Women face a wide array of expectations from others every day. Every person, in every country and era, has a different idea of what role women should play in their families, society, and in the workplace. No matter which path a woman chooses, others will tell her she should do it differently. If she dedicates her life to her husband, children, and home, she will encounter those who say she settled and conformed to tradition. If she decides not to have children, others will say that she did not fulfill her natural purpose and, instead, pursued her selfish desires. If she chooses both family and career, she will hear from all sides in regards to how she fails in the area they deem the most important. If she does not look physically attractive, society will tell her she needs to try harder. If she has physical beauty, she must vie for respect. If she demonstrates too much compassion, she will suffer those who accuse her of weakness, but, if she does not show enough, people will call her an ice queen. She will never win the war of public opinion. It requires an exceptional woman to break through the noise and dare to live a life that defies societal norms to bring positive change to herself and those around her. Cloelia, a heroine of ancient Rome, stands as one such woman.

Cloelia lived during the sixth century at a time when women had no rights of which to speak. Men exclusively dominated all roles in government and society. Women seldom dared to step outside the pre-ordained boundaries that had been set for them, and, when they did, they often regretted it because of the backlash they received. Before Rome became a great empire, in
its early beginnings, Cloelia broke all the society norms and disregarded the role that her
countrymen expected her to play, in favor of the well-being of herself and the women with her.
She lived in Rome which had not yet found its footing and struggled to survive in the vicious
world of those vying for world domination. Many imperials set their eyes on Rome as a prize to
add to their territory, and, as a result, the infant Roman population endured numerous military
attacks. Yet, Rome did not fall. One after the other, dictators with large military advantages
encountered an intangible force they had not entered into their strategic calculations: heart.

Even to this day, the stories of early Roman heroism permeate art and literature. Many
works of art portray the Roman soldier, Horatius Cocles, who bravely stood his ground at the end
of the bridge over the Tiber River leading into Rome during “the second or third year of the
Republic” (Roller 8). When he realized the enemy would overcome them, he ordered his fellow
soldiers to destroy the bridge and gave them time to do so while he incurred many wounds and
died to keep all enemy soldiers from crossing the bridge into Rome. In the journal article
“Exemplarity in Roman Culture: The Cases of Horatius Cocles and Cloelia,” Matthew Roller
quotes Polybius in observing that Cocles’ adversaries felt “astounded not so much by his strength
as by his resolution and boldness” (Roller 2). The enemy encroachment, led by Lars Porsenna,
set up camp directly across the Tiber River from Rome and took a reprieve.

A Roman youth, Gaius Marius Scaevola, seized the opportunity to attempt an
assassination on Porsenna. He snuck into the enemy camp and killed the man he mistakenly
identified as Porsenna. Scaevola immediately found himself standing face-to-face with Porsenna
who still lived and felt enraged about the fact that his attendant has just been killed.
Unabashedly, Scaevola defiantly told Porsenna that three-hundred men had been assigned to kill
him and they were prepared to risk their lives to sneak into camp one-by-one until one
succeeded. To prove “his indifference to the prospect of torture,” Scaevola placed his hand in a nearby fire and held it there as it burned (Charipova 454). Porsenna, realizing the Romans would not easily submit and posed a real threat to his life, offered a peace treaty.

The Romans and Porsenna came to a peace agreement which demanded that Porsenna immediately retreat from Rome, but also stipulated that “the Romans guarantee this truce by sending as hostages to Porsenna the young sons and daughters of leading families” (Roller 28). Cloelia, along with nineteen others, found herself chosen as one of those hostages, a living sacrifice given to satisfy a hungry tyrant. Without warning, Rome required Cloelia to forgo her dreams and desires. Her future now consisted of traveling to a distant land and enacting the role dictated to her by a hostile people. She faced the possibility of never seeing her friends, family, or countrymen again. Hostages taken as war prizes often endured tragic rape and abuse, a fact that must have weighed heavily on Cloelia’s mind. The walk to Porsenna’s camp must have been a sad and arduous one. As a woman, she held no formal rights; society expected her to take the fate dealt to her without complaint. Perhaps inspired by the courageous acts of Cocles and Scaevola, Cloelia decided to refuse the fateful plight handed to her, and plan her escape, despite the inevitable backlash she would receive from both her enemies and fellow Romans.

Porsenna established his camp directly across the river from Rome. Cloelia could see her home, but it eluded her. The Tiber River flowed in between Cloelia and her freedom, and its dangers could have been enough to prevent Cloelia from attempting to leave the enemy camp. Near Rome, the Tiber stretches about 300 feet wide and up to 18 feet deep, and “the river is never fordable in or near Rome” because “during heavy rains and floods the waters sometimes have risen more than 30 feet above their ordinary level” (“Papal State” 197). Despite the perilous conditions, Cloelia plotted her escape across the river, along with the other women with her. The
first obstacle she faced resided in convincing the other woman to participate in her plan. Matthew Roller notes that many accounts of Cloelia’s deeds accredit her “with compelling rhetorical skills by which she urged the other hostages along” (41). Most likely, the other women did not immediately warm up to her plan. These women lived under tremendous expectations to conform to the orders conveyed to them. Cloelia proved to have a strong gift of persuasion, evidenced by the fact that she convinced every other woman to escape with her.

