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'Poetry does not deserve evil keepers'

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An introduction to the Anna Mendelssohn special issue of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. This collection is based on the proceedings of the Anna Mendelssohn Symposium, held at the University of Sussex in February 2017. The symposium took as its epigraph the title of a Mendelssohn poem: 'Poetry does not deserve evil keepers'. This title sets down a challenge for readers and critics of Mendelssohn's work, compelling us to ask: what does it mean to be good keepers of (her) poetry? How is the literary critic to deal with the biographical and political contexts – such as her incarceration for anti-capitalist activism, or the precarity of her later life in Cambridge – which intrude upon readings of her texts? We then sketch a brief biography of Mendelssohn, and discuss approaches to reading her complex and elusive poetry. Lastly, we outline the articles and responses that make up this special issue.

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The poetry of Anna Mendelssohn (1948–2009) has, until recently, been little-known outside certain literary circles. Mendelssohn was a prolific and highly experimental poet and artist, and, earlier in her life, a political activist. In her lifetime, her poetry was published through small presses and in anthologies, culminating in the publication of her major collection, *Implacable Art*, in 2000. Since her death, Mendelssohn is increasingly recognised as one of the most important avant-garde poets of her generation. In 2015, the Anna Mendelssohn Archive, containing thousands of unpublished poems and drawings, opened to the public; in 2017, the first symposium devoted to her work was held at the University of Sussex; and the publication of her *Collected Poems* in 2020 makes her work available to a new generation of readers, students and scholars.¹

This special issue on Anna Mendelssohn/Grace Lake is based on the proceedings of the Anna Mendelssohn Symposium, which was held at the University of Sussex in February 2017. The academic symposium closed with an evening of celebratory poetry readings from Rod Mengham, Jennifer Cooke, Verity Spott, and a performance by Lucy Beynon and Lisa Jeschke of an unpublished Mendelssohn playscript, *THERE was a great ripping up OF ROMANCE OCCURRING* (you can watch a recording of this performance here [<https://poetry.openlibhums.org/article/id/7927/>]).² The rationale behind the symposium – and consequently this collection – was to provide a space for the burgeoning study of and interest in Anna Mendelssohn's/Grace Lake's poetic and artistic output, and to attend to the work of a neglected female, Jewish, working-class poet of the late twentieth century.

As an epigraph to the symposium, we took the title of a poem from *Implacable Art*: 'Poetry does not deserve evil keepers.'³ This title sets a challenge for readers and critics of Mendelssohn's work and compels us to ask: what does it mean to be good keepers of (her) poetry? How is the literary critic to deal with the biographical and political contexts – such as Mendelssohn's incarceration in the 1970s for alleged involvement with the anti-capitalist militants known as the Angry Brigade, or the precarity of her later life in Cambridge – which seem to both intrude upon and inhere within her texts; are these concerns to be kept in or kept out?

The symposium and the essays in this collection take up the challenge of being deserving keepers of poetry, and mark a moment in which serious and sustained attention is being given to Mendelssohn's brilliant and audacious writing for the first time. Each of the essays in this special issue explores different aspects of Mendelssohn's writing practice, from the tradition of Jewish lament to the language of flowers to the politics of work. Many of the essays draw on previously unexamined material from the Anna Mendelssohn Archive, including letters, prison notebooks, marginalia and poetry drafts. In the remainder of this editorial, we sketch a brief biography of Mendelssohn,

and discuss approaches to reading her complex and elusive poetry. Lastly, we will introduce the rich and fascinating articles and responses that make up this special collection.

A brief biography

Mendelssohn, who was born ‘Anna Mendleson’, grew up in Stockport, Cheshire, and described herself as coming from a ‘very strict, working-class socialistic Jewish background’.⁴ She studied English literature at Essex University (1967–69) where Ed Dorn, the prominent Black Mountain poet, was a lecturer from 1965–1970, and Tom Raworth, a leading figure of the British Poetry Revival, was poet in residence in the late sixties. It was at Essex that Mendelssohn became involved with radical student politics and in 1968 she travelled to France to join in the French May along with a large contingent of British students.⁵ In 1969, Mendelssohn made an appearance alongside other student activists in *British Sounds*, a documentary by the French New-Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. By 1970 she had moved to London where she participated in various forms of activism, from writing for countercultural periodicals to the squatting movement. In 1971 Mendelssohn was arrested as an alleged member of the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist urban guerrillas known as the Angry Brigade, who claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in London in the late sixties and early seventies. Following what was then the longest criminal trial in Britain in the twentieth century, the 24-year-old Mendelssohn (along with three others) was convicted of conspiracy to cause explosions and sentenced to ten years in Holloway women’s prison. During the trial, and throughout her life, Mendelssohn strenuously denied any involvement in acts of political violence. Due to her dedication to teaching other incarcerated women while in prison, she was released early on parole.⁶

