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## LSU DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS

### Nicholas Rowe's writing of woman as feminist hero

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[Henry Herbert Sennett Jr., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College](#)

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#### Abstract

Nicholas Rowe was a playwright of some success during the first quarter of the eighteenth century in London. Rowe's importance to the theatre can be seen in his contribution to the development of strong female roles. He was part of that group of Whig writers who championed individual freedom, some rights for women, and a stronger parliament. It is my contention that Rowe was an "incipient" feminist and an innovator of theatrical practice through his use of the female protagonist. By "feminist" I mean that Rowe wrote about the plight of women in a society that afforded very few rights to women. Within the context of his milieu, Rowe had "incipient" beliefs in favor of equal rights of women on a limited scale. This study analyses Rowe's life and works in order to discover how Rowe made his decision to write strong female roles in his plays. Although he was not the first to write plays strong female roles, he appears to have been the first to have attempted to develop a genre based on the female as hero as evidenced by the unique title he used for the plays: "she-tragedy." And with the unique purpose of writing female protagonist roles, Rowe was a proto-feminist, or as I call him, an incipient feminist.

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of women in a society that afforded ... And with the unique purpose of writing female protagonist roles, Rowe was a proto-feminist, or as I call him, an incipient feminist. Nicholas Rowe's biography was completed using research by Thomas Betterton (1635–1710), a leading Restoration actor. Betterton visited Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-upon-Avon, to glean 'any little Personal story' (p. i) of the playwright from people there. Rowe gives us a fascinating glimpse of early responses to Shakespeare's plays, especially in terms of their genre. He says, for example, that *The Merchant of Venice* is 'Acted as a Comedy' but seems more like a tragedy because of the 'deadly Spirit of Revenge' and the 'savage Fierceness' of Shylock (pp. xix–xx). Francois Boitard's engravings. Revis'd and Corrected, with an Account of the Life and Writings of the Author By N. Rowe, Esq. Published: 1709, London. In 1716, Nicholas Rowe, the Poet Laureate to King George I, assisted a woman named Susanna Centlivre with a play that she was writing. He aided her with suggestions on the poetry and even supplied the epilogue, the last thing the audience would hear before exiting the theatre. By doing this, Rowe had taken a major step in legitimizing the career and writings of a woman known for her outspoken views on women's rights. As I shall argue in this study, Rowe's writing of feminist heroes encompasses more than two characters in two plays; they are pervasive in most of his plays. Matthew Wikander wrote an article in 1976 in which he addresses the problems faced in analyzing the historical plays of the period prior to Rowe's writings.