

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*
A Symposium for Students, Poets, and Scholars
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“(Wo)Man (Critic) is but an ass?:”

The Bottom Line for Gender Criticism on Zukofsky

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*“Oman, art thou lunatics? Hast thou no understandings
 for thy cases and the numbers of the genders?”*

FOREWORD: A few months ago, when the Re-Reading Zukofsky on Bottom Symposium was still in its embryonic stages of development, after giving only the most cursory glance at the intended participants, I immediately complained (accused?): “there’s a big problem if NO women are included.” I should have known better—knowing Thom Donovan as I do I should have known that he had attempted to correct this seeming inequity. But such is the way with so much of the worst manifestations of knee-jerk feminism: assuming that such disparity exists because of misogynistic tendencies, ignorance, sexism, or simple lack of consciousness. Nonetheless, I should have known better.

Fast-forward to a late-night telephone call, early September, from none other than Thom Donovan, lamenting that, having received all of the paper proposals, the symposium still appeared as though it were going to be dominated by male participants. Finally, my previous knee-jerk response—so instinctual, so simple—was rightfully called into question. So the situation was not in fact that tired old story of women being marginalized, silenced, shut out; but, rather, that women had chosen to be shut out (?). I resisted the idea. Women were choosing silence (?) I struggled to come up with potential rationalizations. Women are choosing marginalization (?) Confronted with this possibility, my knees were not so much jerking as shaking.

And so this paper began as part sociological inquiry—investigating why *Bottom* as a text might preclude or discourage investment by women critics—part feminist defense—seeking some complexity to explain away the seemingly reductive essentialism that when it comes to Zukofsky, feminists are more interested in Niedecker—and part prosecutorial indictment—wondering fundamentally, (not to

¹ Quoted from William Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act I, scene iv in Louis Zukofsky and Celia Thaw Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare. Complete edition*. (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2002): 435. All subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

mention more contentiously), if it comes down to assigning blame, does the fault lie with the work or with its readers?

*O madness of discourse,
That cause sets up with and against thyself;
Bi-fold authority, where reason can revolt (304).*

The 2002 Complete Edition of *Bottom: On Shakespeare* marks a critical moment in Zukofsky scholarship for, in restoring Louis's volume in tandem with Celia's companion composition, readers are presented not merely with a text and its appendix (as the 1963 University of California edition implied) but rather, for the first time, the *complete* text as it was intended by its authors (emphasized plural). The critical significance of this restoration, unfortunately, has yet to be fully acknowledged.² Lest my argument be confused with other debates regarding male-female collaborations (such as those championing Dorothy Wordsworth, Vivien Eliot, or Marcia Nardi), let me be clear that I am *not* espousing the inclusion of Celia's text merely because writing by a woman—any writing, any woman—is by definition interesting. Rather, the case of Celia's volume being excised from the 1963 publication of *Bottom* is quite significant, not only as a record of a historical and sociopolitical assumption that the woman's writing is dispensable, expendable, and therefore superfluous; but,

² A comparative study of how spouses have been handled by feminist and gender critics regarding other poets demonstrates the degree to which this crucial aspect of Zukofsky scholarship has been overlooked. Note for example the parallel relationship of Alice B. Toklas to Gertrude Stein's poetic production. As typist, secretary, muse, domestic partner, and lover, Toklas's contribution to Stein's *oeuvre* has been the subject of countless articles, dissertations, and full-length books. Celia's collaborative contribution to Louis's work, however, remains generally undiscussed. Instead, feminist critics have been most likely to reference Celia in demonizing discussions of Zukofsky's relationship with Lorine Niedecker. Indeed, one might think that feminist criticism never moved beyond its early days of vilifying, demonizing, lamenting, and attacking male writers in order to open the canon to women writers. Of course, I am being too harsh and the crucial work of recuperating women writers proved a necessary first phase for feminist literary critics. But have we not moved beyond these early efforts? Are we still so blinded by essentialist categories that feminist and gender issues only seem relevant when we are discussing a *woman* writer??

in fact, the omission of Celia's volume marks a misreading of *Bottom*—by critics and editors alike—as well as a fundamental misreading of Zukofsky's poetics of the “wedded word.”³

It is crucial to note that—even if Celia's volume of *Bottom* remained excised from Louis's—the entirety of *Bottom* problematizes, complicates, and knots up questions of gender categories. And, considering the primary subject is Shakespeare's works, isn't this interpellation of gender appropos? From star-crossed lovers to cross-dressing, consider how central to Shakespearean drama is the blurring of gender, the dramatic complications implicit in masculine and feminine categories, the comic and tragic predicaments stemming from fundamental questions as to the engendering of our roles as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, men and women. Can we even imagine reading, teaching, or writing on *any* Shakespeare play—from *Antony and Cleopatra* to *Venus and Adonis*—without contemplating how gender operates at the heart of drama? How then have we missed this crucial (gender) play within the (scholarly) play of *Bottom*?