Upon leaving prison, Mendelssohn re-enrolled in higher education – first at Anglia Polytechnic, then Sheffield Polytechnic, then at the University of Cambridge – and began to produce her vast body of poetic and artistic work. For about twenty years following her release from prison Mendelssohn lived and wrote under the name ‘Grace Lake’ to escape the notoriety attached to ‘Anna Mendleson’. She closely associated the use of her given name with the constant struggle ‘to leave this prison that my nightmares tell me I have been consigned to’, as she wrote in a letter to her friend and publisher, the poet Peter Riley.⁷ Mendelssohn’s three children were born in the eighties, but by the end of the decade, after a bitter court case, she lost custody of them. This loss marked her profoundly for the rest of her life. In 1989, Mendelssohn failed her Finals exams at Cambridge, having ignored the question on the exam paper and instead written a ‘tirade’ against the lack of nursery provision in the university.⁸ She became increasingly

reclusive towards the end of her life, devoting herself entirely to her poetry and her art, and, as Crangle puts it in her introduction to Mendelssohn's *Collected*, '[p]overty exerted its daily grind'.⁹ From the 1990s, she lived in Mowbray Road in Cambridge in an unheated shed at the bottom of a friend's garden – an arrangement she wryly described as 'my atelier (studio) to make it sound inhabitable'.¹⁰ By the time of her death at the age of only sixty-one, the shed was piled high with books, writing, and artwork. This chaotic mass of creative material is now archived and catalogued and can be accessed at The Keep, University of Sussex.

Reading Anna Mendelssohn/Grace Lake

Almost every article in this issue contends with the inescapable *difficulty* of Mendelssohn's poetry. This difficulty is both formal difficulty (in which Mendelssohn's poetry is not unique) but also the difficulty generated by the clamorous biographical and political contexts that surround the work. Mendelssohn's poetry both compels and is highly resistant to biographical readings. In her essay for this collection, Sara Crangle addresses this difficulty when she writes of how

the radicalism and extremes of Mendelssohn's life and writings will continue to encourage over-determined biographical readings of her corpus, even as it is one of her fundamental editorial practices to excise or reformulate the first-person pronoun.

Mendelssohn's endlessly inventive reformulation of the lyric 'I' results in a poetry that is densely allusive, multivalent, and paradoxical. Coterminous with the movement known as the British Poetry Revival, Mendelssohn's poetry shares this movement's distinctive qualities of indeterminacy, discontinuity, poetic artifice and defamiliarisation.¹¹ But to characterise this ever-shifting oeuvre, which encompasses huge differences in style, form and voice necessitates immediate retractions or qualifications. As the poet Sean Bonney, an insightful early reader of Mendelssohn's work, wrote, this 'is a political poetry that is fully aware of the limits of what is permitted in bourgeois society'.¹² Yet Mendelssohn everywhere tells us 'how I had to write like the winds to keep the politics that were at my heels from catching me'.¹³ This is a fugitive poetry, which constantly calls into question and reorganises readerly value judgements on the work.

The lexical variety, the esoteric wordplay, and the sheer imaginative inventiveness of this poetry is exemplified by eponymous characters like 'Bernache Nonnette' and 'viola tricolor', and by lines such as 'Brazilian brocaderie | esclave avant-garderie'; the

parodic Shakespearian diction of ‘a moonlit dusk by lamplight’s side [...] where proof of purse is not in pride’; or the irreverent mockery of ‘the chief of police wears a silver fleece’.¹⁴ The comedy of this last line belies the technical complexity of the poetry, as Mendelssohn sets the structure of the poem against the structure of bourgeois society. This lexical play combined with an insistent, often gendered, lyric ‘I’ challenges the institutional and legal construction of the subject, which can only repress the contingent and the singular. In the poem ‘friday.’, Mendelssohn writes of the ‘detestation | of singularity in the female writer’, and elsewhere, of being ‘fearful | to break through official language’.¹⁵

