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SWORDS-AND-SCANDALS: HOLLYWOOD'S ROME DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION¹

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Images of Rome in films made during the early 1930s offer a fascinating example of how America's metaphoric relationship to Rome took popular and commercial shape during a time of great economic hardship and political turbulence. Americans had never faced anything quite like the Great Depression before. There had been economic depressions in the past, but nothing as catastrophic and enduring as the events that followed in the wake of Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929. In the first two months after the Crash, the number of unemployed in the United States went from fewer than half a million to more than four million. By 1932, one out of four Americans was unemployed, and by 1933, fifteen million people had no work. Banks closed, farms went bankrupt, factories shut down, and many thousands of people found themselves not only jobless, but also homeless. The triumphant optimism of the early years of the twentieth century, bolstered later by America's role in World War I and the Allied victory, gave way to uncertainty and unrest as the imperial bubble burst and the United States endured the shock of the Great Depression.

Several Hollywood films produced during the years 1932–35 utilized stereotypical images of Rome and Romans to articulate and address anxieties and concerns precipitated by this economic catastrophe. Of these, two box-office hits, *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Roman Scandals* (1933), employ a standard trope of Romans as the decadent oppressors of a virtuous, innocent, but ultimately triumphant people, but each figures its corrupt Romans in ways that spoke differently to Depression audiences.

¹ This essay is a revised and expanded version of Malamud 2004.

Competing representations of Rome in American culture were not new in the 1930s; the legacy of Rome has offered Americans a useable and malleable past since the Revolutionary era, and images and narratives of Rome have played a vital role in how Americans have understood themselves and their history. Representations of Rome are not stable even when they are produced in the same historical moment: they shift in accordance with the specific ideological and political concerns and aims of their producers, the artistic conventions to which the representations belong, and the political and aesthetic sensibilities and desires of the audiences and consumers (see Fredrick in this volume). Cecil B. DeMille's sword-and-sandal historical epic focused on the Roman persecution of Christians and offered spectators an uplifting message of spiritual redemption and vicarious enjoyment of Roman decadence. By contrast, in Samuel Goldwyn's musical comedy, ancient Rome and Depression America are mirror images of each other, and renewal and relief result from a cleansing of graft and corruption from the Roman, and hence also the American, political systems.

SPECTACULAR PIETY

Building on the enormous popularity of nineteenth-century novels about Roman persecution of Christians and Jews such as *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Ben-Hur*, and *Quo Vadis*, melodramas known as "toga plays" became popular middlebrow stage entertainment in the 1890s (Mayer 1994.10). Typically, the plays pit virtuous Christians or Jews against militaristic and decadent Roman oppressors. Like the novels, most of the plays feature delusional and tyrannical rulers, predatory and sexually dominating women, orgies, and spectacles of violence and excess in the Roman arena. In the early twentieth century, several of these novels and plays were adapted into film in an attempt to legitimate the new medium as an art form and widen its working-class audience to include the middle and upper classes. Between the years 1907 and 1917, the film industry devoted itself to literary, historical, and biblical subjects that were shown in elegant movie theatres. *Ben-Hur* was adapted into film in 1907 and 1925; *Quo Vadis* in 1912 and 1924; *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1908, 1913, and 1926; and Wilson Barrett's 1895 toga play *The Sign of the Cross* in 1904 and 1914. All were endorsed by churches and uplift movements as excellent ways to educate and inculcate Christian values while, at the same time, offering entertaining adventure and romance. By 1910, twenty-six million people, nearly thirty percent of the population, went to the movies each week (Ross 1998.11,

14–30). By the 1920s, cinema had become the nation's favorite form of commercial entertainment, and the film industry was a major institution. Movies were on offer everywhere—writing in the 1930s, author Margaret Thorp commented that “it is difficult to get out of range of a movie palace anywhere in the country . . . even Nevada has forty” (1939.9). Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*, a cinematic version of Wilson Barrett's toga play of the same name, was shown throughout the nation.

In the toga play and the film, the conflict between a decadent and militaristic imperial Rome and virtuous Christians is structured around a romance. The Roman prefect Marcus Superbus has lived a sensual and decadent life until he meets, pursues, and is initially rebuffed by a young Christian woman, Mercia. Both experience conflict: the prefect's loyalty to Rome's militaristic values and his accustomed sexual freedom compete with his attraction to a woman whose chastity and turn-the-other-cheek morality threaten the core of his identity. The woman's conflict is simpler: she must resist her erotic attraction to the Roman official until he adopts the new religion. The sadistic and debauched emperor Nero, the epitome of Roman vice and decadence, and his lascivious and predatory consort Poppaea (the power behind the scenes) imprison the Christians and condemn them to death. Just as Mercia is about to be thrown to the wild beasts in the arena, Marcus embraces Christianity, and together the two attain martyrdom and eternal reward in the Roman arena.

