



LAYS OF ANCIENT ROME

(ANNOTATED)

THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

Thomas Babington Macaulay

Lays of Ancient Rome (Annotated)

*In this **enriched edition**, we have carefully created added value for your reading experience.*

Enriched Edition. Epic Poems

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Briony Sableford

Edited and published by e-artnow, 2020

EAN: 4064066386429

Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Author Biography](#)

[Historical Context](#)

[Synopsis \(Selection\)](#)

[Lays of Ancient Rome](#)

[Analysis](#)

[Reflection](#)

[Memorable Quotes](#)

Introduction

[Table of Contents](#)

This volume gathers the four narrative poems that Thomas Babington Macaulay published together under the title "Lays of Ancient Rome," presenting the collection as a unified work rather than as isolated pieces. The contents are "Horatius," "The Battle of the Lake Regillus," "Virginia," and "The Prophecy of Capys." In bringing these poems together, the present edition preserves the scope intended by their author: a compact but substantial sequence of verse narratives centered on early Roman legend and memory. Read consecutively, the poems reveal both the variety of Macaulay's narrative art and the coherence of his larger imaginative project.

The purpose of collecting these works in one volume is clear from their original association. Macaulay did not offer them as unrelated occasional poems, but as companion pieces linked by subject, tone, and historical imagination. Each poem revisits a celebrated episode or prophetic vision connected with Rome's formative past, and each transforms that material into vigorous English verse designed for sustained reading and recitation. A collected presentation allows readers to see how Macaulay shaped a cycle from distinct narratives, each complete in itself yet strengthened by its place beside the others.

The texts represented here belong chiefly to the genre of narrative poetry. They are not novels, plays, or essays, though they share with historical prose an interest in public action, civic conflict, and remembered events. Macaulay's poems draw on legendary and early historical matter associated with Rome, and they are cast in a popular,

ballad-like manner that gives them movement and clarity. This combination of learned historical interest with energetic poetic storytelling is central to their character. The collection therefore stands as a notable example of nineteenth-century historical verse shaped for a broad readership.

Macaulay is widely known as an essayist, historian, and public figure, and these poems occupy a distinctive place within that larger body of work. In "Lays of Ancient Rome," his fascination with the past appears not through formal historical argument but through imaginative reconstruction. The poems do not abandon his habitual concern with political life, institutions, and civic character; rather, they recast those concerns in verse. This volume is therefore important not only as a poetic sequence in its own right, but also as a key expression of themes that run through Macaulay's writing more generally: public duty, national memory, and the uses of exemplary history.

The four poems are unified above all by their setting in Rome's early traditions and by their concentration on moments of public testing. "Horatius," "The Battle of the Lake Regillus," "Virginia," and "The Prophecy of Capys" differ in immediate subject, but all are concerned with the relationship between individual action and the fate of a community. Macaulay repeatedly turns to figures, conflicts, and pronouncements that carry collective significance. The emphasis falls less on private introspection than on the larger life of the city, its liberties, dangers, and hopes, making the collection a sustained meditation on civic identity.

Another important bond among these poems is their reliance on legendary and traditional material. Macaulay did not present them as documentary records; rather, he

worked with stories long associated with Rome's beginnings and early struggles. That choice matters to the collection's purpose. Legend permits the poet to condense public values into memorable episodes, to heighten contrasts, and to represent the past as something preserved in cultural remembrance. In this way, "Lays of Ancient Rome" participates in a broader nineteenth-century interest in national and ancient traditions while giving that interest a specifically Roman focus and a distinctly English poetic form.

Stylistically, these poems are marked by directness, momentum, and a strong sense of rhetorical design. Macaulay writes in a manner meant to be heard as well as read: lines advance with conspicuous energy, scenes are sharply outlined, and narrative progress is seldom delayed by abstraction. The language favors intelligibility and force, making complex public situations legible through vivid action and emphatic speech. This accessible vigor helps explain the enduring visibility of the poems. They appeal not through obscurity or delicacy, but through memorable narrative architecture and a disciplined command of pace, cadence, and public utterance.