Her poetry’s apparent resistance to meaning is parsed through a wry question posed in *viola tricolor*: ‘i wonder how you would feel to be relegated to illiteracy’.¹⁶ This *feeling* of illiteracy in the face of a difficult and elliptical poetry prompts a kind of re-calibrating or re-sensitising of reading practices. What Will Rowe and Albinia Stanley identify in their essays for this collection as the ‘sudden turns’ this poetry makes, its dizzying shifts in subject, tone and syntax, similarly work affectively on the reader. Callie Gardner takes up this idea in their suggestion that ‘a Mendelssohnian reading is conducted with our eyes closed [...] moving along by a feel’ for the way in which a poem works. Always vigilant against ‘associations being read by unread people’, by those who ‘don’t allow poems to drift out of their windows’, and the ‘synthesizers of Literature’, this poetry resists its reader’s desire to fit it into accepted interpretational frameworks which rely upon institutional and academic hierarchies of knowledge.¹⁷ A metapoetic invective against ‘bad’, synthesising or authoritarian readers (an invective which is, at times, inflected with elitism) threads through Mendelssohn’s poetry and constellates into a poetics that works against the thoughts and words of powerful ‘people’ – as she puts it – ‘whose positions of authority [...] desensitizes their use of language’.¹⁸

The highly sensitised language of Mendelssohn’s poetry and the way its resistances might re-sensitise a reader’s interpretive practices are recurring themes in this collection. For Luke Roberts, writing of how we might become ‘good enough readers’, ‘[Mendelssohn’s] work demands an approach that stays conscious of our relative positions within the State and its institutions, and the ways in which poetry has both imagined and resisted those institutions’. For Rowe, the very incompleteness of a Mendelssohn poem, its resistance to neat resolution, is ‘an urge to further, difficult thought’.

Mendelssohn’s pervasive preoccupation with how and by whom she is read meets one of her most eerily beautiful characterisations of her poetics in the following passage from *Implacable Art*:

... I'm not suggesting that any of you are landlords – only –
 we are very different & I read Gogol from that position. How many operators,
 was it all one rush for the unbeatable biography resistant to auto, closed door,
 abbreviation fever, throwing away no book, beating down bar lines, a clock set,
 clock within a clock, a nest of clocks & set in the heart of the intricate mechanism
 a heart. a clock in the shape of a heart. the exquisite birthday present: a
 poem of objects that live by magic.¹⁹

What is your position, Mendelssohn's lyric speaker demands of its reader – and asserts its own: unpropertied, literate, sardonic. The Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol, known for his 'defamiliarising' style of writing, here provides an alternative model for reading.²⁰ The contempt with which the next line treats the 'rush for the unbeatable biography' pulls the reader away from any biographical associations. The following lines are filled with caesura and fragmentation, falling in and out of a feverish rhythm, heedless of standard notation: 'beating down bar lines'. The insistently repetitive figures (clock/heart) of the final lines seem to reproduce the monotonous measurements of clock time. (Incidentally, Mendelssohn's poetry is littered with timepieces.) Clocks have always had anatomical features (hands and faces) ascribed to them but the heart beating at the centre of a nest of clocks at the end of this poem is disconcertingly anthropomorphic. Does the human heart become a ticking clock, here, or does the clock become a beating heart? Do the beats of scansion work to counter the ticking of clock time, or do they reinforce one another? The poetic objects 'that live by magic' and mark the passage of time (as a 'birthday present') seem as equally to be enlivened by the fetish of the commodity as they are by poetic thought. We might read this passage as a striking meditation on alienation: the heart fused with the clock mechanism as an uncanny figure for the entrapment of human labour – which includes poetic labour – at the centre of all manufactured objects.

What other approaches might we take to a poem which opens with the statement that 'directions are not given in poetry', a typically Mendelssohnian disavowal? Earlier in the poem, the speaker invokes a mode of 'attentive concern' towards 'stolen time', in an extension of its preoccupation with temporality and alienated labour:

My attentive concern for stolen time
 I cannot sever my body from its multiplicity of
 Longing for words that lasting longer are being rendered null²¹

The speaker's attention to 'stolen time' tempts a quasi-biographical reading that glosses stolen time as prison time, and concern for it as a carceral preoccupation.