Readers of nineteenth-century Victorian novels and viewers of toga dramas identified with the persecuted but ultimately triumphant Christians and distanced themselves from the Roman tyrannical oppressors. Identification with early pre-sectarian Christianity in the fictional world of literature and drama provided a satisfying vision of a community united by religious faith amidst the lived reality of a nation fractured by religious, class, and economic divisions. In the dark days of the early 1930s, DeMille reached back to the pieties and moral assurances of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant progressive era's responses to the turbulence and disorder of the late nineteenth century. Like Wilson Barrett, DeMille looked to the age of the Christian martyrs for an inspirational model of a strongly knit community whose moral certitude enabled them to triumph even in the midst of worldly calamities. Both men believed temporal ills could be overcome by moral regeneration.

A MAN WITH A MISSION

The moralistic and didactic nature of the toga play meshed well with director Cecil B. DeMille's conservative views and Protestant background:

the DeMille family first moved to America in 1658, and DeMille was intensely proud of his Protestant Dutch ancestry. Many members of the family were drawn to the ministry, and his father was a deeply religious teacher and a playwright. Henry DeMille, the patriarch, read a chapter from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament aloud to the DeMille children every day, and the children's bedroom walls were lined with prints of scenes and texts from the Bible (Higham 1973.4–5).

The Sign of the Cross completed a trilogy DeMille began with his 1923 *The Ten Commandments* and 1927 *The King of Kings*. Looking back more than thirty years later, DeMille viewed them as “the three really important films in my career that have had most effect upon the world.” They tell a story: “*The Ten Commandments* is the giving of the law, *The King of Kings* is the interpretation of the law, and *The Sign of the Cross* is the preservation of the law.” Together “they show the way out, [to] those who have a spark of the soul left in them, [for] a soul that knows there is a God” (DeMille, quoted by Pratt 1989.139–40).

There was no separation of faith from work for DeMille. He kept a Bible beside him at mealtimes at the studio. When making *The Ten Commandments*, he sent a Bible to every person on the payroll, and he commanded his staff to keep their Bibles with them at all times: “Place it on your desk, and when you travel, stick it in your briefcase. Make it a daily habit.” When making *The King of Kings*, he again sent copies of the Bible to everyone, ordered that the staff memorize every word of the gospels, and called them in daily for a Bible lesson. He even addressed them from a pulpit! (Higham 1973.112, 160, 167).

The Bible, he said, was “the source of all drama—and the lexicon of human behavior, good and bad!” It was, of course, the source of many of his films. Indeed, he believed he had a special opportunity and a responsibility to disseminate the Biblical message: “We in the industry hold great power. Who else—except the missionaries of God—have had our opportunity to make the brotherhood of man not a phrase, but a reality—a brotherhood that has shared the same laughter and the same tears, dreamt the same dreams, been encouraged by the same hopes, inspired by the same faith in man and in God, which we painted for them, night after night, on the screens of the world?” (DeMille, quoted by Essoe and Lee 1979.18).

DeMille keenly felt the weight of the responsibility of his mission to bring the Bible to life in his films. “It is a sobering thought,” he remarked, “that the decisions we make at our desks in Hollywood may intimately affect the lives of men, women, and children throughout the

world" (DeMille, quoted by Essoe and Lee 1979.15). DeMille understood the power of film to shape and manipulate audiences, and he claimed he wanted his films to kindle Christian piety. Speaking about his 1956 *The Ten Commandments*, he said: "My interest is not in how much money it makes, but in the number of people who see it and carry away part of what Moses carried away from the burning bush" (DeMille, quoted by Pratt 1989.141, DeMille 1959.305–06).

DeMille also understood that film viewers desired visually rich and satisfying stories. Artistic license was necessary to bring Biblical (and other) tales to the screen in an appealing and dramatic manner: "Audiences are not interested in dates, but in events and their significance. And they do not want to be educated, but entertained." Accordingly, he sensationalized his uplifting message. Paramount Pictures advertised *The Sign of the Cross* as "the story of a love that attains fruition on the sun-baked, blood-red sands of the Roman arena" (Essoe and Lee 1979.147, 195). Similarly, DeMille got funding for *Samson and Delilah* (1949) by reducing the story elements to "boy meets girl—and what a boy, and what a girl!" He and his staff carefully studied the historical literature, the material culture and archaeology, and the paintings of the periods he brought to life on screen, but accuracy would always come second to the need for an entertaining narrative. DeMille clearly specified that he wanted "painterly richness of imagination more than scrupulous accuracy" (DeMille 1934.99). In *The King of Kings*, Mary Magdalene's house was not a simple prostitute's house but an opulent and lavish dwelling, and her interest in Judas supplied romance. Similarly, while immense research went into *Cleopatra* (1934), actress Claudette Colbert's gowns were more fitting for 1930s cocktail parties than for ancient Egypt.

The same tension between authenticity and entertainment appears in *The Sign of the Cross*. DeMille trumpeted historical verisimilitude in the promotional literature: "More than a year was spent in research and preparation. Accurate historical settings of a magnitude and magnificence never attempted before were built to insure true realism. The Imperial City as it was in Nero's day was reproduced at the Paramount ranch in the foothills of the Santa Monica mountains."² Nonetheless, Poppaea's (Claudette Colbert) bath, though copied from blueprints and charts of recent excavations, was

2 Promotional literature from the University of Southern California Cinema-Television archive.

filled with asses' milk and scented with the "crushed hearts of thousands of roses," and her gowns were over-the-top modern creations.

