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Produced by David Ceponis

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Preface To The Initial Project Gutenberg Edition Of The Audio
Reading Of Edward Gibbon's Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire.

Or

A First Venue of Excuses, Denials, and Disclaimers.

Let me say at the outset that those who expect this complete audio rendering of Gibbon's historical and literary masterpiece to be an epitome of perfect, pear-shaped, dropped -"r" Oxbridge English may be disappointed. I believe there is such an "audiobook" edition available commercially, but it isn't free. Experimenting some years ago with the text-to-speech software then available, I thought it would be very funny, the private joke of a modern American barbarian, to have the "little stuffed voices" rendering, in their innocent and patient way, the imposing yet effervescent bulk of Gibbon's magnificent and immortal marble-pillared prose. To my amazement, if not to the credit of my taste, I've found this shotgun wedding of sound and sense quite harmonious, vital, and durable through many years of repeated listening. I find that the voices, unembodied and wooden at first audit, but softer, incarnate, personalized by acclimatization, pack more expression and clarity of diction into a few megabytes of software than is exhibited by most humans I hear these days, except for trained entertainment professionals and seasoned barroom raconteurs. I propose that the relentless yet measured deadpan delivery, the ironic contrast of unwitting voice and worldly wise content, is a plausible fit to the objective, slightly distant facade of Gibbon's dense and rational, waste-no-word, 18th century style; a foil to his balanced tone, restrained despite dudgeon, covering a tale that is, face it, in its majority, a mordant chronicle, incarnadined—my favorite period bon mot—by battle, gore, and treachery. Of itself Gibbon's voluminous tragedy—the framework imposed by historians of his time—allows us only the occasional adrenal or comic relief by means of an essay on the basics of Roman jurisprudence, the topography of Arabia, or the absurdities and impossibilities of early Christian theology, not to mention the priceless vituperation against the "Greeks" at the end of Chapter 53.

Perhaps the jest went too far. I wound up producing the entirety of the work, consuming much more time and energy than if I, or some other carbon-based unit, had simply armed ourselves with microphone and recorder, then intrepidly hacked our way toward throat cancer, through all 120-odd hours of the reading. But that's water under the bridge. I took the (immense) trouble to teach the well-meaning but naive programs improved pronunciations of over 4.000 words, mostly proper names, British spellings, and 18th century archaisms. Having some background in Catholic Church Latin, and two years of (forced) Latin in high school, but no classical scholar, I can only vouch that I did the best I could within my hobbyist limitations. In cases of extremely obscure items such as "Goisvintha"—a Gothic queen; or "Geougen"—a collective noun, like "herd" or "squad", to describe a certain group of Tartaric barbarians, I've settled for what sounded, to my part-time poet's ear, euphonious and consistent with the flow of the line. I've heard tapes of classical scholars rendering academically correct Latin, but, to venture arrogance, neither they nor the Church ever convinced me that anyone except prelates, scholars, and perhaps an affected upper crust ever actually spoke that way.

How else explain French? I'd give a lot to bounce through Latium once per century from 600 B.C through the first millennium of our era in order to hear authentic village or "street" Latin.

One notices that at Chapter 39 a different voice takes over through to the end of the work. For this there are two major reasons. Firstly, the product of the original voice required some extensive, and excruciatingly time-consuming digital audio processing to remove crudities of the speech engine, such as a harsh rasp, which even yet breaks through on occasion. Secondly, the production of all six volumes occupied the occasional parts of three or four years, during which time a much improved speech engine became available. Back then I did not envision a public audience for the work, and so was not hobbled by considerations of consistency. The new voice was smoother, endowed with a much more "intelligent" engine, AND DID NOT CRASH EVERY TWENTY MINUTES! For those interested, the softwares are the two final versions of Monologue, created by First Byte Software. I do not believe it is any more available to the market.

There are various types of flaws in this rendering, some correctible, some not—at least not very easily or conveniently. Certain errors persist because I recall they exist, but not where. Now, I don't have the time or inclination to reaudit all 120 hours of the reading in order to flush them out. You are welcome to try, or even to email me, at the address below, their nature and whereabouts. I will collect such reports and maybe someday repair the faults. Better yet, do it yourself (See below)! There are a very, very few errors of garbled audio that arose during the conversion to .mp3. I do not believe they inhibit understanding of the contextual passage. But once again, you tell me. Other errors arise because the programs were not smart enough to recognize and discriminate among some of the tricky ambiguities and homonymic mimeses of English. Sometimes "lives" is pronounced incorrectly relative to context, noun versus verb. Other examples in this category are "minute", "rebel(s)", "lead", "read", and "present". There are occasional renderings of "...part i" -(roman numeral one) as "...part eye". I tried to eliminate that by reformatting the source text, but obviously missed in some cases. The historian Procopius' name is occasionally rendered "Procompanyius" because of an obstinacy about expanding abbreviations I could not completely—Gibbon's favorite term—extirpate. In some few other cases there are obviously erroneous or awkward pronunciations of words, especially of French proper and place names. Frankly, I'm proud the little beasts do as well as they do in the continental tongue. Let me say that although I tried assiduously, and even systematically to eliminate errors (having written a program that scanned the source text for words "new" to the speech software), the product of Gibbon's twenty year labor is in itself an empire of English, in which I have yet to travel every byway. Each successive chapter contained literally many hundreds of new words that had not appeared even in his own previous chapters! Finally, some deep errors arise because the source text itself, Project Gutenberg's Gibbon, contains some flaws.

In sum, what began in levity, then developed into a protracted, private, and informal labor of love, is now offered to the public as a first draft, a Gutenberg "xxxxx10.mp3", mostly correct, of that rare entertainment, dramatic scholarship, rendered into the charismatic medium of the spoken word. The justification of its unredeemed state is that for now, granting the superiority of perfection, if available, there is yet much value in any reasonably integral creation especially if the alternative is nothing. To anyone who reads this, listens to the material, finds blemishes, and cares, I will be happy to send you, in your thousands, the software, gratis save cost of materials and shipping, enabling you to make your own corrections, which you can then share with us all.

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September 05, 2002

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