The enjambed lines here create a syntactic ambivalence: is it ‘stolen time’ the lyric ‘I’ ‘cannot sever my body from’, or the ‘multiplicity of | Longing for words’? Or both? If we read this last line with attention to its formal qualities (following an approach explored in Gardner’s essay), we might notice how ‘Longing’ bleeds into ‘longer’, a seeping of sound and thus of semanticity that seems to express extended yearning and hopefulness, before coming up against the Beckettian desolation of ‘rendered null’. If we continue to read transversally, after Rowe, on the facing page to this poem we find one of Mendelssohn’s black and white line drawings, a dense cube containing (incarcerating?) groups of huddled figures. On the previous two pages are more drawings, including that which we have used to illustrate this collection (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Anna Mendelssohn, untitled, *Implacable Art*, p.7. Reproduced by kind permission of the Mendelssohn estate.

Composed of three figures, two with half-hooded faces, one a triffid-like growth (three muses? The three Fates, or witches?), this is a cryptic and brooding triptych. These are the ‘bodies’ or ‘objects’ surrounding the poem, which the reader encounters before starting to read: they offer little by means of conventional directions, but convey – among other surfaces and textures – a frowning watchfulness, a monstrous proximity, and (suggested by the cube-like drawing) a matrix of carcerality. Here, a transversal reading of material outside the poem returns us to the spectre of biography that this paradoxical poetry both compels and resists. But the long shadow of HMP Holloway dwindles beside the forest of carceral structures, from camps to the police

to courts of law, this poetry evokes. Indeed, in another poem from *Implacable Art*, ‘Art made me thin [...] art took all my time’; the jailer or taker of time is art itself.²²

What, then, is the place of the ‘poem of objects that live by magic’? Commodities and their false glitter might be the ‘objects that live by magic’, but the poem’s closing statement can also be read as a sincere assertion of the aesthetic power of a poem. As Joe Luna argues, Mendelssohn ascribed a ‘practically Platonic value’ to poetry as ‘the autonomous realm of art that “alienates no-one”’. Equally, what is unreadable in the objects of capital might become legible through the kind of ‘attentive concern’ necessitated, and demanded, by this poetry. ‘[A]ttentive concern’ in both the reading and writing of poetry is key to Mendelssohn’s poetic labour, as Crangle’s uncovering of her exhaustive drafting process shows: this sustained attention might promise a way of working through the alienated structuring of social relations. To learn this ‘attentive concern’ is a mode of political shaping; it enables us, as readers, to register the re-sensitising or defamiliarising of language that Mendelssohn mobilises, while simultaneously re-sensitising us as readers.

directions are not given in poetry

The first of the essays that make up this collection is **Luke Roberts’** ‘good-enough’ history of Mendelssohn, via D. W. Winnicott, Melanie Klein, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Lisa Tickner, which explores the radical scene of Essex University in 1968 through the corollary of Roberts’ own experience of the student protests and occupations of 2010. Roberts’ personal account of reading Mendelssohn at a time of political upheaval acknowledges the magnetising ‘mystery, danger and glamour’ that surrounds her history and her writing for the generation of poets who came to her work in the 2010s. Querying Mendelssohn’s disavowal of politics for poetry, Roberts suggests that in so doing ‘she gives us a diagram of their relation’. For Roberts, as for many other critics of Mendelssohn’s work, her poetry throws up a challenge *not* to fall into the role of critic-judge or poetry detective, in the face of which threat her lyric is eternally vigilant. Reading one of Mendelssohn’s ‘most amenable poems’, the opening lyric from *Implacable Art*, Roberts suggests that the long lines of ellipsis in the poem ‘stand for revolution itself’, or its aftermath. This article is an experiment with the resistances of this poetry, specifically to postwar psychoanalytical state apparatuses, and concludes that her work asks for a ‘reorganisation of our acquired habits of reading and critical response’. This demand is especially acute for a ‘historically inclined literary criticism’ that might look for sequence or progressive narratives among the enormous amounts of undated material held in Mendelssohn’s archive.