DISASTER AND REGENERATION

The Sign of the Cross was released at Christmastime in 1932, the nadir of the Depression. Millions were unemployed, tens of thousands of people were homeless, and a catastrophic collapse of the entire banking system seemed imminent. DeMille meant *The Sign of the Cross* to carry a moral message for Americans: "The gods of materialism had failed." The film's prologue urged people to "glance back through human history to men and women who held their ideals dearer than their lives . . . The sacrifice of those martyrs who gave their lives on blood-red sands of Roman arenas preserves for us an eternal Truth. The faith born then is still available" (DeMille 1959.325). In the darkest moment of the Depression, Paramount advertised the film with the message: "Like a shining light! In an America darkened by shattered dreams, empty words, unfilled promises, a Spectacle that lifts up the Spirit. A Love that holds forth hope to an unhappy world."³

DeMille saw a clear analogy between Depression America and imperial Rome.⁴ The souvenir booklet to the film claimed that "in *The Sign of the Cross* students of world affairs will find one of the most startling parallels to modern times. For life in ancient Rome is singularly similar in many of its aspects to life in modern America. The story of the luxury and extravagance of Rome finds striking reflection in our own easy life prior to the fatal autumn of 1929." Here DeMille drew a parallel between the morals of the Jazz Age and imperial Rome, and the souvenir booklet suggested that the decadent behaviors of the Roman and American citizenry made each society vulnerable to catastrophe. For the Romans, the catastrophe was the barbarian invasions, for Americans, the Crash. DeMille told a reporter from the *New York American* on 15 June 1932: "Do you realize the close analogy between conditions today in the United States and the Roman Empire prior to its fall? Multitudes in Rome were then oppressed by distressing

3 Promotional literature from the University of Southern California Cinema-Television archive.

4 Here I draw on Maria Wyke's analysis of the film, particularly the relevance of the Depression to DeMille's depiction of imperial Rome under Nero; see also her discussion (1997.131–37) of the film's reception when it was rereleased during World War II with a new prologue and epilogue.

laws, overtaxed and ruled by a chosen few. Unless America returns to the pure ideals of our legendary forebears, it will pass into oblivion as Rome did" (DeMille, quoted by Higham 1973.216; Wyke 1997.132).

For DeMille, "our legendary forebears" were the early Christian martyrs and their Puritan and Protestant descendants in the New World. Like the earlier Victorian literature from which he drew, DeMille's cinematic trilogy suggested a deep historical and Christian identity for the nation. Like today's religious right, DeMille ignored the concept of the separation of church and state. The film urges a reaffirmation of the early ideals of the first Christians and of the Puritan and Protestant settlers of the New World; it is a call for a spiritual nationalism and renewal based on a revived Christianity.

VISUAL DELIGHTS

DeMille's signature cinematic style added a rich visual dimension to Wilson Barrett's nineteenth-century morality play. On the narrative level, *The Sign of the Cross* offered a pious message of moral regeneration and spiritual transformation but, as Maria Wyke shows, the film also provided audiences visual pleasures through spectacular recreations of Roman power and the imagined opulence and decadence of imperial Rome (Wyke 1997.135–37). DeMille's film spices up old-time Christian morality and the pious sentimentalism of Victorian melodrama and fiction with generous amounts of sex and sadism; in *The Sign of the Cross*, religious uplift is given sensationalized and spectacle form.

The Sign of the Cross was not DeMille's first use of Rome as a site for spectacle and moral commentary on the present. In 1922, his film *Manslaughter* compared the Jazz Age and its pursuit of pleasure to ancient Rome. In a flashback sequence, modern New Year's Eve carousers are set in ancient Rome, and a stunningly lurid Roman orgy stands for the corrosive effects of the gin, jazz, and fast living of 1920s. The main character, Lydia, becomes a Roman empress who presides over and participates in the orgy, appropriately called a Feast of Bacchus. The Feast is enjoyed by scantily clad women and intoxicated revelers and satyrs, and the women become sexually aroused by the spectacle of male gladiatorial combat. In the midst of this debauch, bearded barbarians (the Vandals) wearing huge winged helmets arrive and proceed to rape, pillage, and plunder. The message is clear: decadence and the reckless pursuit of pleasure brought about the end of the Roman Empire, and 1920s America is inviting the same

fate. "No different than Rome at its worst," intones the District Attorney, the voice of the Law in its biblical, patriarchal sense. Disaster is avoided through moral regeneration and the re-establishment of patriarchal authority: Lydia repents and marries the District Attorney! In *Manslaughter*, DeMille exploited Rome's fabled decadence to make a point about the morals of the Jazz Age and, at the same time, offered his audiences a voyeuristic glimpse of forbidden pleasures and desires.

