CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Lays of Ancient Rome

Thomas Babington Macaulay · *1842 · English original*

Four imagined Roman songs move from a defended bridge through battle and civic crisis to a prophecy of greatness.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does a city's remembered song turn private courage or loss into public duty?

"Then out spake brave Horatius,"
Horatius, stanza XXVII

The lays give households, soldiers, and crowds a shared language of praise and protest, shaped by their imagined occasions.

KEY CHARACTERS

Horatius
Holds the crossing while the Romans destroy it.

Spurius Lartius and Herminius
Share the first defense and withdraw before the collapse.

The Twin Brethren
Appear at Regillus and announce victory in Rome.

Virginia and Virginius
Their fatal crisis sparks anger against corrupt authority.

Appius Claudius
Uses judicial power to pursue Virginia.

Romulus and Capys
Join the city's beginnings to a prophecy of its future.

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The danger reaches the bridge

HORATIUS, STANZA XXVII

An invading army threatens Rome, and Horatius volunteers to hold the narrow crossing while it is destroyed.

- Lars Porsena of Clusium is on the march, and the danger reaches the Tiber bridge.
- The lays are narrative poems with Macaulay's own notes and prefaces.
- The hosted text is the complete Lays of Ancient Rome (1842).

> *"Then out spake brave Horatius,"*
> Horatius, stanza XXVII

02

The defender chooses the odds

HORATIUS, STANZA XXVII

Horatius names the homes and sacred places that justify his stand, then survives the fall of the bridge.

- Then out spake brave Horatius, the Captain of the Gate.
- He asks how a man can die better than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods.
- Keep the capitals and lineation of the hosted poem.

> *"And how can man die better / Than facing fearful odds,"*
> Horatius, stanza XXVII

03

Victory and the Twin Brethren

THE BATTLE OF THE LAKE REGILLUS, STANZA XL

The battle at Regillus becomes a remembered civic feast through the appearance and announcement of divine helpers.

- The Battle of the Lake Regillus turns on the appearing of the Twin Brethren.
- It is a later lay in the book, not a second canto of Horatius.
- Rome's cavalry fight is told in the same ballad measure.

> *"The gods who live forever / Have fought for Rome to-day!"*
> The Battle of the Lake Regillus, stanza XL

04

A household and the law

VIRGINIA, CLOSING POPULAR UPRISING

Virginia's death exposes Appius's abuse of office and turns the public crowd against the decemvirs.

- Virginia is the lay of a household and the law under Appius Claudius.
- Macaulay retells a Roman story of justice and a father's terrible duty.
- The lay is grave; do not flatten it into a mere school recitation.

> *"Tribunes! we will have Tribunes!"*
> Virginia, closing popular uprising

05

A future named for Rome

THE PROPHECY OF CAPYS, STANZA XV

Capys foretells the city's greatness from the life and ancestry of its founder.

- The Prophecy of Capys looks toward a future named for Rome.
- The book closes by looking outward from the early city.
- Read the four lays as a set, not only the famous bridge.

> *"From sunrise unto sunset / All earth shall hear thy fame:"*
> The Prophecy of Capys, stanza XV

Civic courage | Law and public power | Song as memory

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The lays are Macaulay's English inventions, not translated Roman songs.
2. Read each prose introduction for the imagined occasion of performance.
3. Virginia contains a father's fatal act against his daughter.

Quotations are verbatim from the English original, Project Gutenberg #847: Thomas Babington Macaulay, Lays of Ancient Rome, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/macaulay-lays-of-ancient-rome/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.