Joe Luna's essay 'Poetry's Law' continues to press at the faultline between the poetic and the political in Mendelssohn's writing. Through a reading of Mendelssohn's letters to Douglas Oliver, poetry from *Implacable Art* and the long poem '1:3ng', Luna interrogates the 'enemies of poetry' that are everywhere in Mendelssohn's 'embattled lyric oeuvre'. In this argument, Mendelssohn's poetry is animated by what Luna calls 'poetry's law', a 'radically negative aesthetic foundation' which is 'most powerfully felt in lament over the murdered subject of poetry'. That lament, which Luna interprets through the Hebrew tradition of *kinah* [lament], paradoxically enables the survival of the poet through the 'besieged autonomy' that only poetry can provide. This is a way, Luna suggests, that we might understand Mendelssohn's designation of her art as 'implacable': in its refusal to console or be consoled. By reading Mendelssohn's poetry alongside her correspondence, Luna elucidates the complex relationship between her life and work, her prose and her verse. This article's illuminating turn to scholarship on Jewish lamentation provides a genealogy for Mendelssohn's 'inconsolable lyric subject', the 'formal contours of lamentation' as a literary genre in which her poetry participates, and the outsized expression of grief that finds its apotheosis, for Luna, in '1:3ng', 'one of the most sorrowful poems of late modernist British lyric'.

In an essay that develops a Marxist feminist reading of Mendelssohn's poetry and its engagement with the politics of work, **Albinia Stanley** examines a literal 'diagram' of her poetry's relation to politics, one which shows how 'poetry is always already embedded, or blocked in, by the political'. Contending with the critical tendency to take Mendelssohn's poetry as 'temptingly emblematic' of either a political poetry or a poetry of political disavowal, Stanley argues instead that this is a 'layered poetics' that refuses the binary division between *poesis* and *praxis*. Through a series of close readings of poems from *viola tricolor* and *Implacable Art*, Stanley identifies the formal features – sharp shifts in register, Marxist metaphor, the use of rhythm – that enact this lyric refusal. Intrigued by Mendelssohn's constant evocation of the feminine and inscriptions of reproductive labour, Stanley draws on the work of Silvia Federici to show how this poetry 'shares ground' with Marxist feminist theory. In this reading, Mendelssohn's 'maligned and insubordinate' lyric 'I' is analogous to Federici's witch: the embodiment of an array of threatening and threatened female subjects. Attentive to the 'pessimistic dimension to Mendelssohn's practice', Stanley finds a 'dual motion towards liberation and collapse' to be the 'defining sensation of [her] prosody', which holds out the promise of radical but unrealisable forms of love and care.

In another feminist reading of Mendelssohn's work, **Sara Crangle** turns to genetic criticism and the nineteenth-century genre of floral poetry to argue that 'flowers become a means by which Mendelssohn performs feminist oscillations between sentimentality and sublimity' and redefines 'a masculinist avant-garde inheritance'. In so doing, Crangle reveals the minutiae of Mendelssohn's editorial processes as they unfold over several decades, as well as explicating elements of the conservatism that runs through her work. Crangle's sensitive genetic analysis of Mendelssohn's poetry drafts, letters, notebooks and marginalia demonstrates a prolonged, avant-gardist reworking of the 'feminised flower tropes that reached the height of their popularity in the nineteenth century'. Bringing the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (an important influence who inspired Mendelssohn's adoption of the term 'poetess') into contact with *viola tricolor* (1993) illuminates the metonymic association between coded flowers and the silenced female subject, and the 'vanguard alienation' that inflects Mendelssohn's own 'floral' lyric. Crangle's close attention to lyric inscriptions of the tulip – yellow, red, or wild – from 1974–1995 culminates in a reading of the poem 'Silk & Wild Tulips' which recalibrates the poet's earlier use of Victorian floral motifs and attains a 'self-conscious, critical romanticism'. Although occasionally disrupted by the poetess's democratic identification with the 'humble potato', Crangle shows how the 'unstoppable glorification of flora' as 'idealised wordless communicators', or a means of creating 'meaning without language', evolves throughout Mendelssohn's writing life.

Mendelssohn's refusal of normative forms of language is the subject of **Will Rowe's** article on *Implacable Art* and the 'failure of composition'. Implacability, in Rowe's reading, lies in this poetry's 'refusal to be reconciled with reality as it exists' – that is, the reality of late twentieth-century Britain. The 'failure of composition' refers to the fundamental incompleteness of Mendelssohn's poetry, its excess, its refusal of resolution and resistance to synthesis – especially in *Implacable Art*, where the distinction between one poem and the next is often unclear, ambiguous and unspecified. For that reason, Rowe reads Mendelssohn's poetry 'transversely, not as independent wholes but across from one to another'. This very lack of wholeness, or incompleteness, 'moves against' the suppression of the 'extreme aliveness' of lyrical language by the Law, as Rowe's detailed, transversal readings show. Rowe is candid about the need for 'painstaking reading[s]' of this poetry's 'multiple contrariness', and warns against smoothing or flattening approaches to lyric reading. Staying with the difficulty of Mendelssohn's writing, Rowe clarifies the slippery relation between the poem and its social, historical or cultural contexts by reminding us that the 'jarring surplus' found within the poem urges us to 'further, difficult thought' outside of the poem. This article is rich with insights into Mendelssohn's poetic practice, its sudden

