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On of authors being asked by a Gentleman
What sort of a Husband would please her, intimating
if she was so hard to please.

On Beauty in a man no price I set,
And wealth or grandeur I never valued yet
~~Scorning~~ ^{Scorning} of wit & fine accomplishment,
Tho' very pleasing, will not quite content,
Virtue & good sense can alone engage
My love for youth and my esteem for age

lines written at of the end of two pages
in a borrowed Book on having written of leaves
together to hide a second page

I here have blotted from my view
Two pestilential pages,
For which of authors name must see
His pains through ~~old~~ ^{old} days.

The owners hands, I'll not fear
For such unconcerned freedom,
For there's no matter what if e'er
She wishes more to read here.

written in a blank leaf of a Poem call'd home and
Honouring of story of Lido of Eneas, A. De la Mayne

Poor Lido by Eneas falsehood slain!
His story's murder & hence by De la Mayne,
Unhappy Queen! with such a Poet carst
None thy last fate's sorer than thy first.

The Poems
of
Olivia Elder

NLI, MS 23254

edited by
Andrew Carpenter

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Introduction

Olivia Elder was born on 21 January 1735, the daughter of John Elder (1693–1779), a prominent New Light Presbyterian minister, who ministered to the congregation at Aghadowey, near Coleraine. Like most Presbyterian ministers in eighteenth-century Ulster, John Elder had to supplement the meagre sum donated to him by his congregation by farming. One of his contemporaries, the Revd John Kennedy, minister of Benburb, Co. Tyrone in the 1720s, described how, in addition to baptizing, marrying, burying and visiting his congregation, he attended markets, bought and slaughtered cattle, quarried stone, spread manure, planted hedges, sowed and reaped his fields.¹ Details from everyday life on a farm and explorations of the implications of Presbyterian theology both appear in the verse of Olivia Elder.

Once she found she had a facility for verse – which seems to have happened when she was in her early thirties – Olivia Elder declared herself ‘a poetess’ and started making fair copies of her work in a quarto notebook, now NLI, MS 23254. The book (which is described below in the ‘Note on the text’) passed, on her death, to her niece and from her to James Henry, the Dublin physician, poet and book collector. From him it came to the NLI.

Olivia Elder’s verse covers a remarkable range of subjects in a considerable variety of poetic styles. She was a voracious reader of English poetry, often placing an epigraph from a writer such as Pope, Thomson or Milton at the head of her poems; she also – probably because she had access to books through her father) knew some Latin and even a little Greek. She was not afraid to experiment with unfamiliar verse styles and her poems include epistles, elegies, a pastoral, an ode, some songs, many pieces of occasional verse and several satires referring directly to places and persons she knew. She also produced a parodic verse in Ulster Scots.

Among her most lively works are the verse letters she wrote to her friends. It is clear from these that they wrote back to her in verse and that, together, the women formed a small coterie of verse correspondents. Unfortunately none of the writings of Olivia’s friends has been found, and it seems that her verse is all that has

¹ See Constantia Maxwell, *Country and town in Ireland under the Georges* (London, 1940), p. 361; see also Patrick Griffin, *The people with no name: Ireland’s Ulster Scots, America’s Scots Irish and the creation of a British Atlantic world 1689–1764* (Princeton, 2001), pp 39–40 and references.

survived from this otherwise unknown group of lower middle class women writers living in rural Ulster in the eighteenth century.

Olivia Elder's satires are among the more surprising of her works. They are outspoken in a way that would be quite unacceptable today; she accuses specific clergymen – Presbyterians as well as ministers of the Church of Ireland – of dishonesty, corruption, cynicism, drunkenness and sexual misconduct. One of her most virulent attacks – on the rector of Coleraine – was, astonishingly, published in the *Freeman's Journal*, though this was her only appearance in print. In that poem, as in a poem like 'Matrimony at the Throne', she represents direct speech with great skill and her use of the couplet is much more sophisticated than that of many of her contemporaries.