DeMille used the same technique in *The Sign of the Cross*. He retained the pious moralism of Barrett's Victorian toga play but added titillating scenes of Roman sexual "deviance" and violence in and out of the Roman arena. During a Roman orgy, a lesbian dancer, Ancaria, attempts to seduce the chaste Christian Mercia through an erotic dance. The naked male courtiers who attend to Nero suggest the emperor's sexual interest in young men. Film audiences witness the agonizing torture of a young Christian boy. *The Sign of the Cross* also contains one of the most lurid Roman arena scenes in all of the Hollywood epics that feature blood in the arena. When the camera pans to the Roman audience in the amphitheatre, their faces are contorted with avid desire for the kill, and the camera lingers on the gory slaughter of Christians. These Romans are so jaded that only the most depraved forms of sadism and cruelty can give them pleasure: naked women garlanded in flowers devoured by crocodiles, attacked by gorillas, and gored by bulls; elephants crushing the heads of chained men; and Amazon women spearing dwarfs and raising them aloft on their spears. Critics routinely heaped scorn on DeMille's films for scenes like these but acknowledged his popularity with audiences; one critic noted ruefully: "Nobody likes DeMille pictures except the public" (*Boston Herald* 25 December 1932). Clearly, the public enjoyed the scenes of Roman depravity and decadence at least as much, if not more, than the scenes of Christian fortitude and piety. "After DeMille's lavish depiction of court orgies, wholesale slaughters, [and] unabashed sensuality," the *Boston Herald* commented, "Christianity comes out a rather poor second" (25 December 1932). Indeed, DeMille understood very well the visual pleasures that came from watching his decadent Romans, and he was a master at portraying them on screen. "Mr. DeMille's real interest is in the wicked Romans," observed one reviewer in the *Boston Herald*, "With the enthusiasm of an artist . . . he paints the manifold nature of their sins, their cruelties, their decadent luxuries" (1 January 1933).

DeMille's scenes of excess and opulence in Rome promoted consumption and consumerism at the same time that they reasserted traditional verities and pieties. In his 1934 *Cleopatra*, imperial Rome again provided

a setting for fabulous displays of wealth, excess, and consumption, but this time these displays are held up as desirable, and the Egyptian queen, played by Claudette Colbert, has many of the qualities of the “new modern” woman promoted in film and advertising: Cleopatra is witty, sophisticated, and glamorous; she is independent, self-assured, and she takes pleasure in her sexuality (Wyke 1997.90–97). But the representation of Cleopatra as an autonomous and powerful woman, the embodiment of the new roles open to women in the 1920s and 1930s, is given a familiar twist: she relinquishes her autonomy in favor of romantic love. “I am a woman not a queen,” she tells Mark Antony. At the end of the day, she is a wife not a careerist. In *Cleopatra*, Rome signifies glamour, indulgence, and consumption (and, as such, it implicitly encourages such behaviors in the consumerist audience), while at the same time, it functions to privilege the model of a woman who subordinates independence and autonomy to what is most important and essential to female identity—her role as wife.

DeMille’s career straddled the late Victorian era and a consumer culture that shifted into high gear in the 1920s. As a number of critics have observed, representations of luxury and opulence in his films stimulated material dreams and desires in film audiences, and his sets were “display windows” for cosmetics, clothes, and household furnishings (Higashi 1994.6, 143). Many objected to DeMille’s materialism and the consumerism it encouraged, including playwright Robert E. Sherwood, who observed that DeMille’s “bathrooms are represented as glorified soda fountains . . . and beds constructed of the classiest Carrara marble and equipped with patent leather sheets” (Sherwood 1925.11). Colbert’s glamorous costumes and the DeMille’s lavish sets marketed a range of products from soaps to cigarettes; the film’s sumptuous Rome showcased consumer goods that helped set fashion trends in apparel and interior decoration. Those who couldn’t afford these commodities (and few could during the Depression) could enjoy them vicariously through the film (Higashi 1994.143).

The religious epic was the perfect vehicle for DeMille’s moral didacticism and orgiastic fantasy, and, in *The Sign of the Cross*, he capitalized on the potent combination of sex, sadism, and religion. *Variety* called the film “censor-bait,” but noted that “every sequence in which religion wins out is built upon lurid details. The censors may object to the method, but they can’t oppose the motive, and in the way *Cross* was produced one can’t be in without the other” (6 December 1932). His films offered a voyeuristic enjoyment of lavish displays of extravagance, consumption, and cruelty set in imperial Rome and the moral pleasure of witnessing the ultimate triumph of Christian

values.⁵ In a DeMille film, you could have your cake and eat it too—a pleasure that Hollywood epics set in ancient Rome still offer audiences.

AN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT IN IMPERIAL CAESAR'S COURT

DeMille's message may have been elevating, but it offered at best a mitigated victory; by contrast, *Roman Scandals* offered the visceral emotional catharsis of wrongs set right through the democratic process. Here modern America and ancient Rome are mirror images of each other. Unlike the moralizing epic tradition that pits virtuous Christians against decadent Romans, the narrative tension in *Roman Scandals* revolves around the political corruption of ancient Rome and contemporary America. In Jewish immigrant producer Samuel Goldwyn's film, the downtrodden are all peoples who are oppressed by the political and economic tyranny of corrupt civic officials. He cast the well-known Jewish actor Eddie Cantor as a hero and spokesperson for the American democratic tradition and immigrants; the film offered a more inclusive definition of citizenry than DeMille's white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian America. Liberation comes about through a melding of identities into a common voice and by the removal of the ancient as well as the modern oppressors from political office.