turns and refusals – whether of reconciliation and sublimation, or, more provocatively, of modernism. What may look at first glance like modernist montage ‘goes beyond any modernist aesthetic of fragmentation, because it relates to a suppression of the possibility [of] true speaking’. The ‘not-speaking’ so characteristic of Mendelssohn’s work is at the heart, in Rowe’s argument, of its difficulty but also of its power.

Callie Gardner’s beautiful reading of what they call a ‘Mendelssohnian poetics’ alongside Veronica Forrest-Thomson’s own poetic theory and practice returns again to the question that draws together every essay in this collection: how are we to read this poetry? Both Mendelssohn and Forrest-Thomson, in Gardner’s argument, are poets who seek ‘an alternative poetic approach to knowledge’ that is non-totalising and polyvalent. Giving a ‘Forrest-Thomsonian’ reading of Mendelssohn, and a ‘Mendelssohnian’ reading of Forrest-Thomson, Gardner elucidates the commonalities and divergences between their poetry’s avoidance of ‘settled knowledge’. This essay opens with a reading of Mendelssohn’s poem ‘Ship in a bottle’ through the framework of Forrest-Thomson’s system of reading poetry, as set out in *Poetic Artifice* (1978). Avoiding ‘Forrest-Thomson’s cardinal sin of “bad naturalisation”’ and the distraction of external referents, Gardner approaches ‘Ship in a bottle’ not through its content but through the scaffold afforded by poetic form, and allows these formal qualities to order their reading of the poem’s ‘matrix of possible meanings’. Moving from Forrest-Thomson to Denis Roche’s concept of scansion, Gardner describes the ‘seeping’ semanticity of Mendelssohn’s poetry and proposes that a ‘Mendelssohnian reading’ would involve reading ‘with our eyes closed [...] moving along by a feel for the way in which a poem’s “pulsations” of shape, sound and syntax work even as semantic meaning recedes’. Closing with a reading of Forrest-Thomson’s ‘Approaching the Library’ and discussions of irony, pastoral and metapoetic figures in the work of both poets, Gardner generously models ways of approaching such ‘resistant [and] elliptical’ poetry.

The editors would like to thank Martin Kettle and Ruth Gardner for kindly allowing permission for this article to be published posthumously, following the tragic loss of Callie Gardner in July 2021. Earlier that year, Callie had signed off the final version of their article, and was looking forward to the work being published in its present form.

In addition to the full-length articles on Mendelssohn’s poetics, this special issue also includes six short creative responses to her work. **Shalini Sengupta** offers an intriguing close reading of Mendelssohn’s handwritten texts, and their connection to the countercultural scene of production of the 1960s and 1970s, through readings of archival material and ‘always nervous’, a poem from *Implacable Art*. **Srishti Krishnamoorthy-Cavell** gives a generative, eco-feminist reading of figures of birds

and flight in the opening lyric of the pamphlet *Bernache Nonnette* (1995). **Florence Uniacke** provides a reading of a drawn poem from *Implacable Art*, ‘clashing bronze’, bringing much needed attention to the visual elements of Mendelssohn’s practice. **Charlotte Thießen** reads an extract from one of Mendelssohn’s prison notebooks as ‘a form of resistant imagination writing itself against the reality of her incarceration’, and suggests themes which remerge in her later poetry. **Jon Clay** explores the poem ‘pladd. (you who say either)’ and its preoccupation with ‘unread people’ through the Deleuzian concepts of ‘delirium-affect’ and assemblage. This section also includes a recording of the superb live performance of Mendelssohn’s short play, *THERE was a great ripping up OF ROMANCE OCCURRING. PEOPLE who were in love WERE BEING LEFT BEHIND in a reserved paddock of the imagination. The ANALYSTS were aT work—;*, by live artists **Lisa Jeschke and Lucy Beynon**. Performing against a backdrop of the disembodied heads of politicians and celebrities, Jeschke and Beynon recite the script in unison, moving slowly backwards towards the audience in a mirror of the play’s escalating Gothic excess and surrealist absurdity.