ELIZABETH. [*striking the tablets from his hand*] Your tables begin to anger me, sir.
I am not here to write your plays for you.
SHAKESPEAR. You are here to inspire them, madam.
For this, among the rest, were you ordained. (212).

In his “Foreword” to the 2002 edition, Bob Perelman notes that in “Zukofsky's first major poem, ‘Poem beginning ‘The,’ Shakespeare is a figure of disidentification,” quoting the lines of Shylock:

262 It is engendered in the eyes...

266 I, Senora, am the Son of the Respected Rabbi (Perelman viii).

“I, Senora,” of course could be read as this “Son of the Respected Rabbi” addressing a female (Spanish) listener / reader. But, considering Zukofsky, in the eponymous role of Bottom, is the

³ To underscore that I am *not* here advocating an area of scholarship focused solely on Celia Zukofsky, (as if feminist criticism only pertains to female writers), I am resisting the desire to offer a reading of her second volume. This emphasis on Louis's first volume, then, hopefully reinforces my assertion that gender issues are a fundamental aspect of *his* work not only in *Bottom: On Shakespeare* but indeed

master weaver who weaves multitextured threads into his text, this assertion might be read similarly as ‘I [am a] Senora as well as a Son’ which is to say ‘I am a woman as much as I am a man’.⁴ Such complications of gender roles recur both in Shakespeare as well as in Zukofsky.

Consider Hamlet’s problematizing of his own gendered identity:

That I, the **son** of a dear father murder’d...

Must, **like a whore**, unpack my heart with words (23; emphasis added).

Throughout Part One, Zukofsky references numerous instances of blurred gender distinctions. Sonnet 116, “Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,” (14) in which love is gendered masculine, appears only pages before a quotation from *Love’s Labor’s Lost* in which love is gendered feminine: “love, first learned in a lady’s eyes” (17). In this seemingly simple strategy, Zukofsky disrupts any assumptions of binary logic. What appear to be mere asides, such as “the name Adriana contains that of Adrian—it is immaterial which was thought of first” (19), demand closer attention for, in Zukofsky’s music, there are no accidentals.

My brain I’ll prove the female to my soul,

My soul the father: and these two beget

A generation of still-breeding thoughts. (69).

According to this rubric of female-gendered brain and male-gendered soul, it is the collaborative efforts of brain *and* soul, mind *and* spirit, which together beget thinking. Indeed, doesn’t *Bottom* perfectly demonstrate the work of a mighty intellect spurred on by spiritual love for the work? Though mind alone might be able to sustain 20 years devoted to producing a single work of literary criticism, we are undoubtedly aware of what such soulless works look

throughout his poetry and prose, an area of Zukofsky scholarship that remains paltry if not non-existent.

⁴ Perelman adds by way of interpretation that lines 266-67 “are quoted from the end of Heine’s ‘Donna Clara’” (Perelman viii). But of course, Zukofsky, as someone with a conflicted relationship to his Jewish identity might also fancy himself, however problematically, as the “rabidly antisemitic maiden...seduced by an attractive outsider who then proclaims his Jewish identity.” In this case, perhaps we might read Zukofsky as the outsider to the Anglo-dominated Western Civilization canon of literature who seeks to seduce *the* most canonized, most established, most white-bred wit of all wits: William Shakespeare.

like. Zukofsky employs the language of marriage repeatedly to wed his writing to that of Shakespeare.

Like Prospero's old brain troubled for the young it would see wed and holding 'true'
marriage at bay, the lines voice a crossed music at once carrying meditation at flood tide
and holding it at bay. (183).

This notion of "crossed music" provides an interesting framework for considering how Celia's musical compositions intersect with Louis's poetics. Even more significantly, Zukofsky's quotational method demonstrates that this marital vocabulary, this thinking of writing as marriage—of poet to muse, of influential predecessor to protégé, of collaborator to collaborator—pervades so much of the textual material married to his own.

*A hand plucking the harpstrings merging their twining chords...
wedded words...on the dim tide—* (214).