In early 1933, film mogul Samuel Goldwyn decided to produce a comedy set in ancient Rome. Roman-themed films and plays were popular on Broadway and in theatres, and the perennial success of adaptations of *Ben-Hur* and the recent success of DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* deserved a comic response. Goldwyn wanted a sendup of these pious and ponderous depictions of Rome, and he hired playwright Robert E. Sherwood and writer George S. Kaufman to produce a comic screenplay, and Frank Tuttle to direct the film. Well-known for his sharp wit, Kaufman had collaborated with the Marx Brothers and Ira and George Gershwin, and he was a member of the famous Algonquin Round Table in New York. No stranger to comedies about Rome, Sherwood was the author of the successful 1926 Broadway play *The Road to Rome*, a comedy about Hannibal set in ancient Rome.

5 William Fitzgerald 2001.26 makes this point in his analysis of 1950s toga films: "There is a distinction to be made between the identifications that are encouraged on the narrative level and the thrills that are experienced on the level of spectacle, a distinction that allows the audience to have its cake and eat it, to be in two places at once. The decadent power and extravagance of the Romans could be enjoyed, appropriated, and, at the same time, disowned from the early Christian point of view."

In *Roman Scandals*, vaudeville humor, populist sentiment, and spectacular Busby Berkeley dance numbers are set against the backdrop of a corrupt Roman Empire. Sherwood and Kaufman's screenplay for Goldwyn's film gives America's relationship to ancient Rome a contemporary twist: in their hands, the legacy of Rome is the subject of comic ridicule and subversion. Plutarch's noble Romans, still a staple of education in 1930s America, are nowhere to be seen; instead, modern American institutional elites are the descendants of corrupt imperial Roman elites. The cinematic conventions of spectacle films set in antiquity are also given comic treatment: chariot races, orgies, people thrown to the lions, harem and bath scenes, corrupt emperors, and scheming, predatory empresses are all parodied. Absent, however, is any hint of the trope of Romans as persecutors of Christians: grafters, corrupt officials, and monopoly capitalism are the evils in this Rome, and the oppressed are slaves, women, and ordinary citizens.

SYNOPSIS

The hero of *Roman Scandals*, Eddie (Eddie Cantor), lives in West Rome, a town that is being undermined by the greed and graft of its leading citizens: the banker, the police, and the mayor are all in cahoots. The film opens with the banker, Mr. Cooper, performing the opening ceremonies at a Museum of Roman Art, which he has endowed. Posing as a civic philanthropist, Cooper is actually a sly grafter who has made a huge profit on his "gift." This immediately establishes a connection between ancient Rome and its modern appropriations: Rome and philanthropy function as a sign for corruption and as a cloak for the exploitative behaviors of the institutional elites of the town. The opening scene punctures the image that the museum projects to its patrons: that of a decorous and refined Rome.

Eddie, a local errand boy, is accidentally locked inside the museum overnight. He hangs his clothes and shoes on classical statues in the museum (replicas of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, Venus de Milo, Dying Gaul, Apollo Belvedere, the Farnese Hercules) and goes to sleep. The next morning he startles the museum's solidly middle-class female patrons, who awaken him when they enter to celebrate the opening day of the museum, and Eddie is soon thrown out of the museum. The scene recalls Charlie Chaplin's film *City Lights* (1931), which opened with the unveiling of a public monument. Chaplin's tramp sleeps at the base of the monument and catches his pants on the sword held by one of the figures of freedom, garbed in classic dress, and the police eject the tramp from the ceremony.

Cultural historian Lary May comments that this scene in Chaplin's film suggests that "public life and 'liberty' are the preserve of the rich and their middle-class followers" (May 2000.75). Similarly, the opening of *Roman Scandals* suggests that the museum and the high art (classical sculpture) it contains are the preserve of the wealthy. When Eddie, who loves Roman history, offers his commentary on the Romans and their art and corrects Mr. Cooper's factual errors, he is hustled out of the museum. Access to classical art is a sign of status and privilege, and separates the well-to-do from ordinary people like Eddie.

Later that morning, Cooper, the mayor, and the chief of police discuss Cooper's latest scam: Cooper will evict families from some land and donate it for the construction of a new city jail, and the three will split the contractor's fees, as they have for Cooper's previous donations. But when the police chief drops the check Cooper gives him to buy him off, Eddie finds it. Eddie commiserates with the people who will be made homeless when Cooper takes over their land. They look like second-generation European and East European immigrants: an organ grinder with a monkey, a man playing an accordion, men with beer steins, and people eating donuts. In the musical number "Build a Little Home," Eddie leads the people in a dance and urges them to create a community on the street. The musical number embodies the spirit of populism, all join hands and dance, and the lyrics urge dispensing with the pseudo-need for commodities. All that is needed for utopia is at hand: Eddie persuades them (for the moment) that there is nothing better than living in the street, with the stars for a parlor ceiling and buttercups and daisies for a carpet.

Eddie is thrown out of West Rome for protesting the plot of Cooper and his cronies. As he leaves the town, he expresses his desire to return to ancient Rome, "where men were real men," and finds himself transported, miraculously, to imperial Rome. There, instead of meeting the virtuous and noble Romans of Plutarch's *Lives*, he encounters a Rome just as corrupt as capitalist, class-divided America.

