

**FORTUNE OF THE REPUBLIC,  
LECTURE DELIVERED AT THE  
OLD SOUTH CHURCH,  
MARCH 30, 1878**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649299539

Fortune of the Republic, lecture delivered at the Old South church, March 30, 1878 by Ralph Waldo Emerson

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**RALPH WALDO EMERSON**

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# FORTUNE OF THE REPUBLIC.

LECTURE

*DELIVERED AT THE OLD SOUTH CHURCH,*

*March 30, 1878.*

BY

RALPH WALDO EMERSON.



BOSTON:  
HOUGHTON, OSGOOD AND COMPANY.

*The Riverside Press, Cambridge.*

1878.



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RIVERSIDE, CAMBRIDGE:  
STEREOTYPED AND PRINTED BY  
H. O. HOUGHTON AND COMPANY.

## FORTUNE OF THE REPUBLIC.

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IT is a rule that holds in economy as well as in hydraulics, that you must have a source higher than your tap. The mills, the shops, the theatre and the caucus, the college and the church, have all found out this secret. The sailors sail by chronometers that do not lose two or three seconds in a year, ever since Newton explained to Parliament that the way to improve navigation was to get good watches, and to offer public premiums for a better time-keeper than any then in use. The manufacturers rely on turbines of hydraulic perfection; the carpet-mill, on mordants and dyes which exhaust the skill of the chemist; the calico print, on designers

of genius who draw the wages of artists, not of artisans. Wedgwood, the eminent potter, bravely took the sculptor Flaxman to counsel, who said, "Send to Italy, search the museums for the forms of old Etruscan vases, urns, water-pots, domestic and sacrificial vessels of all kinds." They built great works and called their manufacturing village Etruria. Flaxman, with his Greek taste, selected and combined the loveliest forms, which were executed in English clay; sent boxes of these as gifts to every court of Europe, and formed the taste of the world. It was a renaissance of the breakfast table and china-closet. The brave manufacturers made their fortune. The jewellers imitated the revived models in silver and gold.

The theatre avails itself of the best talent of poet, of painter, and of amateur of taste, to make the *ensemble* of dramatic effect. The marine insurance office has its mathematical counsellor to settle averages; the life-assur-



ance, its table of annuities. The wine merchant has his analyst and taster, the more exquisite the better. He has also, I fear, his debts to the chemist as well as to the vineyard.

Our modern wealth stands on a few staples, and the interest nations took in our war was exasperated by the importance of the cotton trade. And what is cotton? One plant out of some two hundred thousand known to the botanist, vastly the larger part of which are reckoned weeds. And what is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered, — every one of the two hundred thousand probably yet to be of utility in the arts. As Bacchus of the vine, Ceres of the wheat, as Arkwright and Whitney were the demi-gods of cotton, so prolific Time will yet bring an inventor to every plant. There is not a property in nature but a mind is born to seek and find it. For it is not the plants or the animals, innumerable as they are, nor

the whole magazine of material nature that can give the sum of power, but the infinite applicability of these things in the hands of thinking man, every new application being equivalent to a new material.

Our sleepy civilization, ever since Roger Bacon and Monk Schwartz invented gunpowder, has built its whole art of war, all fortification by land and sea, all drill and military education, on that one compound, — all is an extension of a gun-barrel, — and is very scornful about bows and arrows, and reckons Greeks and Romans and Middle Ages little better than Indians and bow-and-arrow times. As if the earth, water, gases, lightning and caloric had not a million energies, the discovery of any one of which could change the art of war again, and put an end to war by the exterminating forces man can apply.

Now, if this is true in all the useful and in the fine arts, that the direction must be

drawn from a superior source or there will be no good work, does it hold less in our social and civil life ?

In our popular politics you may note that each aspirant who rises above the crowd, however at first making his obedient apprenticeship in party tactics, if he have sagacity, soon learns that it is by no means by obeying the vulgar weathercock of his party, the resentments, the fears, and whims of it, that real power is gained, but that he must often face and resist the party, and abide by his resistance, and put them in fear ; that the only title to their permanent respect, and to a larger following, is to see for himself what is the real public interest, and to stand for that ; — that is a principle, and all the cheering and hissing of the crowd must by and by accommodate itself to it. Our times easily afford you very good examples.

The law of water and all fluids is true of wit. Prince Metternich said, "Revolutions