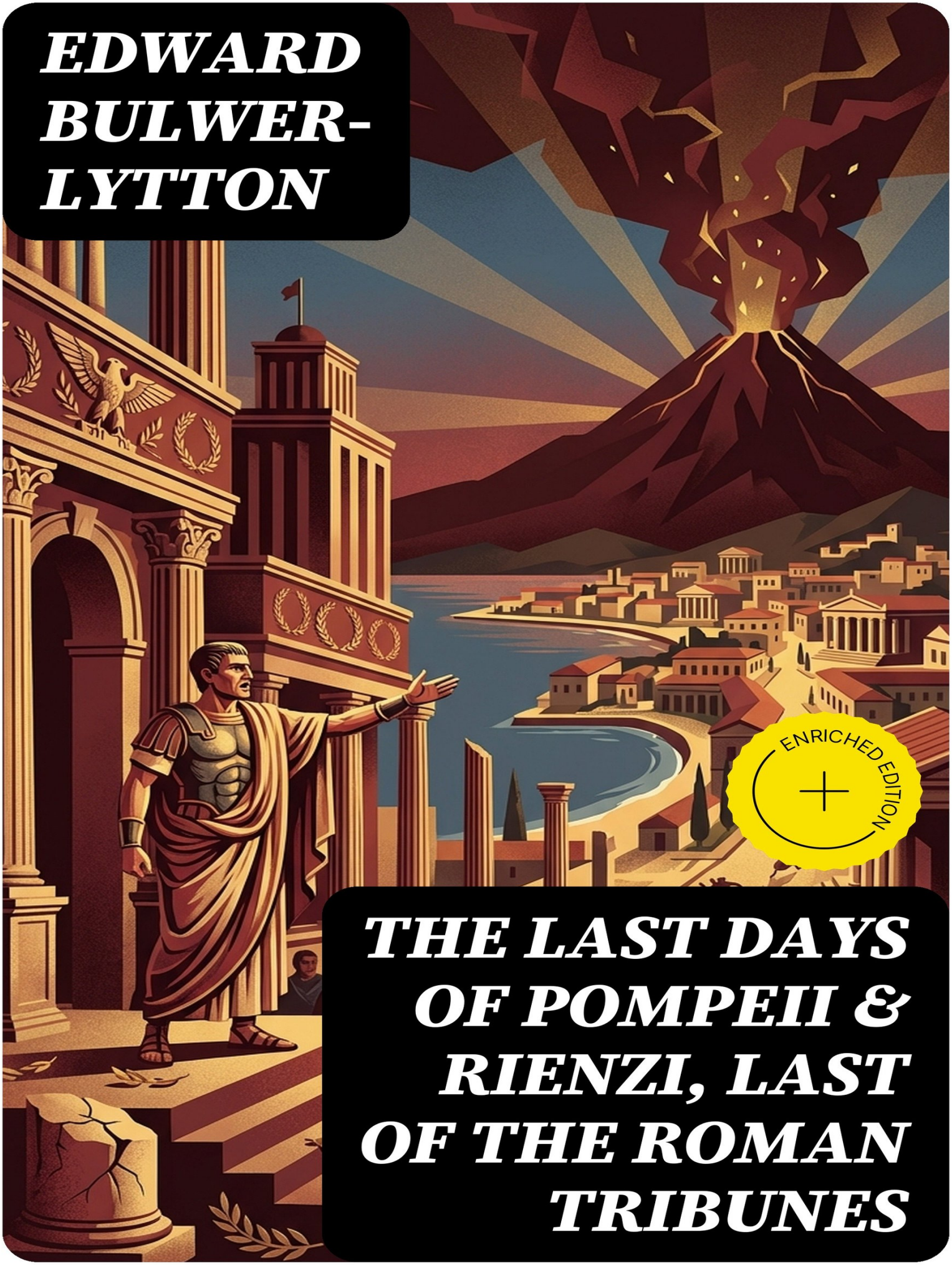
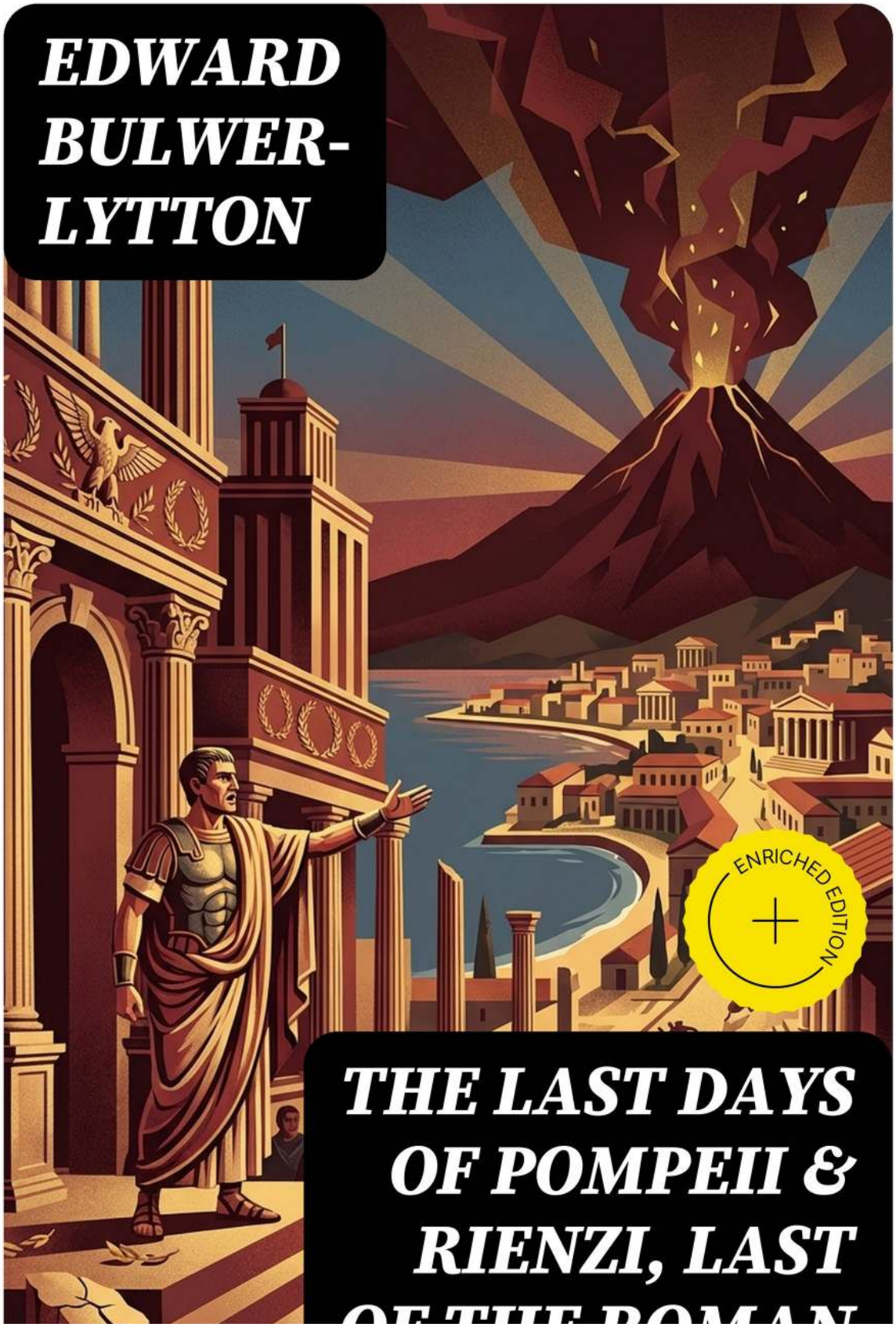
EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON



THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII & RIENZI, LAST OF THE ROMAN TRIBUNES


EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON
ENRICHED EDITION
THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII &
RIENZI, LAST


OF THE ROMAN
TRIBUNES

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

The Last Days of Pompeii & Rienzi, Last of the Roman Tribunes

Enriched edition. Historical Novels

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Isaac Lowry

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Table of Contents

Lost in Rome gathers two complete historical novels by Edward Bulwer-Lytton—The Last Days of Pompeii and Rienzi, the Last of the Roman Tribunes—written in the 1830s at the height of his popularity. The collection's scope is deliberately focused: not a miscellany of forms, but a paired study of Rome imagined across two epochs, antiquity and the late Middle Ages. Read together, these narratives outline the author's persistent fascination with civic grandeur, social turbulence, and personal destiny. Their juxtaposition invites readers to consider how one Victorian imagination could animate different Romes while pursuing questions of power, belief, and the spectacle of history.

Both works are historical novels, blending romance, political drama, and social panorama rather than short stories, essays, or verse. Bulwer-Lytton employs the resources of the nineteenth-century historical romance: a broad cast, carefully staged public scenes, and a plot that tests individual character against forces larger than any single life. He adapts the pace and color of the theatre to prose narrative, pairing declamatory speeches with descriptive tableaux. The result is fiction that aspires to be at once instructive and entertaining, attentive to the moral temperature of societies in crisis while sustaining narrative momentum through suspense, contrast, and carefully arranged set pieces.

The Last Days of Pompeii (1834) sets its action in the bustling Campanian city in the days before the eruption of Vesuvius. The premise brings together citizens, foreigners, artists, patrons, devotees of diverse cults, and observers of the city's pleasures and anxieties. Bulwer-Lytton draws on

contemporary antiquarian knowledge to depict architecture, customs, and urban rhythms without claiming documentary certainty. The novel’s interest lies in how private desires intersect with a public world glittering with art and spectacle yet shadowed by rumor and foreboding. It presents a cosmopolitan community poised on the brink of an event that will retrospectively define its memory.

Rienzi, the Last of the Roman Tribunes (1835) turns to fourteenth-century Rome and the historical figure Cola di Rienzo, whose oratory and civic program rally a restless populace. The premise follows his emergence as tribune amid factional violence and competing authorities. Bulwer-Lytton reconstructs a medieval city haunted by the legacy of ancient grandeur, where public rituals, street assemblies, and noble houses contend for symbolic and practical power. Without foreclosing outcomes, the narrative examines how ideals of justice, order, and Roman revival meet the realities of negotiation, resistance, and the contagious energy of crowds shaped by hope, grievance, and spectacle.

Across both novels, Rome is less a static backdrop than a living argument about civilization itself. Bulwer-Lytton’s recurring themes include the seductions of authority, the fragility of institutions, the magnetism of charismatic leadership, and the ethical tests posed by prosperity and fear. He is especially attentive to the crowd as a moral and theatrical presence, capable of sudden generosity and sudden cruelty. His style favors high rhetorical color, sharply spotlighted scenes, and contrasts between luxury and austerity, belief and skepticism. Yet the humane interest remains character-driven: private loyalties, ambitions, and doubts refract the pressures of history in mutually revealing ways.

These fictions reflect a Victorian confidence in learning made vivid through narrative. Bulwer-Lytton assimilates classical and medieval sources available to nineteenth-century readers, along with antiquarian studies and popular

histories, into a readable synthesis rather than specialized scholarship. He does not aim to reproduce the past verbatim; he stages it, selecting emblematic moments and arranging them to clarify motives and conflicts. The descriptive lexicon is opulent, the pacing theatrical, the moral framing explicit but flexible. This approach helps explain the novels' durability: they offer an education in how to see the past as a set of intelligible scenes without exhausting its ambiguities.

Lost in Rome thus serves as an essential pairing within Bulwer-Lytton's oeuvre, gathering two Roman-themed historical novels that have shaped popular images of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Their ongoing significance lies in the way they connect civic questions to narrative pleasure, bringing readers inside debates about order, charisma, faith, and cultural memory. The collection's purpose is straightforward: to present complete texts in a coherent frame so that continuities and distinctions emerge on their own. Approached together, the novels illuminate each other, offering complementary perspectives on what Rome has meant—and continues to mean—in the modern literary imagination.