The collection is also notable for the way it balances literary artistry with moral and political seriousness. Macaulay's interest in Rome is never merely antiquarian. The city's early legends become a means of exploring courage, loyalty, sacrifice, ambition, conflict between orders, and the strains placed on republican society. Without reducing the poems to simple lessons, one can see that they repeatedly ask what sustains a commonwealth and what threatens it. Such concerns connect the verse to Macaulay's larger intellectual world, in which historical writing and political reflection often turn on the character of institutions and the conduct of citizens.

Because the four poems are gathered complete, readers can appreciate the internal range of the collection. One poem may emphasize martial defense, another collective battle, another civic injustice, another prophetic national destiny; together they broaden the imaginative map of early Rome without losing unity. This completeness matters. A selection or excerpt can display Macaulay's local brilliance, but only the whole set demonstrates how he varied tempo, atmosphere, and emphasis while remaining faithful to a common theme. The present volume therefore offers not a sample of Macaulay's Roman verse, but the full poetic sequence by which it has long been known.

The lasting significance of "Lays of Ancient Rome" lies partly in its unusual position between scholarship, patriotically inflected historical imagination, and popular poetry. Macaulay brought classical subject matter to a wide English-speaking audience in forms that were readily memorable and frequently recited. For many readers, these poems became an entry into Roman legend and an example of how verse can animate the distant past. Their continuing importance does not depend on modern agreement with every assumption or emphasis they contain; it rests on their accomplished fusion of narrative drive, civic grandeur, and literary accessibility.

As a whole, Macaulay's work is distinguished by confidence in the intelligibility of history and in the power of narrative to shape public understanding. This confidence is fully visible in the poems collected here. He selects emblematic moments, arranges them with clarity, and gives them an elevated but lucid verbal form. Readers familiar with his prose will recognize related habits of mind: a taste for broad historical contrasts, an attraction to decisive scenes, and an ability to make political and social questions vivid through

storytelling. In verse, these qualities become compressed, rhythmic, and especially memorable.

This edition invites readers to encounter "Horatius," "The Battle of the Lake Regillus," "Virginia," and "The Prophecy of Capys" as the integrated collection Macaulay published under the shared title "Lays of Ancient Rome." Taken together, they represent a coherent body of narrative poems rooted in ancient Roman tradition and shaped by one of the nineteenth century's most recognizable literary voices. Their unifying themes of civic action, communal memory, and historical destiny, along with their vigorous style and durable readability, have secured the collection a lasting place in the history of English historical verse.

Author Biography

[Table of Contents](#)

Thomas Babington Macaulay was a major British writer, historian, essayist, and politician of the nineteenth century. Born in 1800 and active during a period of intense political reform and imperial expansion, he became one of the best-known prose stylists of his age. His writing combined clarity, confidence, and narrative force, making both his essays and historical works widely read. Alongside his public career, he also wrote poetry, including the sequence later collected as *Lays of Ancient Rome*. The pieces in this collection—*Horatius*, *The Battle of the Lake Regillus*, *Virginia*, and *The Prophecy of Capys*—belong to that celebrated poetic achievement.

Macaulay was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he distinguished himself through classical study, public speaking, and literary accomplishment. The ancient historians and poets he read there helped shape both his style and his imaginative interests. He developed a command of rhetoric that would mark his essays, speeches, and verse alike. His poetry drew strongly on classical themes, especially Roman history and legend, but it was filtered through a nineteenth-century taste for vigorous storytelling and moral contrast. These influences are especially visible in the Roman poems for which he remains well known.

He first gained broad recognition through essays published in leading periodicals, where his forceful judgments and energetic historical portraits attracted a large readership. Macaulay's public reputation grew further through parliamentary service and later administrative work in

British India, experiences that deepened his engagement with law, government, and history. Although his political and historical writings were central to his fame, he continued to write verse. His literary career thus moved across several forms—essay, speech, poetry, and large-scale history—while maintaining a distinctive preference for lucid argument, dramatic incident, and memorable phrasing.