It is interesting that Olivia Elder sought the friendship of Anna Lætitia Barbauld, the most significant English women poet of the 1770s and one whose work was widely admired and read by women writers throughout England and Ireland.² She also aligned herself with other women writers working in England and, in her own poems, refers to her position as a 'poetess' several times. It is possible that she contemplated publication as, twice in the manuscript, there are notes that might be directed to a compositor. But the poems were still in manuscript when she died in 1780.

Though Olivia Elder's work compares very favourably with that of other women poets writing in England and America at the time, her outspokenness and the vividness of her imagery make her poems stand out strongly even in that company. Hers is a highly distinctive, female voice and one that invites us to look again at cultural life in eighteenth-century Ulster.

² For Anna Lætitia Barbauld (1743–1825) see *ODNB*. Her poems were reprinted in Belfast by James Magee in 1774.

[p. 7]

To Mrs A.C.H., an account of the
Authors manner of spending her time¹

Written Octobr 20th 1769

When far from you, dear Anna, placed,
Think not my life I idly waste;
But when I tell you how it's pass'd,
You'll say it is an odd contrast,
And that I strangely spend my time
Between the mean, and the sublime.

I oft forsake both Pope and Swift
The House to sweep, and Pots to lift;
With Princely Queensb'ry leave his Gay,
To call the folks from making hay;
Or Young³ upon the morning Star
To help the boy down with a Car;
Quit Tragick Queens in all their clutter,
And help to churn, or dress the Butter.

Oft from my hand the Pen I whisk out,
And in its place take up the Dishclout;
For spite of all sublimer wishes,
I needs must sometimes wash the dishes.

[p. 8] No wonder if ~~that~~ my work but trash is,
When I'm obliged to lift the ashes:
Or what I sing in homely lays,
I'll site the Besom with the Bays.

¹ <this is placed by ye author at ye beginning as an apology for ye poorness of ye following performances: as little can be expected from one so variously and often much employed, the appology she afterwards Ironically makes for ye muse of S——n she here makes in earnest for her own, viz: Can she in one art excell / When to her provence twenty fell.> Mrs A.C.H., though not positively identified, could be a member of the Higginbotham family of Coleraine. For another poem addressed to Mrs A.C.H., see [p. 109]. For lines about the muse of Dr S——n, see [p. 75]. A page number placed between square brackets refers to the page number in the original MS.

² The duke and duchess of Queensberry were patrons of the poet and dramatist John Gay; see *ODNB* entries for Charles Douglas (1698–1778), 3rd duke of Queensberry, Catherine Douglas (1701–77), duchess of Queensberry, and John Gay (1685–1732).

³ Edward Young (baptised 1683–1765): see *ODNB*.

Unfinish'd I must leave a fable,
 To go and scour the Kitchen table,
 Or from ye writing of a Poem,
 Descend my Neighbours turf to throw 'em:
 For trust me, I'm not quite unskill'd in
 A good turf stack the art of building,
 And yesterday, a sight uncommon,
 I help'd with one a poor old Woman.
 Nay, at this very present writing,
 As this Epistle I'm inditing,
 When all are busy b[ea]ring hay to us,
 I'm forced to go and boil Potatoes.

In politicks I never dabble
 Nor e'er in party matters squabble,
 But sometimes curious, read the news,
 Then take a Brush and clean my Shoes
 Tho never at a school or Colleg;
 Of ancient fables I've some knowledge;
 Yet Beauties Queen, and widows Goddess⁴
 I quit to mend my whale bone bodice;
 Or like the Shepherd God Apollo,
 Leave wit and verse to follow.

[p. 9]

Philosophy I seldom need it,
 My brain will hardly bear to read it,
 Yet I have got some little notion
 Of heavenly bodys, and their motion;
 And neither wonder, gape nor stare,
 When I hear learned folks declare
 The moon to be a peopled world,
 And round, each day, this Earth is whirl'd;
 And when I hear of Saturns Ring,
 I neither take it for a thing
 That's round the finger put for shew,
 Nor turns⁵ old God for modern Beau;
 But yet the stars I never survey
 Till wool and flax go topsy turvy.

40

50

⁴ Venus and Minerva.

⁵ meaning uncertain.