Historical Context

Table of Contents

In the 1830s, Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote against a backdrop of European reordering after the Napoleonic Wars and Britain’s own constitutional change under the Reform Act of 1832. The vogue for the historical novel launched by Walter Scott had trained readers to see the past as a laboratory for modern dilemmas. As a Member of Parliament from 1831, Bulwer balanced fascination with popular sovereignty and fear of mass volatility, a tension that animates his Roman subjects. The simultaneous revival of travel to Italy after 1815 and the enduring prestige of the Grand Tour offered him landscapes and civic myths through which to test those questions.

The rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum under the Bourbon kings of Naples supplied unprecedented material detail for imagining ancient life. Systematic excavations began at Herculaneum in 1738 and at Pompeii in 1748, with galleries, frescoes, and household objects transferred to the Museo Borbonico in Naples. By the 1810s–1830s, widely read works such as Sir William Gell and John P. Gandy’s Pompeiana and François Mazois’s monographs provided careful plans and engravings. Travelers could walk exposed streets and atria, comparing texts to ruins. This archaeological visibility encouraged narrative reconstructions attentive to domestic interiors, urban ritual, and the fragile prosperity of Campanian towns.

Romantic culture’s appetite for the sublime and the spectacular heightened interest in volcanic catastrophe. The letters of Pliny the Younger to Tacitus, describing Vesuvius in 79, became touchstones for painters and writers. Karl Briullov’s vast canvas The Last Day of Pompeii (completed

1833) circulated through Europe as an emblem of terror, beauty, and historical pathos. In Britain, debates about pagan decadence and moral reform made classical Rome a mirror for contemporary virtue and vice. Bulwer's audience thus expected antiquity to deliver both spectacle and ethical instruction, framing disaster not merely as ruin but as revelation about civic character and fate.

Political conditions in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies further colored British views of southern Italy. Under Ferdinand I and later Ferdinand II, Naples sustained a reputation for police surveillance and sporadic repression, even as it welcomed foreign visitors to its museums and excavations. Recent eruptions, notably in 1822 and renewed activity in the 1830s, kept Vesuvius visibly alive. At the same time, geology's public controversies—Georges Cuvier's catastrophism against Charles Lyell's uniformitarianism (Principles of Geology, 1830–1833)—shaped how readers interpreted sudden destruction. Cataclysm could be read as both natural process and moral drama, a dual lens suited to historical fiction.

The medieval setting of Cola di Rienzo's career unfolded amid the Avignon Papacy (1309–1377), when papal authority resided in France and Rome's civic institutions frayed. Rival baronial families, notably the Orsini and the Colonna, dominated the city's politics. Rienzo rose as Tribune in 1347, briefly restoring order and republican ceremony with populist pageantry before exile. Petrarch celebrated him in letters urging Roman renewal, while wider Italian conflicts between communal autonomy and imperial-papal claims persisted. After a papal-backed return as Senator in 1354, he was killed by a Roman mob. The episode crystallized anxieties about charisma, legality, and urban sovereignty.

Nineteenth-century debates about nationhood and church power made Rienzi's story newly topical. The Risorgimento saw uprisings in 1820–1821 and 1831, while

Pope Gregory XVI (1831–1846) ruled the Papal States with pronounced suspicion of liberal reform. British observers, informed by Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and parliamentary reform in 1832, approached Italian struggles through their own questions about representation, order, and conscience. Bulwer's portraits of crowds, tribunals, and symbolic rituals speak to this climate: they test the promise of popular awakening against the perils of demagoguery. Subsequent revolutions in 1848–1849 and the brief Roman Republic intensified contemporary readings of such themes.

Bulwer's method drew on an expanding infrastructure of scholarship and museums that popularized the past. For antiquity, he could combine Pliny's eyewitness letters, epigraphic catalogues, and the visual record of Pompeian artifacts. For medieval Rome, accessible chronicles—such as the anonymous Vita di Cola di Rienzo, printed in eighteenth-century collections like Muratori's Rerum Italicarum Scriptores—offered narrative scaffolding. The growth of circulating libraries in Britain broadened the audience for such learned fiction, while engravings and guidebooks trained readers to visualize settings. This convergence of philology, archaeology, and print culture made it possible to stage history as lived environment and contested memory.

