, *The Life of Thomas Ken*, II, 628-29.

40 See Stecher, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe*, pp. 68-72.

41 Prescott, 'Provincial Networks', p. 33.

42 Turell, *The Life and Character*, p. 36.

43 Turell, *The Life and Character*, pp. 39-40.

44 Turell, *The Life and Character*, p. 36.

45 Peter Walmsley, 'Whigs in Heaven: Elizabeth Rowe's 'Friendship in Death', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 44(3), 2011, 315-30 (p. 324).

46 See also Stecher, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe*, p. 27.

47 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 2.

48 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 2-3.

49 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 3.

50 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. v-vi.

51 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 13.

52 Susan Staves, *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), p. 168.

53 See Bigold, *Women of Letters*, p. 245.

54 See, for example, "To Philario, from the Duke of ---. Written on his death-bed" (Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 78); "To Lady Mary, from her sister just before her death" (p. 19) and the "Account of the death of Amanda", where an ignorant father dies a pagan death: "Instead of prayers and pious meditations, one of his libertine companions read Dryden's translation of Lucretius to him, in his last hours; while fearless and insensible he met death, and all its succeeding horrors" (p. 157).

55 Rowe, *Friendship in Death*, p. 148.

56 See Paula R. Backscheider, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 188.

57 'Historical Sketch of the Congregational Church Assembling at Rook Lane, Frome, Somersetshire, with Biographical Notices of the Pastors, and some Distinguished Members', *The Congregational Magazine*, New Series, 7, August 1830, pp. 393-400 (p. 397).

58 Anderdon, *The Life of Thomas Ken*, II, 630.

59 *The Children's Magazine and Missionary Repository*, XI, 286.

60 Elizabeth Frank, *Classical English Letter-Writer: or, Epistolary Selections; Designed to improve young Persons in the Art of Letter-Writing and in the Principles of Virtue and Piety* (Philadelphia: Caleb Richardson, 1816), p. iii.

61 Penelope Aubin, *The Life of Charlotta Du Pont, An English Lady; Taken from her own Memoirs* (London: A. Bettesworth, 1723), p. iii.

62 See in more detail Norma Clarke, 'Soft Passions and Darling Themes: from Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674–1737) to Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806)', *Women's Writing*, 7(3), 2000, 353-71.

63 Elizabeth Carter, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 4th edn (Dublin: William Watson, 1777), p. 12.

64 Quoted in Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence*, ed. by Thomas Sadler, 3 vols (London: Macmillan and Co, 1869), I, 216.

65 Backscheider, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel*.

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