In ancient Rome, the emperor Valerius and a corrupt senate oppress foreign slaves, women, and ordinary citizens just as Mr. Cooper, the mayor, and the chief of police exploit the people of West Rome. Eddie is sold as a slave in a slave market and ends up being taken to the Emperor Valerius's palace. There Valerius is reunited with his wife Agrippa (a Roman male name), who is continually trying to poison him, and Eddie is made the new food taster. Eddie overhears Valerius tell his counselors that they will again raise the taxes to build a new palace and then keep the money left over. The

counselors make Valerius put his promises in writing, but they drop the scroll and Eddie finds it. Eddie exposes the emperor and his cronies, a chariot race ensues, and Eddie's chariot goes over a cliff. He wakes up in West Rome and finds in his pocket the check with which Cooper paid off the chief of police. He reveals the scheme, and the corrupt officials are put in prison, after which the evicted citizens move back into their homes. The film thus ends with a restoration of a cleansed political system in both Romes.

MUSICAL INTERLUDES

Two musical interludes feature Busby Berkeley choreographed spectacles starring the Goldwyn Girls, the musical company of female dancers employed by the Metro Goldwyn Mayer studio. In "No More Love," an extraordinarily decadent musical number set in a Roman slave market, the Goldwyn Girls, wearing little more than long blonde wigs, are chained to a pedestal and displayed for sale. Those not chained are kept in line by whip lashings, and Roman men eager to purchase them leer. The women are doubly enslaved and exploited: as slaves and as the prisoners of male desire. The number ends with the death of a female slave who tries to avoid being sold (she falls to her death from the display pedestal), and her death prompts one of the women to sing the dirge-like "No More Love."

By contrast, in "Keep Young and Beautiful," set inside the imperial harem, cosmetic products and secrets for enhancing female beauty and allure are the focus of the musical number. Through song and dance, the women in the harem convey the message that their identity is their beauty and that they need to adorn themselves and take care of their bodies to encourage male sexual desire. Eddie enters the harem disguised in black-face as an Ethiopian doctor who has beauty secrets, and he gives musical instructions to the female slaves on what products are necessary and how best to enhance their looks.

Like DeMille's fabulously decadent Roman sets, the Busby Berkeley dance numbers allowed Depression audiences simultaneously to enjoy and condemn spectacles of excess, sadism, and consumption set in ancient Rome. In the musical numbers set in antiquity, Rome signifies the exploitative tendencies of twentieth-century capitalism and the decadence of consumerism. These musical spectacles are framed and contained by those set in West Rome. In "Build a Little Home," performed at the beginning and reprised at the end of the film, Eddie leads the townspeople in a song and dance number that celebrates the unimportance of commodities

and dreams of a utopia where there are none for sale (Thompson and Rant 1987.36–43).

RAGGIN' THE CLASSICS

The roots of the 1933 film musical comedy lie in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century vaudeville and burlesque traditions in which European and American “highbrow” art and culture were parodied; opera, Shakespeare, novels, and drama were given farcical treatment, and “raggin’ the classics” was a popular form of entertainment. The application of the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” goes back to the late nineteenth century: highbrow was first coined in the 1880s to describe intellectual or aesthetic superiority, and lowbrow appeared shortly after 1900 to mean something or someone neither highly intellectual nor aesthetically refined (Levine 1988.221–22).

Progressive-era reformers, especially Protestant women, were increasingly active in working to address social problems through educational uplift programs, temperance movements, and church organizations. Inspired in part by Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), many hoped that a promotion of “high” culture (according to Arnold, “the best that has been thought and said in the world”) could improve the people and the nation by example. Well-meaning women’s groups hoped to civilize and assimilate immigrants and the poor by means of culturally improving visits to museums, sermons, talks, and entertainments with a moral content. For some progressive-era reformers, art, culture, and Protestantism were considered the best means to incorporate the discontented and the newcomers into a shared value system.

Melodramatic toga plays, novels, and films set in antiquity provided rich material for comedians desiring to poke fun at pious entertainment and the proselytizing and earnest intentions of its patrons and sponsors. In 1896, Joseph Weber and Lew Fields, a Polish-Jewish vaudeville team, opened the Weber and Fields Music Hall in New York City, where they offered burlesques, such as *Quo Vass Iss*, a spoof of the novel *Quo Vadis* and an example of dialect comedy. (Chico Marx, with his stagy Italian accent, mangled English usage, and malapropisms, is a later example of dialect comedy.) In another burlesque of the novel, *Quo Vas Iss? A Travesty Upon “Quo Vadis”* by Edgar Smith, the characters were given comic variations of the names of characters in the novel *Quo Vadis* and Wilson Barrett’s toga play *The Sign of the Cross*: Marcus Finishus (Marcus Superbus), Petrolius (Petronius), Zero