The novels found swift international audiences and helped fix enduring images of Rome. The Last Days of Pompeii inspired popular stage spectacles in Britain and the United States, aligning theatrical machinery with archaeological display. Rienzi resonated with musical and political imaginations; Richard Wagner's opera Rienzi (Dresden, 1842) drew on the legend that Bulwer also revived. Later developments reframed their contexts: Giuseppe Fiorelli's excavation reforms in the 1860s, including plaster casts of voids, deepened the pathos of Pompeian narratives, while Italian unification in 1861 and debates over the Roman Question gave new urgency to meditations on civic liberty.

Synopsis (Selection)

Table of Contents

The Last Days of Pompeii

A panoramic historical novel following intersecting lives in Pompeii as pleasures, politics, and superstition collide on the eve of catastrophe.

Lush, melodramatic narration and antiquarian detail explore themes of decadence, spiritual yearning, and the precariousness of civic life.

Rienzi, the Last of the Roman Tribunes

A political romance of medieval Rome tracing a charismatic tribune’s bid to revive the city’s ancient glory amid baronial feuds.

Oratory, spectacle, and courtly intrigue drive a study of reformist idealism, authority, and the volatile force of public opinion.

LOST IN ROME: Shared Motifs and Style

Across these Rome-centered novels, Bulwer-Lytton stages history as pageant, blending ornate prose, research-driven scene-setting, and high-stakes moral drama.

Recurring motifs include urban spectacle, crowd psychology, and the strain between classical ideals and human frailty, with a shift from intimate social milieus (Pompeii) to grand civic theater (Rienzi).

LOST IN ROME

Main Table of Contents

The Last Days of Pompeii
Rienzi, the Last of the Roman Tribunes

THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

BOOK THE FIRST

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF POMPEII.

'HO, Diomed, well met! Do you sup with Glaucus to-night?' said a young man of small stature, who wore his tunic in those loose and effeminate folds which proved him to be a gentleman and a coxcomb.

'Alas, no! dear Clodius; he has not invited me,' replied Diomed, a man of portly frame and of middle age. 'By Pollux, a scurvy trick! for they say his suppers are the best in Pompeii'.

'Pretty well—though there is never enough of wine for me. It is not the old Greek blood that flows in his veins, for he pretends that wine makes him dull the next morning.'

'There may be another reason for that thrift,' said Diomed, raising his brows. 'With all his conceit and extravagance he is not so rich, I fancy, as he affects to be, and perhaps loves to save his amphorae better than his wit.'

'An additional reason for supping with him while the sesterces last. Next year, Diomed, we must find another Glaucus.'

'He is fond of the dice, too, I hear.'

'He is fond of every pleasure; and while he likes the pleasure of giving suppers, we are all fond of him.'

'Ha, ha, Clodius, that is well said! Have you ever seen my wine-cellars, by-the-by?'

'I think not, my good Diomed.'

'Well, you must sup with me some evening; I have tolerable muraenae in my reservoir, and I ask Pansa the aedile to meet you.'

'O, no state with me!—Persicos odi apparatus, I am easily contented. Well, the day wanes; I am for the baths—and

you… '

'To the quaestor—business of state—afterwards to the temple of Isis. Vale!'

'An ostentatious, bustling, ill-bred fellow,' muttered Clodius to himself, as he sauntered slowly away. 'He thinks with his feasts and his wine-cellars to make us forget that he is the son of a freedman—and so we will, when we do him the honour of winning his money; these rich plebeians are a harvest for us spendthrift nobles.'

Thus soliloquising, Clodius arrived in the Via Domitiana, which was crowded with passengers and chariots, and exhibited all that gay and animated exuberance of life and motion which we find at this day in the streets of Naples.

The bells of the cars as they rapidly glided by each other jingled merrily on the ear, and Clodius with smiles or nods claimed familiar acquaintance with whatever equipage was most elegant or fantastic: in fact, no idler was better known in Pompeii.

