

Cloelia: Puella Romana

The Latin Novella, *Cloelia: Puella Romana*, written from the powerful perspective of a small, insignificant girl, calls out the unsettling pattern of gender roles in Roman society. Growing up in a standard Roman family, Cloelia is taught the necessities of making clothes, staying home, and upholding “pudicitia” (chastity), which was the expectation of all Roman women. From a young age, Cloelia is troubled by the way women were brushed away in society, instead she remained inspired by her mother, who spoke about powerful stories of warrior women. The stories included accounts of mythological figures such as the famous story of the warrior woman Camilla who was dedicated to the warrior goddess Athena. Cloelia refuses to conform to Roman expectation, “I was wanting to do great things, just like in the stories”(Arnold, 2).

As the novella climbs to its climax, Cloelia finds out her family friend Lucretia was raped by the king Sextus Tarquinius Superbus’ son. Although she was in no wrong and forced upon without consent, she was still blamed for his actions. As a result, Lucretia commits suicide, rather than face the pain and humiliation placed upon her after his wrongs. In Roman culture, it is important to note that, “pudicitia,” was expected highly of Roman women. However, men were blameless if they took part of these actions, but women expected cruel consequences. After much controversy over Lucretia’s death and the poorly handled situation, the Romans overthrow both the corrupted government and king. As the king is pushed into exile, the neighboring Etruscans find Rome in their weakest moment and begin to attack. King Porsenna leads his men into Rome. A brave, Roman boy named Mucius attempts to kill Porsenna, but ends up killing a scribe instead. As Mucius is caught he is ordered to be burned, but through his fearlessness he puts his hand willingly into the fire. Porsenna is impressed by his bravery and agrees to let him go with a

truce that he brings ten Roman boys and ten Roman girls sent as hostages. Cloelia is one of the ten girls who is taken as Porsenna's hostages, but implements a plan to escape. Using all the courage she was taught as a young girl, she leads the nine other girls out of the enemy camp, swimming across the Tiber river back to Rome. After finally returning home, she realizes she broke Porsenna's and Mucius's truce. Cloelia, alone, returns to remain as a captive, thus sacrificing herself for her country, allowing the other ten boys and girls to be set free. Ultimately, Cloelia, a small insignificant girl with "dignitas," reunites the peace between the Etruscans and the Romans. The story of Cloelia remains a legend and known as one of the first early feminists in history.