It is particularly interesting to note, considering Zukofsky's oft-quoted statement of his poetics in terms of speech and music in 'A', how often his discussions of music in *Bottom* are specifically gendered. In Part Two, Zukofsky's formulation of "upper limit music" as a female-gendered entity becomes explicit immediately in the title: "*Music's master*: notes for Her music to *Pericles* and for a graph of culture." As if prophetically foreseeing that the significance of "Her music" might be overlooked by his readers, Zukofsky begins this section by underscoring:

THE *H* IN THE TITLE PRESUMES AFTER SHAKESPEARE THAT *Her* MEANS
Music: Herself! (33).

Once again announcing this equivalence, Zukofsky quotes from *Pericles*:

SIMONIDES. Sir, you are Music's master.

PERICLES. The worst of all **her** scholars, (36; emphasis added).

That all of Zukofsky's volume in three parts serves as point to Celia's counterpoint cannot be emphasized enough. That, in this way, *Bottom* actualizes the collaborative union of speech to music, quotational string to musical "string, sweet husband to another" (262) cannot be sufficiently stressed.

In the ‘Q’ section of “An Alphabet of Subjects,” Zukofsky emphasizes that this text operates as collaboration or wedded word by posing the Shakespearean question:

‘*Od’s me! Qu’ai-j’oublie?*’

only to answer it in Celia’s voice:

She who typed this assured me: *Nothing!* (436).⁵

In this playful exchange, Zukofsky evokes Shakespeare’s original question, “what have I forgotten” only to assert resoundingly that nothing has been forgotten. Alas, the entirety of *Bottom* attests to the fact that Shakespeare is far from forgotten. And, in the same way, neither can Celia be forgotten. Zukofsky reminds his readers that, as the “She who typed this,” Celia remains ever-present in the text. It is through her eyes that all of the text passes before our own eyes have the chance to read it. It is through her fingers, striking the keys of the instrumental typewriter, that the text is produced. It is through her ears that Zukofsky’s question rings; and, finally, it is her voice which answers Zukofsky before any other just as his voice answers Shakespeare unlike any other voice before or since.

As with so much of the debate regarding Shakespeare’s authorship, it becomes abundantly clear in *Bottom* that there is no *one* author; rather, the text emerges from multiple voices woven together to make the music of wedded word. A facile misreading of this multiple authorship might condemn Zukofsky for appropriating the voice of Celia, silencing her, relegating her nameless, faceless, merely a ‘She’. But such a knee-jerk indictment would be to fundamentally misread not only Zukofsky’s conception of his marriage but also his poetics. Zukofsky quotes Peirce to underscore the relation of marriage and method:

The genius of man’s logical method should be loved and revered as his bride, whom he has chosen from all the world. He need not condemn the others; on the contrary, he may honour them deeply, and in doing so he only honours her the more. But she is the

⁵ At the risk of facile observation, the poignant irony that the quote which directly precedes this allusion to Celia is excised from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* certainly would not have been lost on Zukofsky. Also, consider that ‘q’, as the letter which never stands alone, is married to ‘u’ or the ‘you’ of direct address.

one that he has chosen....And...he knows that he was right in making that choice....And...he will work and fight for her...and will strive to be the worthy knight and champion of her from the blaze of whose splendours he draws his inspiration and his courage. (256).

Just as Zukofsky ‘chooses’ Shakespeare to weave into his own words, wedding the two bodies of work together, so too, Zukofsky chooses Celia (and she him) as fugal point to counterpoint, as lower limit speech to upper limit music.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that the question of forgetting proves a painful reminder that critics and readers have indeed forgotten the ‘She’ that Zukofsky chooses. For almost 40 years, her volume has been forgotten. Let us not continue such critical blindness and, at last, commit ourselves to hearing her presence in the text.

“For there is the happiness—...

of an exercise by Bach for Anna Magdalena—” (443)

Zukofsky ends his volume by referencing a male and female partnership, a marriage in life, in love, and, crucially, in art. It need not be emphasized that Bach holds significant import to Zukofsky’s thinking and life’s work. Therefore, the point need not be belabored here that referencing Bach and his *wife* as the segue between Zukofsky’s volume and *his* wife’s volume suggests a strong desire for parallel there. If this partnership has been overlooked, in the end, this oversight suggests a fundamental misreading of the text that the Zukofskys—*both* Louis *and* Celia—composed. If, on the other hand, this discussion has been simply delayed until some later moment in time, until some moment when more work will have been done on *Bottom* then let me announce quite explicitly: the moment is now. Let this be the moment called BEGINNING:

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