(Nero), Popcornea (Poppaea), Fursus (Ursus), and Lythia (Lygia).⁶ In this burlesque of the toga genre, Lythia is a member of the Christian Temperance Union, which has closed the city's saloons. Marcus Finishus is in love with Lythia, who makes the sign of a lobster instead of the fish or a cross. Lythia is accused of having bewitched Fido, Popcornea's pet dog. Zero sends her to the arena for being a member of the Christian Temperance Movement and wanting to burn "Rum." Fursus fights the bull with Lythia tied on it, and both are pardoned by Zero. Slang is used to puncture the moral pretensions of the toga genre: "Hail to Petrolius, the oily Roman gent, if he is not a cuckoo, we do not want a cent, though mighty Zero's reigning, it's Petrolius we hail; and the people love him better than they love a bargain sale. Hail Petrolius, hail!" Burlesques of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* (*Julius Cnaesar* and *The Roasting of Brutus on the Plains of Phillipi—Red Hot!*) were also popular, as were stage and circus burlesques of the adaptations of *Ben-Hur* (such as *Bend Her*). The use of dialect and slang to mock the affectations of the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants appealed to Jewish and Catholic immigrants.

There were also cinematic spoofs of spectacles set in the Roman arena. In *Friends, Romans, and Leo* (1917), a decidedly unmuscular male slave with glasses, Morpheus, engages in a comic combat as a gladiator in the arena. Morpheus manages to woo and win the emperor Mulius's daughter, Myria, who is the imperial loan shark, Liarus Bunko's, object of desire. Instead of satisfying his lust, Liarus Bunko is eaten by a lion in the arena as the audience, eating peanuts (as if at a baseball game), watches the comic spectacle. In *The Three Ages* (1921), starring Buster Keaton, a sendup of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), there is a parody of the famous chariot race in the popular stage production of *Ben-Hur* and the 1907 silent film version. Here Keaton races with a chariot drawn by a mule and unmatched horses while that of his opponent, Wallace Beery, is drawn by dogs, with one in the back of the chariot as a spare.

In the 1920s and 1930s, new art forms like the Broadway musical revue and the film musical comedy continued the burlesque and vaudeville traditions of thumbing noses at high culture and the sentimental pieties of moralizing fiction and film. In the 1933 film production of the popular

6 This script is in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library. Another script of a burlesque of *Quo Vadis* can be found in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress entitled *Quo Vadis Upside Down*.

Broadway revue show *The Gold Diggers*, for example, Ginger Rogers, clad in little more than gold coins engraved with Caesar's head, sings the Depression standard "We're in the Money" in Pig Latin, and in the Marx Brothers' 1935 *A Night at the Opera*, Groucho tricks the orchestra into playing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" during the overture to *Il Travatore* (by now, opera was considered highbrow). *Roman Scandals* belongs to the same tradition of comedy. Critics praised the film for its slang, burlesque, colloquialisms, and slapstick. According to *Variety*: "It has the virtue of being vigorous low comedy conveyed in terms of travesty, and the device is almost foolproof" (26 December 1933).

DOMESTICATING THE CLASSICS

Romans and the different empire they inhabit can be made familiar by domesticating them, a process by which or through which representations of politics, empire, and history in narratives about Rome devolve onto the family, personal relations, or romance. In Barrett's play *The Sign of the Cross* and DeMille's adaptation of it, for example, the political and social forces that shaped the conflict between Romans and Christians were subsumed into a simple narrative of a couple's destiny. George Bernard Shaw's sophisticated and witty play, *Androcles and the Lion* (1912), gently ridiculed the toga drama's domesticated Romans and Christians. In his spoof of Barrett's play, Shaw's Roman soldier seems unmoved by the Christian maiden Lavinia's willingness to die in the Roman arena. "I have seen many women die," he says, "and forgotten them in a fortnight." And in contrast to the moral certainty and conviction of Barrett's heroine, Shaw's Lavinia seems far from certain of her faith and what she is dying for, but still insists on going into the arena: "I *think* I'm going to die for God." Leading her fellow Christians into the arena where they will be devoured by lions, she says brightly and vacuously: "Come along rest of the dinner, I shall be the olives and anchovies." Shaw's play was popular on both sides of the Atlantic and was made into a film in 1912. The play was revived again on stage in New York in the 1920s and listed as one of the best plays of 1925–26. Shaw's play had been Samuel Goldwyn's first choice for his comic sendup of DeMille's film, but Shaw refused to give him permission.⁷

⁷ The play was again adapted into film in 1952 (directed by Chester Erskine) as a comic response to the 1953 cinemascope toga epic, *The Robe*.

The trio of Guy Bolton, Jerome Kern, and P. G. Wodehouse wanted to elevate musical comedy and get away from “clowning and Weberfieldian cross-talk” (Green 1980.55). They produced up-to-date musical comedies for sophisticated audiences with their New York Princess Theatre shows. They set their 1917 *Leave It to Jane* on a college campus, which allowed them to produce songs that played with such historical and literary subjects as the Arthurian tradition (“Sir Galahad”) and Cleopatra (“Cleopatterer.”) The silent film hit *Cleopatra*, starring femme fatale Theda Bara, had been released earlier that year, and Jane, a college freshman, wishes she could be like the devastatingly seductive Egyptian Queen “Cleopatterer”:

In days of old beside the Nile
A famous queen there dwelt.
Her clothes were few, but full of style.
Her figure slim and swelt.
On every man that wandered by
She pulled the Theda Bara eye.

At dancing Cleopatterer,
Was always on the spot.
She gave these poor Egyptian ginks,
Something else to watch besides the spinx.

