

**THE GREATNESS AND DECLINE  
OF VENICE: A PRIZE  
ESSAY, READ IN THE THEATRE,  
OXFORD, JUNE 16TH, 1858**

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The Greatness and Decline of Venice: A Prize Essay, Read in the Theatre, Oxford, June 16th, 1858 by Lewis Morris

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**LEWIS MORRIS**

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*THE GREATNESS AND DECLINE OF VENICE.*

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A PRIZE ESSAY,

READ IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 16th, 1858.

BY

LEWIS MORRIS, B.A.,

JESUS COLLEGE.



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## ANALYSIS.

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	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
Origin of Venice, and successive steps in advance . . . . .	2
Great European movements of the eleventh century. The Italian towns engaged. Isolation of Venice . . . . .	3
The fourth Crusade. The taking of Constantinople. Part taken by Venice in the contest. Its influence on her. Increase of her territory . . . . .	7
Changes produced by these events. First more decidedly aristocratic character . . . . .	9
Venetian government up to the shutting of the Grand Council. The Council of Ten . . . . .	10
Second result of Eastern conquests. The collision with Genoa. Wars of 1253, 1298, 1352. War of Chiozza, and decline of Genoa . . . . .	ib.
Wars of the Terra Firma. Death of Gian Galeazzo Visconti. Venice under Foscari and Carmagnola. Death of the latter. Conquests of the Republic. <i>Zenith of Venetian greatness</i> . . . . .	14
The commerce of Venice. Her services to literature. Her art. Painting . . . . .	16
Architecture . . . . .	19
Aspect of Venice at this time. Venetian character depicted by native painters . . . . .	20
Her government at this period; its real nature and value . . . . .	21
Commencement of her decline. The first Turkish wars . . . . .	23
Invasion of the Terra Firma by the Turks. Venetian commerce shattered by discoveries of Portuguese. The Cape of Good Hope doubled. Projects of Albuquerque. Capture or destruction of keys of commerce with Asia . . . . .	24
<i>The League of Cambray</i> . Atrocities of the spoilers of Italy. Exhaustion of Venice. Turkish wars of 1537 to 40, and 1572 . . . . .	28

	PAGE
Wars with Turkey of 1645—69. Loss of Candia. Glorious struggle of 1632. Recovery of the Morea. Final loss of Eastern possessions in 1714 . . . . .	27
State of Venice at this time. Her foreign policy. Her internal condition. Extraordinary corruption and license . . . . .	28
Real meaning of this state of things. Characteristics of Venetian history . . . . .	30
Conclusion . . . . .	31

## THE GREATNESS AND DECLINE OF VENICE\*.

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Few educated men are not familiar with at least the most striking features of that long and splendid pageant which is known to us as the "History of Rome." The simple fables which are so closely interwoven with the dawning narrative,—the stories of the twin-brothers and their mysterious foster-mother,—of the good King Servius and the wicked Tullia,—of the proud Tarquin and the chaste Lucretia,—of the Horatii and their bloody duel,—of Curtius and his magnificent self-sacrifice,—of Cincinnatus and his grand simplicity; these and many others, coming as they do much nearer to us than the stories of Arthur, or Alfred, or Cœur-de-Lion, impress themselves upon our minds with a vividness and reality which no frigid rationalism can ever completely efface. Later studies bring out with distinctness the rising fortunes of the Commonwealth to the full effulgence of the Empire under Augustus, and so through all the painful chronicle of its decline, until the advent of the Goths. But when the curtain has fallen upon the Western Empire, and the play is apparently played out, few care to await its rise upon that great life-drama which, during the mediæval period, was acted again upon the old classic ground. Many do not even suspect that Italy, during that most critical period, was the theatre of great events, of struggles for liberty as glorious and more obstinate than those of the *populus* and the *plebs*, of factions and proscriptions as fierce and sanguinary as those of Marius and Sylla, of tyrants as depraved and cruel as the worst of the Cæsars, of great names and large patriotism, of pure art and wide-spread commerce, all with a greater claim upon our sympathies than those of Rome, because, while she stands on the further side of that great gulf which yawns between the old order and the new, the Italian republics stand upon this side, the history of Rome is that of a vanished yesterday, the story of mediæval Italy is that of the dawn of to-day.