As Mendelssohn would have it: ‘there is no excuse | for approaching me on any matter | other than writing’.²³ It is on these grounds that the essays and creative responses collected here approach Mendelssohn: we are proud to be sharing with you scholarly writing on a female, working-class, Jewish poet whose work has been neglected, until now. Mendelssohn’s writing demands careful attention, and to be taken on its own terms. We hope that this collection will inspire others to explore Mendelssohn’s work further and we are grateful to our intrepid authors for their ‘attentive concern’ that opens out the ambiguities, opacities, and enchantments of her poems, for playing – as she would call it – ‘real games with books’.²⁴

Notes

- ¹ Sara Crangle (ed.), *I'm Working Here: Collected Poems of Anna Mendelssohn* (Swindon: Shearsman, 2020).
- ² A full programme can be found here: <<https://amsymposium.wordpress.com/programme/>> [Last accessed 01/08/21]
- ³ Anna Mendelssohn, *Implacable Art* (Folio/Equipage: Cambridge, 2000), p. 45. Henceforth IA.
- ⁴ Peter Riley, 'Anna Mendelssohn obituary', *Guardian*, 19 December 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2009/dec/15/anna-mendelssohn-obituary>> [accessed 31 January 2023].
- ⁵ Mendelssohn's opening speech in her defence, 11 October 1972, SxMs109/2/D/5; Jonathon Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counter-Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 277. All references beginning 'SxMs' refer to material housed in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive (1928–2013), University of Sussex Special Collections, The Keep, Brighton, UK.
- ⁶ Malcolm Pithers, 'Anna: leave me alone', *Guardian*, 17 February 1977, p. 24.
- ⁷ Letter to Peter Riley, 8 May 2000, SxMs109/3/A/1/52/3.
- ⁸ Lynne Harries, 'The Northern Debutante: A memoir of Anna Mendelssohn' (unpublished master's thesis, University of East Anglia, 2013), p. 24.
- ⁹ Riley, 'Anna Mendelssohn obituary'; Crangle, *I'm Working Here*, p. 29.
- ¹⁰ Letter to Alan [? WILLIAMS], 9 January 2004, SxMs109/3/A/1/67.
- ¹¹ Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 3–4. See Sheppard's chapter on the British Poetry Revival for a longer discussion of this movement and its contexts.
- ¹² Sean Bonney, "'Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform" – Anna Mendelssohn', *Poetry Project Newsletter*, 226 (February/March 2011), 17–19, p. 17 <<https://www.poetryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/n226.pdf>> [accessed 2 May 2018].
- ¹³ Letter to Marion Stenner Evans, 24 June 2022, SxMs109/3/A/1/59.
- ¹⁴ 'Erato', *I'm Working Here*, p. 368; 'i.m. Laura Riding', *I'm Working Here*, p. 459; 'S', *I'm Working Here*, p. 378.
- ¹⁵ See Grace Lake, *viola tricolor* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1993); Lake, *Bernache Nonnette* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1995); Mendelssohn, 'friday', IA, p. 31; Lake, '**on challenge, positive attitudes and 'les peintres cubistes'**', *viola tricolor* n.p. [p13].
- ¹⁶ 'dulc.', *viola tricolor*, [p2].
- ¹⁷ 'pladd. (you who say either), IA, p. 17; '1:3ng', *I'm Working Here*, p. 390; 'I also wish to refer to my loathing', IA, p. 102.
- ¹⁸ 'basalt.', IA, p. 72.
- ¹⁹ 'a man who snatches a ring', IA, p. 9.
- ²⁰ Viktor Shklovsky, *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar* (Moscow: Sovetsky Pisatel, 1970), p. 230. By 'defamiliarising', we refer to Shklovsky's famous definition of defamiliarisation as an

artistic device – that is, that the object of art is to make objects unfamiliar ('to make the stone stony'), and thus heighten our perception of those objects. Viktor Shlovsky, 'Technique as Device', in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, ed. Lee T Lemon and Marion J Reis (Nebraska: Uni of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12.

²¹ 'a man who snatches a ring', *IA*, p. 9.

²² 'Art made', *IA*, p. 42.

²³ *IA*, p. 46.

²⁴ *IA*, p. 133.

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Competing Interests

Vicky Sparrow was until recently reviews editor of *JBIP*; since completing most of the collection, Eleanor Careless has joined the *JBIP* editorial team.

