



STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (190)

TEXT: *To Keep the House and Shut One's Mouth* (2015)

AUTHOR: Clara Janés

EDITOR: Anne Pasero

PART 1: CONTEXT & CRITICAL ANALYSIS

A Transcultural Journey Through Women's Writing

To Keep the House and Shut One's Mouth by Clara Janés (b. 1940), an acclaimed Spanish poet, essayist, and member of the Spanish Royal Academy, is a profound exploration of women's literary contributions across diverse cultures and historical periods. This treatise embarks on a journey from ancient Akkadian priestesses to contemporary Afghan poets, highlighting significant, often overlooked, writings by women. Janés challenges the conventional literary canon by revealing the enduring presence and impact of female voices throughout history.

The Paradox of "The Other" and Female Agency

The work critically examines the concept of the "feminine as the Other," a notion often associated with Simone de Beauvoir. Janés, through her analysis of Rosa Chacel's reflections, argues that while physical differences exist between sexes, women have historically been capable of performing the same tasks and confronting risks, often subverting their prescribed societal roles. She traces this agency from prehistoric times when tasks were undifferentiated, to later periods where the invention of hunting began to define gender-specific roles.

Global Perspectives on Women's Literary Expression

Janés explores various societal contexts where women's voices emerged:

Ancient Mesopotamia: Featuring Enheduanna, the first known poet by name, an Akkadian high priestess who asserted her voice despite a patriarchal milieu.

Ancient Egypt: Where women held significant societal roles, as evidenced by legal equality in marriage and deeply emotional love poetry.

Ancient Greece and Rome: Highlighting poets like Sappho and other female writers who enjoyed periods of autonomy and freedom of expression.

East Asia (China, Korea, Japan): Unpacking the paradox of "women's writing" (e.g., Nushu, sijo, kana) as a separate, often undervalued, literary sphere, yet giving rise to masterpieces like Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*.

Medieval and Renaissance Europe, and the Arab-Andalusian World: Revealing women troubadours, warriors, and scholars who navigated complex social landscapes.

Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance

The book delves into the erotic and spiritual dimensions of women's writing, from the suggestive metaphors in the *Song of Songs* to the candid expressions of love and desire by poets like Li Qingzhao and Ono no Komachi. Janés also examines how women resisted societal norms, whether through the freedom enjoyed by Taoist priestesses in China or the subtle defiance woven into their verses. Her work ultimately proposes a contemporary analytical approach to reclaim and integrate these past voices into our present and future understanding of literature and feminism.



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PART 2: TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

The Concept of "The Other" and the Feminine:

Discuss Rosa Chacel's and Simone de Beauvoir's perspectives on "woman as the Other." How does Clara Janés engage with and expand upon this concept through her historical survey of women's writing?

Historical and Cultural Contexts of Women's Writing:

Compare and contrast the conditions under which women wrote in different societies (e.g., ancient Egypt, China, Japan, Medieval Europe). What factors (social status, religion, access to education) facilitated or hindered their literary expression?

Language and Gender:

Explore the concept of "women's writing" (e.g., Nushu in China, sijo in Korea, kana in Japan). How did the development of distinct writing systems for women impact their literary autonomy and the reception of their works?

Eroticism and Spirituality in Female Poetry:

Analyze the presence of eroticism and spirituality in the poetic traditions discussed by Janés (e.g., Song of Songs, Li Qingzhao, Ono no Komachi). How do these themes challenge or conform to conventional expectations of women's writing?

The Role of Editors and Translators:

Discuss the role of literary figures who translated or edited early women's writings. How might their interventions have shaped the public perception and survival of these texts?

Reclaiming Literary History:

How does Janés's project in *To Keep the House and Shut One's Mouth* contribute to a broader feminist project of reclaiming literary history? What are the implications of her "contemporary approach to analysis" for understanding the past?

PART 3: SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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PART 4: QUIZ BANK (Multiple Choice)

Which ancient Akkadian figure is identified as the first known poet by name, who was also a high priestess?

- A) Sappho
- B) Murasaki Shikibu
- C) Enheduanna
- D) Ono no Komachi

Correct Answer: C

According to Clara Janés, what historical evidence does Rosa Chacel provide to challenge the notion of "woman as the Other"?

- A) Women's exclusion from war expeditions
- B) Women's physical strength compared to men
- C) Women's ability to perform the same tasks as men in prehistoric times
- D) Women's unique role in managing households

Correct Answer: C

In which ancient society did women possess significant autonomy, including equal marriage rights and the ability for either spouse to initiate divorce without guilt?

- A) China (during the T'ang Dynasty)
- B) Japan (Heian period)
- C) Ancient Egypt
- D) Medieval Spain

Correct Answer: C

What is the literary term for the Japanese "power of words" that influenced the development of female writing?

- A) Waka
- B) Kana
- C) Otodama
- D) Hanji

Correct Answer: C

Which major work of universal literature is cited as being written by a Japanese woman, Murasaki Shikibu, in the 10th century?

- A) *The Pillow Book*
- B) *The Tale of Genji*
- C) *The Song of Songs*
- D) *The Alexiad*

Correct Answer: B

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