'What, Clodius! and how have you slept on your good fortune?' cried, in a pleasant and musical voice, a young man, in a chariot of the most fastidious and graceful fashion. Upon its surface of bronze were elaborately wrought, in the still exquisite workmanship of Greece, reliefs of the Olympian games; the two horses that drew the car were of the rarest breed of Parthia; their slender limbs seemed to disdain the ground and court the air, and yet at the slightest touch of the charioteer, who stood behind the young owner of the equipage, they paused motionless, as if suddenly transformed into stone—lifeless, but lifelike, as one of the breathing wonders of Praxiteles. The owner himself was of that slender and beautiful symmetry from which the sculptors of Athens drew their models; his Grecian origin betrayed itself in his light but clustering locks, and the perfect harmony of his features. He wore no toga, which in the time of the emperors had indeed ceased to be the general distinction of the Romans, and was especially

ridiculed by the pretenders to fashion; but his tunic glowed in the richest hues of the Tyrian dye, and the fibulae, or buckles, by which it was fastened, sparkled with emeralds: around his neck was a chain of gold, which in the middle of his breast twisted itself into the form of a serpent's head, from the mouth of which hung pendent a large signet ring of elaborate and most exquisite workmanship; the sleeves of the tunic were loose, and fringed at the hand with gold: and across the waist a girdle wrought in arabesque designs, and of the same material as the fringe, served in lieu of pockets for the receptacle of the handkerchief and the purse, the stilus and the tablets.

'My dear Glaucus!' said Clodius, 'I rejoice to see that your losses have so little affected your mien. Why, you seem as if you had been inspired by Apollo, and your face shines with happiness like a glory; any one might take you for the winner, and me for the loser.'

'And what is there in the loss or gain of those dull pieces of metal that should change our spirit, my Clodius? By Venus, while yet young, we can cover our full locks with chaplets—while yet the cithara sounds on unsated ears—while yet the smile of Lydia or of Chloe flashes over our veins in which the blood runs so swiftly, so long shall we find delight in the sunny air, and make bald time itself but the treasurer of our joys. You sup with me to-night, you know.'

'Who ever forgets the invitation of Glaucus!'

'But which way go you now?'

'Why, I thought of visiting the baths: but it wants yet an hour to the usual time.'

'Well, I will dismiss my chariot, and go with you. So, so, my Phylias,' stroking the horse nearest to him, which by a low neigh and with backward ears playfully acknowledged the courtesy: 'a holiday for you to-day. Is he not handsome, Clodius?'

'Worthy of Phoebus,' returned the noble parasite—'or of Glaucus.'

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

THE BLIND FLOWER-GIRL, AND THE BEAUTY OF FASHION. THE ATHENIAN'S CONFESSION. THE READER'S INTRODUCTION TO ARBACES OF EGYPT.

Talking lightly on a thousand matters, the two young men sauntered through the streets; they were now in that quarter which was filled with the gayest shops, their open interiors all and each radiant with the gaudy yet harmonious colors of frescoes, inconceivably varied in fancy and design. The sparkling fountains, that at every vista threw upwards their grateful spray in the summer air; the crowd of passengers, or rather loiterers, mostly clad in robes of the Tyrian dye; the gay groups collected round each more attractive shop; the slaves passing to and fro with buckets of bronze, cast in the most graceful shapes, and borne upon their heads; the country girls stationed at frequent intervals with baskets of blushing fruit, and flowers more alluring to the ancient Italians than to their descendants (with whom, indeed, "latet anguis in herba," a disease seems lurking in every violet and rose); the numerous haunts which fulfilled with that idle people the office of cafes and clubs at this day; the shops, where on shelves of marble were ranged the vases of wine and oil, and before whose thresholds, seats, protected from the sun by a purple awning, invited the weary to rest and the indolent to lounge—made a scene of such glowing and vivacious excitement, as might well give the Athenian spirit of Glaucus an excuse for its susceptibility to joy.

'Talk to me no more of Rome,' said he to Clodius. 'Pleasure is too stately and ponderous in those mighty walls:

even in the precincts of the court—even in the Golden House of Nero, and the incipient glories of the palace of Titus, there is a certain dulness of magnificence—the eye aches—the spirit is wearied; besides, my Clodius, we are discontented when we compare the enormous luxury and wealth of others with the mediocrity of our own state. But here we surrender ourselves easily to pleasure, and we have the brilliancy of luxury without the lassitude of its pomp.'