Cloelia asked their guards to turn their backs and allow the girls privacy to bathe in the river. Seizing the opportunity, Cloelia led the other maidens “across the Tiber amidst the enemy's javelins, and restored them all safely to their kinsmen in Rome” (Bell 1). To say that Cloelia’s actions shocked both the Romans and the Etruscans would qualify as a massive understatement. They never dreamed a woman would attempt such a bold act. Unsurprisingly, Cloelia immediately received an angry backlash from both sides: King Porsenna who had just been snubbed, and her own countrymen who feared Porsenna’s retaliation. Roller observes:

> The Romans collectively, or Porsenna, who object that Roman trustworthiness has been tainted, even while they praise the virtus of the escape itself— thus judging her deed negatively in one category but positively in another. Her glory is therefore tarnished unless the breach of fides can be repaired. (43)

Mary Lefkowitz, the author of “Women’s Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation,” details Porsenna’s reaction by saying, “when the king found out, he was furious at first and sent emissaries to Rome to ask that Cloelia be given back; he did not care about the other girls” (132). Interestingly enough, Porsenna somehow knew the escape had been instigated by Cloelia, and one can only speculate how he knew. Perhaps Cloelia made her objections known to him from the beginning. She might have even tried to use her persuasiveness to
influence Porsenna to release them before resorting to a daring escape. In either case, he felt furious and wanted Cloelia’s head. He had been made to look like a fool by three different Romans, and, to add insult to injury, a woman, not a soldier or even a man, dealt him the last blow. After facing the perils of the Tiber River, Cloelia now faced the wrath of Porsenna.

Cloelia did not waver in her resolve. She bravely faced Porsenna and, once again, proved to have remarkable persuasiveness, even to a king whose ego had been badly bruised by a woman. In “The History of Rome,” Canon Roberts translates Titus Livius’ account of Porsenna’s disposition after their meeting, saying, “afterwards his feelings changed to admiration; he said that the exploit surpassed those of Cocles and Mucius” and, even more surprisingly, “told her that he would make her a present of half the remaining hostages, she was to choose whom she would” (“The History of Rome”). Amazingly, at a time in which a man would sooner die than to have a woman show him up, Cloelia managed to defuse Porsenna’s anger and transform it into appreciation. Porsenna no longer felt the need to take revenge and, instead, had the compulsion to allow Cloelia her freedom, along with other hostages of her choice. Cloelia chose to bring home the young men. Some speculate that she chose them, rather than the women, because she predicted they would have the most risk of mistreatment. Others surmise that Cloelia did not want the boys to receive Etruscan military training and later return as an enemy; rather, she wanted them to grow to fight for Rome. In either case, the decision demonstrated that Cloelia did not take the decision lightly and used compassion, along with strategy, to make the best choice for the future of Rome.

The Romans later “erected an equestrian statue” of Cloelia, an unprecedented honor (Flory 289). Roller notes, “certain monumental forms, such as honorific statues and cognomina, were apparently reserved for elites” (6). Not only did elites get the exclusively of such honors,
but also men. Sinclair Bell, author of the journal article “Role Models in the Roman World,” writes that “this masculine courage, new in a woman” led to a “new kind of honor” and quotes Seneca as saying “we virtually enrolled [Cloelia] as a man because of her outstanding courage” (289). Even in the deed of honoring Cloelia, they associate courage to males. The implication being that heroic acts would remain the responsibility of men, and women would (or should) remain in the social role laid out for them to manage their homes and children.

Surprisingly, Porsenna acclaimed Cloelia’s actions as more heroic than that of Cocles and Scaevola’s, both men. Roller notes that in Manilius’ book of Roman heroes which included kings, Scaevola, and Cocles, he also included Cloelia, calling her, “a maiden greater than the men” (33). While Cloelia’s deed certainly required an immense amount of bravery and heroism, she did not suffer multiple sword wounds and die defending the bridge to Rome, nor did she hold her hand in fire as it burned after attempting to assassinate Porsenna. Arguably, her actions entailed less risk to her life than Cocles and Scaevola’s actions, so why would hers receive more admiration?

