

*Clara Janés*

TO KEEP THE HOUSE  
AND  
SHUT ONE'S MOUTH:  
OF WOMEN AND  
LITERATURE

Translation & Notes

Anne Pasero

 - STOCKCERO - 

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# TO KEEP THE HOUSE AND SHUT ONE'S MOUTH

Because just as nature ... made women so  
that, while shut in, they could keep house,  
so were they obliged to shut their mouths.

FRAY LUIS DE LEÓN

## I- THE PRISM

Fate, that acts as an accomplice, has offered me the following paragraph:

“That the Feminine is the Other! But, my heavens, what is the historical evidence that demonstrates that? What is the text [ ... ] that allows that to be seen? Is it evident in Greek tragedy or in the Bible? Is there a special supplement of the *Decalogue* just for the *Other*?” (11). It’s a phrase from Rosa Chacel, from her essay “Late Commentary on Simone de Beauvoir”, that, from the beginning, points to several ideas that invite reflection:

The *OTHER*, well, for Rosa Chacel is not the feminine, and nevertheless, she herself, who wrote perhaps the most lucid and unusual pages that have been written about the burning theme of woman’s reality in our times, repeated over and over again that woman is different from man, that her body is different as much in its possibilities for the sexual act as in that which has to do with offspring, from which her position in society is derived. In spite of that, she pointed out—and demonstrated, in her book *Saturnal*—that we are in a historical moment in which major changes are being produced that, in part, are focused on precisely the coming together of the sexes, not because of the masculinization of woman but because of the feminization of man.

The difference between man and woman has always ex-



isted; it is evident from their bodies. Nevertheless, going back to pre-history, there once was a time in which –apart from the procreating factor– man and woman would accomplish the same tasks. This took place in the arboreal nests period, when man was still the gatherer and would spend the entire day looking for food and, when night fell, would climb up into the trees to sleep. Man and woman, pure nomads, would walk with their children on their back—as long as these were not able to walk– and would gather berries from the bushes, and then, when dark fell, just like some animals, they would climb up to the tree-tops and rest among the branches. Their life, hard and monotonous, was short, not extending beyond 18 or 20 years.

Things changed as soon as some respite was discovered when hunting was invented: Women did not have –in general– the necessary strength to confront the big animals, and, in addition, they would often be pregnant. From this moment on, everyday tasks of one or the other sex began to be defined. At the beginning there was nothing established, this happened much later. And when that initial necessity was forgotten, the distribution of tasks seemed like something imposed from outside and determinative.

Returning to Rosa Chacel, to the afore-mentioned essay, it is interesting to underscore her response to a phrase by Simone de Beauvoir, cornerstone of the question. The French writer says the following: “The worst curse that weighs on woman is that of having been excluded from war expeditions. Not giving his life but risking it is how man has been elevated to superior to animals; for that

reason, superiority has been granted, not to the sex that procreates, but to the one that kills" (12). And Chacel replies: "It is evident that from there stems the supremacy, the real supremacy of the male, and then certainly the female would be something else, she would be *"the Other"*, she would not ever be able to feel close to her fellow man if she were not able, in all respects, to carry out that specifically human act of risking one's life voluntarily. But it is not this way: Woman, without exception, can do it; every woman from every class or race is equipped to do so" (12).

The implacable lucidity of the Valladolid writer does not stop there; she continues to open up the way through that intricate pathway: "Of course, what counts for the matter is the real fact of warrior expeditions, but is it that woman was excluded from them? Simone de Beauvoir does not conceive that, for such a number of women, so extensive that one could almost say *the woman*, and women so well constituted mentally, awake, free, the mission of procreating might make sense" (12-13). Effectively, the female was not totally excluded from warrior expeditions; there were, including in the Middle Ages, feminine orders of chivalry.