'It was from that feeling that you chose your summer retreat at Pompeii?'

'It was. I prefer it to Baiae: I grant the charms of the latter, but I love not the pedants who resort there, and who seem to weigh out their pleasures by the drachm.'

'Yet you are fond of the learned, too; and as for poetry, why, your house is literally eloquent with AEschylus and Homer, the epic and the drama.'

'Yes, but those Romans who mimic my Athenian ancestors do everything so heavily. Even in the chase they make their slaves carry Plato with them; and whenever the boar is lost, out they take their books and their papyrus, in order not to lose their time too. When the dancing-girls swim before them in all the blandishment of Persian manners, some drone of a freedman, with a face of stone, reads them a section of Cicero "De Officiis". Unskilful pharmacists! pleasure and study are not elements to be thus mixed together, they must be enjoyed separately: the Romans lose both by this pragmatical affectation of refinement, and prove that they have no souls for either. Oh, my Clodius, how little your countrymen know of the true versatility of a Pericles, of the true witcheries of an Aspasia! It was but the other day that I paid a visit to Pliny: he was sitting in his summer-house writing, while an unfortunate slave played on the tibia. His nephew (oh! whip me such philosophical coxcombs!) was reading Thucydides' description of the plague, and nodding his conceited little head in time to the music, while his lips were repeating all

the loathsome details of that terrible delineation. The puppy saw nothing incongruous in learning at the same time a ditty of love and a description of the plague.'

'Why, they are much the same thing,' said Clodius.

'So I told him, in excuse for his coxcombry—but my youth stared me rebukingly in the face, without taking the jest, and answered, that it was only the insensate ear that the music pleased, whereas the book (the description of the plague, mind you!) elevated the heart. "Ah!" quoth the fat uncle, wheezing, "my boy is quite an Athenian, always mixing the utile with the dulce." O Minerva, how I laughed in my sleeve! While I was there, they came to tell the boy-sophist that his favorite freedman was just dead of a fever. "Inexorable death!" cried he; "get me my Horace. How beautifully the sweet poet consoles us for these misfortunes!" Oh, can these men love, my Clodius? Scarcely even with the senses. How rarely a Roman has a heart! He is but the mechanism of genius—he wants its bones and flesh.'

Though Clodius was secretly a little sore at these remarks on his countrymen, he affected to sympathize with his friend, partly because he was by nature a parasite, and partly because it was the fashion among the dissolute young Romans to affect a little contempt for the very birth which, in reality, made them so arrogant; it was the mode to imitate the Greeks, and yet to laugh at their own clumsy imitation.

Thus conversing, their steps were arrested by a crowd gathered round an open space where three streets met; and, just where the porticoes of a light and graceful temple threw their shade, there stood a young girl, with a flower-basket on her right arm, and a small three-stringed instrument of music in the left hand, to whose low and soft tones she was modulating a wild and half-barbaric air. At every pause in the music she gracefully waved her flower-basket round, inviting the loiterers to buy; and many a

sesterce was showered into the basket, either in compliment to the music or in compassion to the songstress —for she was blind.

'It is my poor Thessalian,' said Glaucus, stopping; 'I have not seen her since my return to Pompeii. Hush! her voice is sweet; let us listen.'

THE BLIND FLOWER-GIRL'S SONG

I.

Buy my flowers—O buy—I pray!
The blind girl comes from afar;
If the earth be as fair as I hear them say,
These flowers her children are!
Do they her beauty keep?
They are fresh from her lap, I know;
For I caught them fast asleep
In her arms an hour ago.
With the air which is her breath—
Her soft and delicate breath—
Over them murmuring low!

On their lips her sweet kiss lingers yet,
And their cheeks with her tender tears are wet.
For she weeps—that gentle mother weeps—
(As morn and night her watch she keeps,
With a yearning heart and a passionate care)
To see the young things grow so fair;
She weeps—for love she weeps;
And the dews are the tears she weeps
From the well of a mother's love!