In that day, from an early age, men lived under the expectation that they should act heroically and courageously, and, in fact, would receive ostracisation if they did not. Therefore, while Cocles and Scaevola’s actions served as an inspiration to others for generations, they performed well within the boundaries of societal expectations. Cloelia did not. Cocles and Scaevola both knew, if they survived, they would come home to admiring fans and receive the benefits bestowed upon all men who enacted so valiantly, and, if they died, they knew their legacy and likeness would live forever to inspire generations of people after them. Cloelia did not. Not only did she risk her life, but she risked it knowing that she would not receive any accolades for doing so. In fact, quite the opposite: she would face scorn for stepping outside the
boundaries of the role she had been placed. If not for the fact that she craftily turned Porsenna’s rage into esteem, the ending of her story would have been much different. Had Porsenna’s seen it fit to take revenge on Rome for her actions, her own countrymen would have passed down her story much differently, and, arguably, as an example to young girls of why they dare not defy their role. Therefore, with no promise of a reward at the end, Cloelia’s actions required an extra measure of bravery, and, thus, exceeded the deeds of Cocles and Scaevola.

My Personal Glass Ceiling

When I read Cloelia’s story for the first time, I instantly admired her. From a young age, I have been drawn to and inspired by women who demonstrate great strength in the face of adversity, as well as anyone who refuses to be on the wrong side of history simply to maintain peace. I, myself, aim to embody such traits, and I have had that desire for as long as I can remember.

Growing up, my home always had a large collection of books that grew every year, and my mother would read numerous books simultaneously. She passed that love of reading to me and never failed to keep me stocked with new books to read. Instead of wishing to go to the mall or arcade like many of my peers, I begged my mother to drive me to the library or bookstore. When I became old enough, my parents allowed me to ride my bike to the library. I remember riding home from the library with numerous books bags hanging from the handlebars of my bike; the bags contained so many books that the sharp edges bulged through the bags and banged against my legs the entire way home. The hot Texas sun would cause me to swelter as I pedaled my bike, but no matter how exhausting the trip became, the excitement of arriving home with a fresh, unread collection of books brought me back again within a couple of weeks when I inevitably would finish reading everything and needed new material.
My love of reading ignited an inexhaustible imagination within me. I would often lie in my favorite tree, take a walk, or bike ride through our neighborhood and enter fantasy worlds of my own making. I imagined myself as one of many heroines who lived in another time and place: a woman surviving through the American Civil War, working to free slaves in the Underground Railroad in the face of female oppression, a medieval princess running away from her abusive father and king, living in disguise until she returned with an army to save the kingdom from her father’s oppressive hand, or a singer with a dark past who determinedly overcame all obstacles and rejection to become a world famous artist and used her fame to improve the lives of many people. The characters I created within my imagination always exhibited passion, strength, courage, and sacrifice, even in the face of great struggle. Unsurprisingly, my favorite books highlighted heroines of a similar nature. Cloelia absolutely demonstrated those traits as well, so, unsurprisingly, I felt drawn to her story.

Sometimes, on paper, I would recreate the heroines in my imagination when I would deem a story too good not to write down. I wrote often. I chronicled my experiences and family absurdities within the pages of my journal. I had several pen pals throughout the country who received pages of letters from me on a regular basis. I took the ordinary events of my life and tried to make them as entertaining and interesting as possible. Several people told me that I had mastered the art of turning an ordinary daily occurrence into a great story. I also wrote to show appreciation or advocate causes. I wrote my favorite authors to tell them how much I admired their work, I wrote corporations when I found their actions particularly egregious, and I wrote my representatives in Congress to protest or support pieces of legislation. Even as a child, I recognized the power of the written word. I greatly admire Cloelia’s ability to persuade and inspire others to her side, even when it required them to risk their lives. In many ways, I feel I
greatly lack in that ability as I tend to rub others the wrong way with my blunt way of approaching circumstances. She has inspired me to change my approach and learn how to persuade and motivate others to do something completely counter to their natural instincts. With Cloelia’s art of persuasion and my writing ability, I believe I could grow into a powerful advocate for good around the world.

I think about the way that Cloelia defied the role she had been given, even knowing she would probably receive flack from her friends and family for doing so. I can relate to this in a big way because of the circumstances surrounding my enrollment into college. My parents felt a substantial amount of distrust regarding higher education and directed my siblings and me to pursue entrepreneurship instead. Unsurprisingly, they did not agree with my decision to start college, and, since then, my mother has blamed my college attendance for any type of difficulty I encounter. I always knew that if I wanted to attend college, I would have to navigate the process on my own. Without parental support or knowledge of the system, I felt intimidated by college. Despite all of that, I decided to pursue higher education anyway.

I felt butterflies in my stomach as I stepped into my community college to take my first class. I had never taken a class before. My parents homeschooled me from kindergarten to 12th grade, and I never had any other teachers. Our kitchen served as the only classroom I ever knew. I wondered if the other students would immediately know that I did not belong. At 28 years old, I had about 10 years over most of the student population, a fact that added to my angst. What should I say? Where should I sit? Should I call the teacher by her first name? Questions overwhelmed me and felt nervous that I would make a fool of myself.