I sometimes sew, and sometimes knit:
 And oft in social circle sit; 60
 Leave mending of ye Kitchen fires,
 And pay a visit at the Squire's:
 Drink Tea and Coffy, laugh and chat,
 And hear him talk of this and that;
 How he himself must prime the Pudding⁶
 Or else he never gets a good one;
 Of method new his meat to cure up,
 Then swear it is the best in Europe;
 How cheap he purchases things new:
 [p. 10] Doubt if all he says be true; 70
 Or hear dull Storys where no wit is
 From stupid Rector,⁷ who more fit is
 For feasting Aldermen than Preacher,
 Else of good eating make his teacher.
 But to return from these digressions;
 Were I to tell of my professions,
 Of Cook, Slut, Butler, Laundrymaid,
 Of ricks and housewifry my trade,
 You'd swear, I was the perfect ape
 Of Proteus, god of changing shape. 80
 What need I speak of candles dipping,
 Of Brewing, Dining, and Tea sipping
 With Ladies; then entreat excuse
 Till I send Nan to kill a goose.
 Or how I went from spinning tow⁸
 To entertain a Paris Beau;
 For once, when thus employ'd, I hapt on
 A visit from the sprightly Captain⁹
 Who comes with fishing tackle hear [*recte* here],
 And likes to taste my Bottled Beer; 90
 Or how from whitewashing a wall

⁶ <his Phrase for puting brandy in it.>

⁷ <Revd Mr B——d son to ye late B——p of D——y and Brother to the D——ne> i.e. Rev Henry Barnard, son of Bishop William Barnard (1697–1768); see *DIB* for Henry's brother Thomas Barnard (1728–1806), Samuel Johnson's friend, who was dean of Derry (1769–80) and later a Church of Ireland bishop.

⁸ 'tow' is the unworked stem or fibre of flax.

⁹ <Captain, now Major W——d Nephew to R——t W——d Esqr author of ye ruins of Palmira.> Robert Wood (c. 1717–1771) was a traveller and politician: see *DIB*.

- I'm dress'd, and dancing at a Ball;
 Sometimes engaged in Mirth and folly
 [p. 11] And oft immers'd in melancholy.
 You with my skill would never quarrel
 In tighting Hoops upon a Barrel;
 Nor wou'd believe with what art
 I play the Manteau makers part;
 What pictures of old fans have made;
 And grottos in the rural shade:¹⁰
 How catgut, envied work have wrought on,¹¹
 For working muslin how thin Cotton,
 Now sprig¹² a gown, and now an apron,
 And now a steed I sometimes taper on,¹³
 Or learn to do some Dresden stitches:
 Then go and mend an old man's Bri[t]ches,
 And then begin ye very trade
 In tother world of Ancient Maid.¹⁴
 For planting flowers the ground take up
 Or make fictitious ones of Tea-cup:¹⁵ 110
 Sometimes explain a learned Word,
 And sometimes glue a broken board.
 And now of all this strange account
 What think you is the just amount?
 Why sure a Triumph of such Eclat¹⁶
 Preceding Ages never saw,
 And Prais'd, in all after times
 Witnessing her fame in deathless rhymes;
 [p. 12] Historians tell, adorned what reign is
 By such an universal genius; 120
 But hold — in vanity's despight

¹⁰ <A method of making pictures out of old broken china.>

¹¹ i.e. how I have wrought work which has been admired on [coarse] catgut as if it had been worked on muslin or thin cotton.

¹² to decorate with patterns of springs or sprays of flowers or plants.

¹³ 'steed' may be an error for 'sleeve[e]'.
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¹⁴ i.e. spinning.

¹⁵ <a method of making flowers of broken china.>

¹⁶ pronounced 'eclaw' [eklō].

I'll set myself in proper light,
For tho' each syllable is true,¹⁷
I'll frankly own my dear to you,
What all my works themselves have shewn,
I'm Jack of all trades good at none.¹⁸

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¹⁷ <not exactly in the order yt they here follow one another tho' some of them did, as ye building ye turf stack, boiling ye Potatoes, entertaining Capt W. & some others.>

¹⁸ <this is a Poetical licence for which I have Mr Popes authority who for ye sake of ye Rhyme calls Minerva a God.>