II.

Ye have a world of light,

Read together, the novels map a continuum from salon persuasion to mass address, binding private charisma to public order. Bulwer-Lytton admires language’s force to clarify, reconcile, and inspire, yet he traces its vulnerability to vanity and misrecognition. When eloquence becomes the principal credential for rule, ethical hazards multiply: motives blur, evidence yields to rhythm, and community bonds hinge on mood. The author’s interest lies less in observing speech than in observing its double life as moral signal and political technology, shaping destinies while quietly narrowing the space for doubt.

Question 3

How do religious imaginaries shape public order and private conscience across the two narratives?

In The Last Days of Pompeii, polytheistic ritual saturates urban routines, from household shrines to grand sacrifices. Mystery cults and foreign priesthoods import spectacle and secrecy, offering avenues of power that bypass civil offices. Bulwer-Lytton sketches these practices with ethnographic patience, framing belief as social infrastructure that assigns roles, legitimizes festivals, and sanctions penalties. He also traces minor currents of emerging Christian piety without turning them into thesis statements, using them to suggest quieter forms of duty and compassion. Conscience, here, is negotiated amid crowded pantheons, where omens and honor intersect.

In Rienzi, Christianity provides the dominant grammar of authority, interlacing law with sacramental symbolism and penitential discourse. Reformers and opponents alike recruit the sacred—invoking saints, processions, and relics—to frame political aims as moral obligations. Humanist admiration for antique Rome enters as a parallel imaginary, reinterpreting civic virtue through classical exempla rather than cult practice. Bulwer-Lytton shows conscience

articulated through confession, oath, and pastoral counsel, while public order emerges from negotiated accommodations between ecclesiastical jurisdiction and civic aspiration. The religious field thus becomes a contested yet structuring context for every institutional choice.

Across both novels, belief operates as a shared vocabulary that orders time, space, and emotion. The contrast is striking: Pompeii's ritual ecology is embodied, performative, and multi-centered; medieval Rome's is textualized, juridical, and focused through clerical authority. Yet continuities are evident in how rites stabilize identity and authorize collective risk. Bulwer-Lytton avoids doctrinal treatises, preferring to track the lived effects of faith on habits, sympathies, and sanctions. Private conscience appears not as solitary rebellion but as a recalibration within inherited forms, where acts of mercy and fidelity alter civic trajectories.

Question 4

How do research-driven details and imaginative interiority collaborate to animate past societies?

The Last Days of Pompeii is animated by the era's fresh excavations: street grids, frescoes, mosaics, and curiosities supply a museum of textures. Bulwer-Lytton selects these materials not as inert catalog but as prompts for movement, mapping household economies, marketplaces, and convivial rituals onto artifacts. He grants interior motives to figures who might otherwise serve as labels for statues, threading desire, fear, and calculation through rooms etched by archaeology. The fusion produces a tactile historicism where lamp soot, garden shade, and tavern clatter bolster plausibility while sustaining a romantic melody of character.

Rienzi draws from chronicles, letters, papal records, and civic decrees, and the prose reflects this documentary

spine. Bulwer-Lytton adapts the cadence of public writing into scene-making, translating edicts into moments of human stakes and incorporating reported speeches without ceding narrative momentum. Interior life in this novel often speaks the idiom of policy and memory, with private reflection shaded by legal calculation and symbolic inheritance. Material description remains vivid, yet the texture is primarily textual: the city becomes an archive of commitments, where parchment, inscription, and oath animate the corridors of power.

Together, these methods reveal an authorial flexibility that keeps imagination tethered to evidence while refusing pedantry. Archaeology grounds Pompeii’s sensuous immediacy; documentary rigor steadies Rienzi’s political chronicle. In both, Bulwer-Lytton’s ornate style risks excess yet often sharpens ethical and social contours by lingering over detail long enough to make systems visible. Imaginative interiority supplies motive and sympathy that records cannot fix, converting lists and laws into lived dilemmas. The result is a layered historiography in narrative form, where bodies and documents, artifacts and voices, co-produce the feel of a vanished world.

Memorable Quotes

Table of Contents