The poems in this collection come from *Lays of Ancient Rome*, published in the early 1840s. In these works Macaulay turned Roman legend into English narrative verse designed for oral power and emotional immediacy. *Horatius* presents civic courage under pressure; *The Battle of the Lake Regillus* evokes martial conflict and patriotic memory; *Virginia* centers on liberty, law, and public outrage; and *The Prophecy of Capys* looks toward Rome's destiny through a voice of prediction. Though based on ancient material, the poems were written for modern readers, with strong rhythms and vivid episodes that made them accessible and enduringly popular.

Macaulay's verse is notable for its emphatic movement, declamatory energy, and preference for scenes of public action. He often emphasized bravery, sacrifice, patriotism, and the defense of political community, themes that connected his poetry to his broader historical outlook. In the Roman lays, individual figures stand out sharply, yet they matter chiefly as embodiments of civic values. This method helped make the poems memorable in schools and among general readers for generations. Critics have sometimes found his manner more rhetorical than subtle, but even detractors have recognized the remarkable momentum and immediacy of his storytelling.

His larger literary standing rests not only on poetry but also on his historical and critical prose, especially the work that

established him as one of the defining English historians of the Victorian period. Macaulay wrote history with a strong narrative drive, moral confidence, and belief in political progress, qualities admired by many contemporaries and debated by later readers. Those same habits of mind can be felt in the poems of this collection, where public liberty and national continuity are recurring concerns. The Roman subjects gave him a stage on which to unite classical learning with popular literary appeal.

In his later years Macaulay remained an eminent public man and author, continuing the historical work that would secure his long-term reputation until his death in 1859. His legacy has endured in several overlapping ways: as a master of lucid English prose, as an influential interpreter of history, and as the author of narrative poems that retained a wide readership long after their publication. *Horatius*, *The Battle of the Lake Regillus*, *Virginia*, and *The Prophecy of Capys* still represent his gift for transforming classical legend into stirring English verse. They remain central to understanding his literary range and nineteenth-century influence.

Historical Context

[Table of Contents](#)

Thomas Babington Macaulay published *Lays of Ancient Rome* in 1842, at a moment when British public life was intensely shaped by parliamentary reform, imperial expansion, and confidence in national progress. Born in 1800, he belonged to the generation formed after the French Revolution and during the Napoleonic Wars, when debates about liberty, order, citizenship, and historical precedent were central to political argument. The poems look back to Rome's legendary and early republican past, but they were written for a nineteenth-century readership accustomed to seeing antiquity as a storehouse of civic examples. Macaulay's historical imagination joined classical learning to modern public discourse.

The collection's four poems are set in the traditional early history of Rome, roughly between the late regal period and the early centuries of the Republic. Their immediate narrative sources are not contemporary records from archaic Rome, which are scarce, but later Roman historians such as Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, whose accounts blend memory, legend, and moral exempla. Macaulay openly worked within that inherited tradition. His poems therefore reflect not only ancient events as later Romans understood them, but also the long educational practice, common in Europe and especially Britain, of reading Roman history as a guide to civic virtue, public sacrifice, and constitutional struggle.

Macaulay's own career helps explain this choice of material. He was a prominent Whig politician, essayist, and historian, entering Parliament in 1830 and supporting measures such

as the Reform Act of 1832. Whig historical thought tended to present history as a long, conflict-ridden movement toward civil liberty under law. Early Rome, as represented in school histories and classical texts, offered a dramatic setting for such themes: resistance to tyranny, defense of the commonwealth, and the tension between aristocratic leadership and popular rights. *Lays of Ancient Rome* adapts those themes into narrative verse, making the remote past speak to contemporary liberal constitutionalism.

