

**THE RIVERSIDE  
LITERATURE SERIES:  
LAYS OF ANCIENT ROME**

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The Riverside literature Series: Lays of Ancient Rome by Thomas B. Macaulay

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**THOMAS B. MACAULAY**

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*The Riverside Literature Series*

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LAYS OF ANCIENT ROME

BY

THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

*WITH THE AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTIONS, AND  
ADDITIONAL EXPLANATORY NOTES*



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## EDITOR'S PREFACE.

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**M**ACAULAY'S *Lays of Ancient Rome* is something more than a bit of pastime of a famous writer, though it partakes of this character. Macaulay, like other Englishmen of his class and training, was steeped in a knowledge of classic literature and history, which he read with his eye on English history and politics. Scholarship, since his day, has become more specialized, and it is not common to find a man of letters so conversant with Roman life that he would turn easily from his ordinary work of writing modern history, for example, or literary essays, to the half-serious, half-entertaining task of composing imaginary ancient ballads. With Macaulay, Latin literature was a familiar field for recreation, and, his mind having been turned to questions upon the historic basis of early Roman legends, — a subject much discussed in his day, — he threw off these Lays, and accompanied them with introductory essays intended to establish his position upon grounds of scholarship. The entire body of Lays is, in effect, a long essay with poetic illustrations; but the illustrations appeal so directly to the imagination, and to the love of poetic narrative, that frequently they are printed separately without comment.

In preparing an edition for the use of American school-boys and school-girls, many of whom will be in-

terested without having had any training in the classics, it has been thought best to give the prose introductions, not in full, since they contain matter incidental to the theme rather than essential, but so far forth as they serve to explain Macaulay's position, and to account for the action of the stories. In one or two instances the editor has supplemented these introductions, enclosing his additions in brackets [ ]. He has also furnished a few explanatory notes, and in preparing them he has been under obligation to an edition for schools, edited by Sir G. W. Cox, and published in London in 1884. The reader will notice that many passages which might otherwise require annotation will be made clear by an attentive study of Macaulay's introductions.

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## LAYS OF ANCIENT ROME.

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### INTRODUCTION.

**T**HAT what is called the history of the kings and early consuls of Rome is to a great extent fabulous, few scholars have, since the time of Beaufort, ventured to deny. It is certain that, more than three hundred and sixty years after the date ordinarily assigned for the foundation of the city, the public records were, with scarcely an exception, destroyed by the Gauls. It is certain that the oldest annals of the commonwealth were compiled more than a century and a half after the destruction of the records. It is certain, therefore, that the great Latin writers of a later period did not possess those materials without which a trustworthy account of the infancy of the republic could not possibly be framed. They own, indeed, that the chronicles to which they had access were filled with battles that were never fought, and consuls that were never inaugurated; and we have abundant proof that, in those chronicles, events of the greatest importance, such as the issue of the war with Porsena, and the issue of the war with Brennus, were grossly misrepresented. Under these circumstances a wise man will look with great suspicion on the legend which has come down to us. He will, perhaps, be inclined to regard the princes who



are said to have founded the civil and religious institutions of Rome, the son of Mars, and the husband of Egeria, as mere mythological personages, of the same class with Perseus and Ixion. As he draws nearer and nearer to the confines of authentic history, he will become less and less hard of belief. He will admit that the most important parts of the narrative have some foundation in truth. But he will distrust almost all the details, not only because they seldom rest on any solid evidence, but also because he will constantly detect in them, even when they are within the limits of physical possibility, that peculiar character, more easily understood than defined, which distinguishes the creations of the imagination from the realities of the world in which we live.

The early history of Rome is, indeed, far more poetical than anything else in Latin literature. The loves of the Vestal and the God of War, the cradle laid among the reeds of Tiber, the fig-tree, the she-wolf, the shepherd's cabin, the recognition, the fratricide, the rape of the Sabines, the death of Tarpeia, the fall of Hostus Hostilius, the struggle of Mettus Curtius through the marsh, the women rushing, with torn raiment and dishevelled hair between their fathers and their husbands, the nightly meetings of Numa and the Nymph by the well in the sacred grove, the fight of the three Romans and the three Albans, the purchase of the Sibylline books, the crime of Tullia, the simulated madness of Brutus, the ambiguous reply of the Delphian oracle to the Tarquins, the wrongs of Lucretia, the heroic actions of Horatius Cocles, of Scævola, and of Cœlia, the battle of Regillus won by the aid of Castor and Pollux, the defence of Cremera, the touching story

of Coriolanus, the still more touching story of Virginia, the wild legend about the draining of the Alban lake, the combat between Valerius Corvus and the gigantic Gaul, are among the many instances which will at once suggest themselves to every reader.

The Latin literature which has come down to us is of later date than the commencement of the Second Punic War, and consists almost exclusively of words fashioned on Greek models. The Latin metres, heroic, elegiac, lyric, and dramatic, are of Greek origin. The best Latin epic poetry is the feeble echo of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The best Latin eclogues are imitations of Theocritus. The plan of the most finished didactic poem in the Latin tongue was taken from Hesiod. The Latin tragedies are bad copies of the masterpieces of Sophocles and Euripides. The Latin comedies are free translations from Demophilus, Menander, and Apollodorus. The Latin philosophy was borrowed, without alteration, from the Portico and the Academy; and the great Latin orators constantly proposed to themselves as patterns the speeches of Demosthenes and Lysias.

But there was an earlier Latin literature, a literature truly Latin, which has wholly perished,—which had, indeed, almost perished long before those whom we are in the habit of regarding as the greatest Latin writers were born. That literature abounded with metrical romances, such as are found in every country where there is much curiosity and intelligence, but little reading and writing. All human beings, not utterly savage, long for some information about past times, and are delighted by narratives which present pictures to the eye of the mind. But it is only in very enlightened

communities that books are readily accessible. Metrical composition, therefore, which, in a highly civilized nation is a mere luxury, is, in nations imperfectly civilized, almost a necessary of life, and is valued less on account of the pleasure which it gives to the ear than on account of the help which it gives to the memory. A man who can invent or embellish an interesting story, and put it into a form which others may easily retain in their recollection, will always be highly esteemed by a people eager for amusement and information, but destitute of libraries. Such is the origin of ballad-poetry, a species of composition which scarcely ever fails to spring up and flourish in every society, at a certain point in the progress towards refinement.

As it is agreeable to general experience that, at a certain stage in the progress of society, ballad-poetry should flourish, so is it also agreeable to general experience that, at a subsequent stage in the progress of society, ballad-poetry should be undervalued and neglected. Knowledge advances; manners change; great foreign models of composition are studied and imitated. The phraseology of the old minstrels becomes obsolete. Their versification, which, having received its laws only from the ear, abounds in irregularities, seems licentious and uncouth. Their simplicity appears beggarly when compared with the quaint forms and gaudy coloring of such artists as Cowley and Gongora. The ancient lays, unjustly despised by the learned and polite, linger for a time in the memory of the vulgar, and are at length too often irretrievably lost. We cannot wonder that the ballads of Rome should have altogether disappeared, when we remember how very narrowly, in spite of the inven-