

Camilla and cloelia – history's early feminists and heroines essay



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The Oxford American College Dictionary (Lindberg, ed. , 2002) defines feminism as “ the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social and economic equality to men” (Lindberg 1346). Dating back to antiquity, the writer’s of history have provided stories of females deemed “ feminists” or “ warrior women” because they challenged the traditional views of women as the “ weaker sex” and confinement to roles as wives, daughters, mothers and caretakers. Two important examples are Camilla in Virgil’s “ The Aeneid” and Cloelia in Titus Livius’ (Livy) “ The History of Rome.”

Despite the significant contributions made by both women and their historical designation as heroes, their tales are limited to a few pages in two of history’s most lengthy and enduring epics about the evolution of the Roman civilization. This essay will discuss how political and social upheaval - war - during Rome’s development:

1.) provided people of strength, namely Camilla and Cloelia, an otherwise unavailable opportunity to display their character and abilities, 2.) demonstrated that despite the contributions of these women, they were viewed by their contemporaries as exceptional and unusual, and that perceptions of women changed little during the writing of either epic, and 3.) showed that these women did not set out to be advocates for the equality of women, but they inadvertently became “ feminists” because they were heroic people fighting for what they valued.

In “ The Aeneid”, the author Virgil recounts the tale of the Latins, ancestors of the Romans, fight a defensive war against Trojan invaders. One of the

war's most significant battles - " War in Latium" - involves Camilla. This battle occurs at the " future site of Rome" and drew groups of people who, otherwise, would not have been involved in major skirmishes, but were skilled. Virgil describes some of them as people " who ploughed vales" or " worked with their ploughshares" (Virgil 200). He also calls them a " cloud of foot-soldiers" that allied themselves with Turnus (Virgil 199). Virgil first mentions Camilla here in Book 7 as one of Turnus' followers. He deems Camilla as a person of exceptional qualities, who could " outdistance the winds" by foot, skim " over the tops of uncut corn stalks without ever harming their delicate ears as she ran" (Virgil 200).

Virgil discusses Camilla's significant skills in greater detail in Book 11. Again, he describes how Camilla is given an unforeseen opportunity to display her courage and strength. As the Trojans attack the City of Latinus, Camilla offers to directly attack the Trojans, while Turnus sets a trap for them. She plunges into battle, saying to Turnus, " If the brave have a right to self-confidence, then I, having the courage, offer to meet the Horse of Aeneas' army and advance alone against the Etruscan cavaliers..." (Virgil 294).

In " The History of Rome: Vol. I, Book 2," the author Livy describes the battle between the Etruscans and Romans. In this skirmish, Cloelia, a female hero like Camilla, is given an extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate her physical skills and bravery. She exhibits self-sacrifice in an unusual situation - when warring groups take hostages. Livy states, " The Etruscan camp was situated not far from the river, and the maiden Cloelia, one of the hostages, escaped, unobserved, through the guards and at the head of her sister

hostages, swam across the river amidst a shower of javelins and restored them all safe to their relatives.”

Cloelia, thus, saves not only herself, but her fellow hostages. Despite Camilla's and Cloelia's obvious contributions, their stories also provide examples of the gender discrimination that took place during their eras. Their achievements did not signal a change in how women were viewed. When Virgil first mentions Camilla, he notes that people who witnessed her talents were surprised because she was a woman. For example, Virgil notes, “ A gathering of mothers and all the young men who were streaming from the houses and fields looked forth admiringly at her as she passed, in open-mouthed astonishment...” (Virgil 200).

In another example, Camilla has proven her prowess on the battlefield, but one of her enemies, Aunus' son refuses to acknowledge her skills because she is a female. He states, “ What is so marvelous about being a woman warrior when you have so powerful a horse on which to rely? Set aside your means of flight...and dare to meet me hand to hand on level ground. You will soon see who conceited vanity it is which is bringing disaster on her” (Virgil 301). Additionally, when Virgil discusses Camilla, he always calls her “ maid” or “ maiden,” a reference to her virtue or virginal status, a valued characteristic in young, unmarried women.

Cloelia experiences similar gender discrimination. In her story, her contemporaries are surprised, but grudgingly acknowledge her contributions. Author Livy notes that the Romans did not expect women to exhibit qualities like valor and strength of character. For example, Livy notes, “ Seeing that

the Romans so respected courage, women too were inspired to carry out acts of heroism..." Livy also states Cloelia's acts of heroism brought an end to the fighting: " Peace was re-established, and the Romans rewarded this act of courage - new in a woman - with a new kind of honour, an equestrian statue."

He infers that the Romans believed that Cloelia's courageousness was out of the ordinary, that women did not usually exhibit valor like her. Finally, Livy describes Cloelia as a " maiden," emphasizing the value placed on the virtue of young, unmarried women. Camilla and Cloelia are also historical symbols of feminism, demonstrating that women were as capable as men, even in battle. They, however, both set out to simply fight for what they believed, not with the goal of changing opportunities for women. Camilla simply wanted to assist Turnus in protecting what would become Rome from Trojan invaders.

Virgil describes Camilla as she fights the Etruscans. He states, " Camilla rode armed with her quiver, exulting like an Amazon,...having one breast exposed for freedom in the fight" (Virgil 299). He mentions that she used spears and a battle axe with great skill and might. He also says the following: " Oh! Furious Maid, whom first and whom last did your spear unhorse? And how many were the strong young men whose bodies you stretched dying in the ground? " Virgil even mentions that every time she released her spear, " a Phrygian warrior fell" and that she killed " two Trojans of massive strength" (Virgil 300).

Cloelia performs an act of bravery to save her life and that of her fellow hostages. When the king learns of Cloelia's successful escape, he is angry, but develops a grudging respect for her. Livy states, " his anger turned to admiration and he said that her undertaking had been greater than that of a Cocles or a Mucius, and gave it to understand that, although he would consider the non-restoration of the hostage equivalent to breaking the treaty, he would nonetheless return her unharmed."

Livy also notes that the king extols Cloelia and is willing to negotiate the release of some of the Roman hostages. He notes, " They [the hostages] were brought before her and it is said she picked the boys, the appropriate choice for her young age, and by agreement of the hostages themselves it was the right thing. " Thus, Cloelia chose to bargain for the release of the hostages that would mean the most to Rome. In conclusion, the tales of Camilla and Cloelia indicate that crisis (for example, war) in a culture can provide opportunities for change.

However, entrenched social and cultural mores - like the perception of women and value placed on characteristics like virtue - are difficult to alter. Neither character deserves the designation " manly woman. " Instead, history should applaud their efforts at greater length because they are strong, exceptional people who have done the following: 1.) demonstrated their abilities and strength of character through great self-sacrifice to aid others in need, 2.) experienced success despite gender discrimination, and 3.) unintentionally become " feminists" or advocates for women's rights.