I may have never worked up the courage to attend college if not for a recent tragic event in my life. My husband passed away a few months prior to my enrollment. The day he died, I
knew in my heart something was terribly wrong. My husband did not return from work and would not answer his phone. I drove to his workplace and found numerous police officers gathered around a taped-off area where a hazmat team chemically cleaned the parking lot. I began to sob uncontrollably and begged a nearby officer to assure me that my husband remained unharmed. A detective approached me and led me to a curb to sit down. He waited patiently until my hysteria subsided, but it returned again when he somberly stated, “I’m sorry.” My worst fear had been confirmed: I had just become a widow with two young children. The loss of my husband caused me to examine my own mortality and motivated me to conquer my fears. To this day, I do not understand his death. I do not know what led him to jump from the sixth-floor of his office parking garage and leave me a widow of two children; however, I faced the challenge head-on and decided I would not allow that event to define or consume me.

As I started college, I not only had misgivings about how I would adapt socially, but I also wondered if I could keep up academically. My mother did her best, but my siblings and I only received an elementary-grade level proficiency in most subjects. I soon gained confidence when I realized I could keep up with my peers, but at times it came with great difficulty. I have worked hard to maintain a perfect GPA, despite the many roles and responsibilities I juggle every day. It has been especially difficult because I basically began from scratch. The only math I learned growing up had been taught by my mother who had limited knowledge in the subject. As a result, my math proficiency amounted to about an eighth-grade level. Amazingly, I still tested high enough on the college entrance exam to take College Algebra without remedial classes; however, it did not come without challenges. My math professor used many unfamiliar terms, but ones that my classmates seemed to understand without explanation. I felt discouraged, but I would not allow myself to give up. Instead, I utilized every resource I could imagine,
including the math lab, personal tutors, internet video lectures, and extra class time to help me understand the material. Eventually, my test scores starting climbing from a C to an A, and I managed to earn an A in the class.

I am proud of myself that I overcame my fears and made the leap of faith into college, just as I am sure Cloelia felt after she clenched her freedom. My college experience has given me greater depth as a person. The insights I have received caused my belief system to begin crumbling, and I started questioning what I previously considered infallible truth. Most significantly, the knowledge I obtained led me to the profound realization that I do not know much at all. College also gave me an unexpected blessing: in my first class, I met my current husband. When I nervously arrived at the classroom on my first day, he felt amused and captivated as I approached each student in the room and, unaware of the oddity, shook their hands while introducing myself. Little did I know at the time that I had just shaken hands with my future husband. We got married a few short months later, and, between my two children and his two daughters, we started our own “Brady Bunch.” Two years later, we added a new daughter, Morgan, to the mix.

Sometimes, heroic actions do not come by way of big, daring, and public deeds like Cloelia’s; they often come through the quiet determination and compassion demonstrated in everyday deeds. In total, I have 5 children, ranging in age from 3 to 14, including 2 stepdaughters who split their time between our home and their mom’s. Their mother’s drug use, among other issues, has caused us to pursue full legal custody of both girls. In every possible way, I welcome my stepdaughters as one of my own children. I have attempted to fill the void caused by their having an absent mother. I know I can never remove the pain caused by their mother’s substance abuse, but I do everything I can to make them feel loved and supported. My
days consist of preparing meals, driving children to and from school, assisting with homework, attending ball games and musical performances, and taking them shopping for school project supplies. Like many other mothers, I sometimes wonder if my efforts make any impact on my children. Not long ago, my oldest stepdaughter stood in front of a large group at a mother-daughter camp and shared how much I meant to her and what a difference I had made in her life. Those moments help me realize that every one of my efforts serve an important purpose. Cloelia could not have inspired those around her if they sensed she did not have their best interest in mind. Those hostages trusted her, and, presumably, the reason for that had to have come from them observing her character and selflessness up to that point. I hope I can inspire my children to take courageous steps in their own life by exemplifying love and courageousness in mine.

Although the difficulties in my life could, in no way, compare to that of those in Cloelia’s life as a woman in the sixth century living in arduous conditions, I have faced my own adversity. However, I appreciate every hardship that has been handed to me. Each obstacle has strengthened me and given me wisdom that I otherwise would not have obtained. My greatest growth has occurred during times of enormous struggle. I have come to appreciate challenges because some of my proudest personal victories have occurred amidst paralyzing fear.

Like every other woman, I will always encounter those who say I should live my life differently. In that way, Cloelia, myself, and every woman in history share a similar experience. Let women break out of the expectations placed upon them by society, friends, and family. Let women do that which makes themselves proud. Let women strive to be everything they always dreamed they could be, what they knew they could be, but allowed fear to get in the way. Let Cloelia serve as an example to all women, and rise above that fear to inspire others around the world for generations.
Works Cited