Rosa Chacel does not give in: "Man assumes the risk for his life and woman assumes the *responsibility* for introducing any number of lives into the world". This is a point that, in reality, is of great importance, because given historical changes—the way of making war—precisely because with each succeeding year the responsibility falls on both sexes, since the risks have been modified. On the other hand, the autonomy of women when confronted with ma-

ternity, their possibility of decision-making, makes this such that it does not suppose slavery for one's entire life: having ten or fifteen children is not comparable to having one. In antiquity, only the women who were not completely tied to their tasks, that is, those from the upper class or nuns, were able to become cultured, and these could demonstrate their autonomy and creative forces.

When Ana Comneno (17<sup>th</sup> Century) decides to undertake her father's biography, that of the Byzantine Emperor Alejo I Comneno, she starts by declaring that she is a cultured woman and has not left rhetoric aside. Such a declaration should not be necessary because, for that person who reads her work, *The Alexiada*, it becomes evident that the author knows her Classical writers, and what writing is, and also that she is a great writer. I say *writer* (as opposed to *woman writer*) because in that immense book of hers she confronts us with a historical process, through court intrigues and, above all, battle stories, and nothing that is particularly feminine comes across in her pages.

The (woman) poet Sappho, many centuries before, did not need to justify her poems in any way, nor the fact of singing or reciting with complete freedom. Her tone and her perspective were, simply, those of her contemporaries. And going back still further, we could almost say that woman is not *the Other* but rather *the One*. To begin, 2,500 years before Christ we find the first known poetic voice, which is precisely feminine: the Akkadian priestess Enheduanna, firm in enunciating and denouncing. Sometime later, in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, and taking, as in time, a leap in space, the first great novel of universal literature, ac-

According to the way in which we understand the genre today, is the work of the Japanese woman writer Murasaki Shikibu: *The History of Genji*, that has been compared with Cervantes' *Don Quixote of la Mancha*, and with Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It offers us a backdrop of the society of their time that does not cause us to think about the needle and thread.

During the period of arboreal nests, neither man nor woman knew which was his or her reality, because they were not able to see themselves, and in following periods, when each step taken by those who belonged to one or the other sex was a necessary one, such a theme—to see oneself as male or female—was not considered. Only when the reason that had induced one to establish different conducts according to sex seemed so remote, when that fact became alienating, was it revealed through a new perspective. This perspective achieved high levels of sophistication during the Baroque period, a period in which misogyny was merged with the covering up of the senses, in such a way that it affected forms. Thus did disguise open up a pathway, and at the same time, an incipient feminism.

Today, the panoramas had opened up as if by means of a great cornerstone, and it is logical that women writers would focus their gaze, among other things, toward this aspect of the landscape that surrounds them. The consequence of this vision turns out to be particularly interesting in societies that continue to be subjected to ancestral situations or that have just achieved a certain degree of freedom. We find important examples among contemporary Arab women writers, many of whom include over-

whelming books of testimony in their production.

This outlining of the facts and this consciousness are related to phases of development that different peoples have reached. There are still some who find themselves in a previous state, subjected to less “elaborated” cultures. Nevertheless, once the moment has arrived, women throw themselves into the struggle running as much risk as in other acts of life. Curiously, it can happen, as it does in some cases, that they may be creators while man does not do anything other than prepare himself for war. I am referring to Afghan women of the Pashtun language, those who, while being illiterate, are depositories of an extraordinary traditional lyric. In a similar mix of historical strata as seen in present-day situations, to look at the past and its successions can result sometimes, at the very least, as a guiding principle.

Lacan affirmed that the entire problem of the human being resides in the fact that we cannot find a response to the question “what is it to be a man and what is it to be a woman”, since neither men nor women are moved as much by sex as animals (15). This is exactly what happens: the element of reason grants us great possibilities of proximity. The Syrian-Lebanese poet Adonis wrote: “Reason is something that we all share, and it’s that which we all know. This is what reason offers which is why it does not function as a cognitive method. To know is to know the unknown, and that which is different. We are equal in the realm of reason but different as regards the body. This experience can be seen represented in dreams, in desire, in ecstasy, in movement, in dynamics” (15). Adonis was not

referring to the sexes, but instead his lucid reflection introduces us into the following reality: Differences as much as similarities constitute a true richness that we should not easily renounce.

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