The first poem, *Horatius*, reworks the famous story of Horatius Cocles defending the bridge against Lars Porsena after the expulsion of Rome's last king. In Roman tradition, this episode belongs to the turbulent transition from monarchy to republic around the late sixth century BCE. Whether the event occurred as described cannot be verified, but the story was central to Roman accounts of collective self-defense and hatred of kingship. For Macaulay's readers, the poem resonated with ideas of patriotic endurance and citizen courage. Its emphasis on a small community preserving its liberty against overwhelming force matched enduring nineteenth-century admiration for constitutional resistance and martial self-command.

The political background to *Horatius* includes the Roman memory of the Tarquins, especially Tarquinius Superbus, whose overthrow marked the foundation of the Republic in traditional chronology. Roman writers treated the end of kingship as a defining act of civic liberation, though the new state remained dominated by aristocratic elites. Macaulay's treatment follows the ancient moral framing rather than modern source criticism. Yet his selective emphasis is historically significant: in the age of European revolutions and reactions, stories about the fall of tyrants and the defense of lawful institutions carried unusual force. The

poem transforms Rome's anti-monarchical legend into a broader meditation on public duty and political legitimacy.

The Battle of the Lake Regillus draws on another foundational Roman legend, usually dated to the early fifth century BCE, in which Rome fought a Latin coalition associated with the exiled Tarquins. Ancient tradition connected this battle with the consolidation of the young Republic and with divine signs, particularly the intervention of Castor and Pollux. Macaulay inherits a version of the past where military struggle, religious ritual, and political identity are inseparable. His poem reflects how early Roman history was preserved as a sequence of commemorative narratives linking war to civic cohesion. For nineteenth-century readers, it also suggested how states create legitimacy through shared memory and sacralized victory.

The historical forces behind Lake Regillus include Rome's competition with neighboring Latin communities in central Italy. Although the exact details are uncertain, conflict and alliance among these communities were real features of the region in the fifth century BCE. Roman later tradition turned these local struggles into a grand test of republican survival. Macaulay's poem follows that enlargement, presenting communal loyalty as the foundation of military success. Such themes corresponded to nineteenth-century interest in nation formation, citizen armies, and the emotional bonds that sustain political communities. The poem's energy reflects an era when historical writing and patriotic literature often worked together to shape civic feeling.

Virginia turns from external war to internal conflict and is rooted in the traditional struggle between patricians and plebeians in the fifth century BCE. Its central episode involves the decemvir Appius Claudius and the death of Virginia, events associated by Livy with the collapse of the

decemviral regime around 449 BCE. Roman historians used the tale to dramatize the danger of unchecked magistracy and the need for legal protections. In Macaulay's hands, the poem becomes a study of liberty endangered from within. It is less about conquest than about institutions, class tensions, and the social cost of arbitrary power in a nominally republican state.

The background to *Virginia* includes one of the most important themes in Roman political memory: the Conflict of the Orders. Over generations, plebeians sought relief from debt, protection from patrician abuse, and access to magistracies and law. Modern historians treat the traditional narrative with caution, but agree that long struggles over status and political inclusion marked the early Republic. Macaulay was writing soon after major debates about representation and reform in Britain, so a poem about legal injustice and popular resistance had clear contemporary relevance. Without directly allegorizing modern politics, *Virginia* channels nineteenth-century concerns about reform, accountability, and the moral authority of law.

The *Prophecy of Capys* reaches further into Rome's legendary past and future by imagining a visionary forecast of Roman greatness. Capys is a figure associated in Roman mythic genealogy with Trojan origins, and Macaulay uses prophecy to survey Rome's later expansion over Italy and beyond. Unlike the more tightly focused narratives of *Horatius*, *Lake Regillus*, and *Virginia*, this poem depends on retrospective historical knowledge accumulated over centuries. It reflects the Roman habit of reading early legend in light of eventual empire. For a British audience living in the age of global empire, that framing invited comparison between Rome's rise and Britain's own expanding power and burdens.