

Project title: Anna Mendelssohn & Feminist Vanguardism

Description:

Focused upon the life narrative and archive of British-born writer, artist, and activist Anna Mendelssohn (1948-2009), this project, the recipient of research fellowship funding, aims to challenge the presentation of women within male-defined discourses on avant-garde artistry and leftist militancy. Mendelssohn was affiliated with the British Poetry Revival, a post-Fordist group of New Leftist, experimental poets. Repeatedly anthologised, she authored 15 poetry collections and filled 800 notebooks with life writing, literature, and art. Influenced by international avant-gardes, reflecting often on her Northern, working-class, Jewish roots, Mendelssohn's focus remained feminism and female artists.

Two legal battles parenthesize Mendelssohn's adulthood. The first was the Stoke Newington Eight criminal trial of 1972, then the lengthiest in British history. A student radical, Mendelssohn appeared in Jean-Luc Godard's *British Sounds* (1969) before joining The Angry Brigade, Britain's contribution to a late-1960s transnational wave of urban guerrilla groups. Still lacking the comprehensive histories devoted to their counterparts – America's Weatherman, Germany's Red Army Faction – The Angry Brigade shared their anti-imperialism and less lethal methods, prioritising Irish reunification, social equality, and autonomism.

Pleading innocent, Mendelssohn was sentenced to ten years for conspiracy to cause explosions. A literacy tutor in prison, she was paroled in 1976. In the 1980s, she changed her name to Grace Lake, had three children, and began an English degree at Cambridge University. Unwell and parenting alone, she was supported by a family who ultimately initiated proceedings with the Family Division of Britain's High Court. This second judicial conflict ended in 1988 when, under duress, Mendelssohn's children were made wards of the state, and went to live with the family who became their permanent guardians.

Mendelssohn's peers, Jewish-American urban guerrillas Susan Stern and Jane Alpert, published confessional, fluid autobiographies that appeal to reader sympathy. By contrast, Mendelssohn's life narrative is feminist, polemical, fictionalised, epistolary, and poetic. It remains unpublished, excepting a portion that the project leader, Sara Crangle, edited for the PMLA in 2018. The successful applicant will assist in preparing the unpublished portions of this 400+ page text with a book in view.

Named *What a Performance*, a title derived from its lengthiest extract, the text as planned will be a 160,000-word volume. It will include: Crangle's introductory 45,000-word critical biography situating Mendelssohn's narrative within her political, historical, and aesthetic coordinates; her 90,000-word edited autobiography; and final scholarly editorial notes of 25,000 words detailing textual variants and context.

Method

The successful applicant will work alongside the project leader in the Keep, the institution that houses Sussex Special Collections, which in turn holds Mendelssohn's vast archive. They will proofread the manuscript and read broadly through pertinent portions of Mendelssohn's papers, researching materials to assist with the composition of her biography and the cross-referencing of her autobiographical work. These duties will be combined with research conducted on topics related to Mendelssohn's period and poetics in the University of Sussex Library. Clear, cogent note-taking on those topics will be required, as will weekly reports documenting hours and progress.

Skills / experience required

In the first instance, archival work requires a curious combination of passion and patience.

Applicants should be prepared to read materials fascinating, original, and witty, but also repetitive, and to spend lengthy periods comparing scripts for detail, difference, and error.

In addition, the project leader seeks:

- evidence of strong abilities in writing and research
- the capacity to take notes legibly, accurately, and in an organized fashion
- sustained interests in poetry, experimental writing, and/or twentieth-century avant-gardism

No prior experience in archives is necessary, as training will be provided.

Key readings

Anna Mendelssohn, *I'm Working Here: The Collected Poems of Anna Mendelssohn*, ed. Sara Crangle. Shearsman, 2020.

Anna Mendelssohn, "What a Performance", ed. Sara Crangle, *PMLA*, vol. 133, no. 3, 2018: 610-30.

Sara Crangle, "The Agonies of Ambivalence: Anna Mendelssohn, *la poétesse maudite*", *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 25, no. 3, 461-497.

[a longer list can be provided on request]

Learning Outcomes

The project leader has previously worked with half a dozen students on the Mendelssohn archive. These students have learned a great deal about poetics, feminism, social justice movements, avant-gardism, and contemporary history.

In addition, they have developed archival, research, and editorial methodologies that have fed into graduate work, employment, and in one notable instance, an apprenticeship working on an archive of the first Black Labour MP in the UK.

Sustained student contributions and research will be cited in any publication.

Mendelssohn's work is now being read and studied in India, Germany, Greece, the USA, and the UK; 2023/24 saw the first Mendelssohn exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London. Mendelssohn's legacy is increasingly recognised, and her coordinates are incredibly relevant to contemporary thought and culture.

Supervisor:Sara Crangle.....

Department:English Literature.....