
What Are You Going to Do about the Fact that Anna Mendelssohn Doesn't Like You? Or: How Do We Deal with Bad Feelings in the Commons?

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Abstract

This paper deploys the poetry of Anna Mendelssohn as a case study for thinking through some of the tensions inherent in communal projects. To work together for a 'better happier world', as Mendelssohn did through her political activism, we must also navigate tension, disagreement, burdensomeness, and worse. Such feelings of community alienation are indexed in Mendelssohn's poetry in moments where the reader might feel implicated or even attacked: 'Poetry does not deserve evil keepers'; 'who gave you charge of this country's poetry?'; 'there is no excuse — for approaching me on any matter — other than writing'. While we might not seek a solution to mutual mess — indeed we may question such a drive to sanitisation — this paper asks nonetheless: do poems that resist the consoling balm of easy solidarities give us tactics or ways of working with individual damage within the bigger projects of communal politics? This paper speculatively wonders if the affective states produced within the architecture of the poem enable us to productively share ambivalences and their valences? What structures, or even defences might we need, within and between ourselves — or between ourselves and the poem? And might these work to resist the conservative communitarian drives of the type of community built on nation, retrogressive ideals of the family, or perceptions of race (for example)? This paper borrows from affect theory to seek to interpret Mendelssohn's troubling of community.

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