It is no longer, however, one story which has to be told. The

\* This Essay is based upon Sismondi and Daru, together with occasional references to Hazlitt, Gibbon, Lord Brougham, Hallam, a lighter history by Flagg, and other articles of less importance.

broad canvass of history, before occupied by the gigantic proportions of one Titanic form, is filled with numerous groups of diminutive figures, brilliantly coloured and exquisitely finished; all with something of resemblance to the great original, whether in their beauties or their deformities. But there is no longer any great central figure, and what the picture gains in intensity of meaning, it certainly loses in simplicity, and as an artistic whole. There is altogether a want of breadth and grandeur in the history of mediæval Italy; the outlines are hardly sufficiently well marked, the confused maze of petty systems become irrecoverably entangled; their wars are as tedious and unsatisfactory as those of the Volsci and Æqui. Some well-defined figures, however, grow upon us out of the obscurity; Florence, Milan, and Rome herself, have all eventful histories: Venice in particular recalls the traditions of the past, whether by the extent of her empire, the brilliancy of her story, or her extraordinary permanence. Her story is worth telling, because it is incomparably the most romantic, and indeed, anomalous, of modern times; and because, as a whole, it bears a rough kind of resemblance to our own. It is more interesting than that of the other Italian cities, because, in addition to the charm of a direct and unbroken descent from ancient Rome, which she alone could trace, only in Venetian story is there anything like a distinct moral significance, only this conforms to the test by which all really useful history may be tried—the possession of “a beginning, a middle, and an end, a moral progress, and a mournful decline<sup>b</sup>.” Her rise is coincident in point of time with the last agonies of the Empire. Fourteen centuries ago, the fertile plains of Upper Italy and the peaceful cities of Venetia were exposed to the first rush of savage invasion which broke in upon the weakness of Rome. Never had barbarian conquerors reaped so rich a harvest. Year after year they came, different in name, but alike in fierceness and rapacity,—Attila with his Huns, Alboin and his Lombards, Clovis and his Franks, Theodoric and his Ostrogoths; scarcely had one tribe passed away, or been absorbed, before another came to reopen the still bleeding wounds, and to turn the whole of the hapless country into one bloody battle-ground. One can picture even now, (for war is always essentially the same,) the warning signal-fires blazing out on the distant hills, the dull suspense of the succeeding days, then the smoke of burning homesteads upon the horizon, the terror always drawing nearer and nearer; at last, the dark masses of the enemy, first in the open fields, then swarming in the streets of the city, and presently the awful realities of savage warfare. And so there came a time when it seemed to the bolder spirits that these horrors were to be avoided, at what-

<sup>b</sup> The remark is in substance Mr. Stanley's: “Sinai and Palestine.”

ever sacrifice of old associations; and they wandered forth from their homes to seek some place of security for life and labour, some little spot of dry ground for the soles of their feet, amid the wide-spread waters of barbarism. They chose, with a wise prescience, the chain of almost inaccessible Lagunes which lie at the head of the Adriatic. Each succeeding wave of invasion, (and there they were many,) which swept over the mainland, drove before it, to some of the many islets, its band of outcasts, to swell the number of those who were to form the nucleus of the future republic. There they coalesced into a number of separate communities, not bound together by any very powerful tie, often, indeed, distracted by mutual jealousies, and only combining against common perils. Thus they went on for two centuries and a half, pursuing a humble commerce, constantly at war with their enemies, or with each other, yet never losing their independence. Then there came a notable change; the citizens of each little island met together at Heraclea, and elected a Duke of maritime Venetia. From this period there existed one state only, and the results of the union must have made themselves felt in the greater security for the lives and commerce of the citizens—effects which must in their turn have given rise to a far more ambitious policy than that of mere self-defence. The fortunes of the growing state are still, however, long involved in obscurity. The mainland was in the power of heretics and enemies. The sea was infested by swarms of piratical adventurers. From the former the Venetians had little to fear. Their inaccessible position was their surest safeguard. Against the latter they soon became able to hold their ground. They were, in the quaint words of the minister of Theodoric, like water-fowl<sup>c</sup>, and they penetrated in safety along the canals and navigable waters of Lombardy. Meanwhile their long isolation was consolidating the national character. One of the few strongholds which defied the Lombard power, they were rewarded by the Eastern Empire, to which they always seem to have looked with affection, with the honour of an equal alliance. When Charlemagne marched into Italy to receive at Rome the imperial crown, his courtiers saw with surprise the costly silks of the Venetian merchants. But the little state, undazzled by the almost fabulous glories of his career, and strong in her allegiance to Constantinople, stedfastly refused to admit his title, or that of his successors, to the Empire of the West. And in 809, when at war with Pepin, the islanders assembled their fleets, and fixing upon the island of Rialto, they built that famous city which was destined to play so brilliant a part in mediæval politics,—to blend within itself the most opposite traditions,—a maritime Sparta,—an oligarchical Athens,—a Rome, not of outcasts, but of nobles;

<sup>c</sup> Cassiodorus, *Variar.* 1. xii. *Epist.* xxiv., quoted by Gibbon, c. 35.