Marc Antony admitted,
That what first made him skid,
Was the wibbly, wobbly, wiggly dance,
That Cleopatterer did.

In this interpretation of Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen is figured as a modern vamp, something audiences clearly appreciated. In a similar vein, John Erskine’s bestselling 1926 novel, *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, featured an impenitent and quite modern Helen (“He never would have taken me if I hadn’t wanted to go”). The popularity of the novel led director Alexander Korda in 1927 to make it into a silent film that received critical and popular acclaim. Playwright Robert E. Sherwood, recognizing the popular taste for Erskine’s novel and other “middlebrow” books like Will Durant’s 1926 *Story of Philosophy*, commented that there was “a widespread conspiracy to divest history of its text-book formality . . . Clio has always been an austere figure, clad in marble robes and perched up before public libraries for the purpose of scaring away those who approach such dignified edifices with other than

serious, studious intent. Nowadays, Clio is being urged to step down from her pedestal and meet the boys” (Sherwood 1927.xli). Sherwood thought this was a good thing; like Cecil B. DeMille, he believed that history should be accessible, popular, and entertaining, and saw no reason “why history should continue to be chastely academic and formidably dull” (Sherwood 1927.xliv).

Sherwood’s own critically acclaimed and popular 1926 Broadway play, *The Road to Rome*, was neither dull nor academic.⁸ It offered a comic explanation for the mystery of why, in 218 B.C.E., the Carthaginian leader Hannibal, after crossing the Alps and routing the Roman army, did not sack the city that had been his lifelong goal. In Sherwood’s play, Hannibal’s failure to sack Rome is explained by his love for a young Roman woman who enables him to acknowledge the pointlessness of conquest and war. In the play, Amytis, a young Roman woman, is engaged to the elderly, pompous dictator Fabius Maximus. She is bored, so when Fabius asks her: “What are you thinking about now, my dear? She replies: “I was just wondering what it would be like to be despoiled.” On an outing outside of the city, she is captured by Hannibal’s soldiers, who bring her to him. A romance sparks, and Amytis tries to persuade Hannibal not to sack the city. When she asks him why he fights, he finds it difficult to come up with an answer; for him, the road to Rome has been “littered with the bones of dead men. Perhaps they know why they died. I don’t.”⁹ Amytis urges him to turn back: “Rome will destroy itself. Success is like a strong wine, Hannibal; give a man enough of it, and he’ll drink himself to death. Rome will do that, too, if you leave it alone.” Hannibal decides not to sack Rome, and the play suggests that real manhood is the ability *not* to fight. As he retreats, taking Amytis with him, Hannibal says: “I’m leaving Rome to an enemy that is crueler even than I am . . . I shall allow Rome to destroy itself.”

IMPERIAL ROME AND WEST ROME, USA

In the introduction to his play, Sherwood commented on republican Rome’s fall from virtue and compared it to 1920s America. By the

8 *The Road to Rome* served as the basis for George Sidney’s 1955 film musical *Jupiter’s Darling*, starring Howard Keel as Hannibal, Esther Williams as Amytis, and George Sanders as Fabius Maximus. It did not do well at the box office.

9 Similarly, on the pointlessness of battle, Hannibal says: “But—if we win a victory, that’s that. We have to go on to the next battle, then the next, and the next, until we’ve finished this war. Then we go home to Carthage and start looking for another.”

second century B.C.E., Rome's "government was in the hands of evil, lustful, vindictive men, like Cato, who gloried in conquest and bloodshed and destruction" (Sherwood 1927.xxxv-vi). In Sherwood's view, Rome's vices, rather than her virtues, predominated in Calvin "The business of America is business" Coolidge's America: "The spirit of Fabius Maximus and his brother boosters has become the spirit of America today" (Sherwood 1927.xxxix). He also says: "Fabius was a leading exponent of the old regime in Rome—a cautious, conservative reactionary. Today he would be numbered among the stand-patters of the Republican Party, and would undoubtedly be high in the favor of the White House Spokesman" (Sherwood 1927.xxvi). Sherwood hoped that audiences would recognize the parallels between his Romans and modern Americans. And indeed, the dictator Fabius Maximus sounds like a staunch Republican of the day when he says: "No state can survive unless it is founded on good, sound military strength and a policy of progressive conquest." As a pacifist, Sherwood was opposed to imperial conquest, and he worried that America was repeating Rome's slide into a destructive imperialism and greedy materialism.

In 1933, Robert Sherwood turned again to Rome to critique contemporary America and collaborated with the prolific George S. Kaufman to produce the screenplay for Goldwyn's *Roman Scandals*. Kaufman was another politically engaged Broadway writer and producer. He wrote the book for the 1927 Gershwin musical comedy *Strike Up the Band*, whose antiwar sentiments were so strong that the show folded on the road (Green 1980.93). Kaufman directed and wrote the book (along with Morrie Ryskind) for another Gershwin musical comedy, *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), which was sharply critical of Congress, political conventions, the Supreme Court, beauty contests, and even motherhood. The musical comedy won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for drama. The 1933 successor to *Of Thee I Sing*, *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, was even more scathing of society and politics. "If *Strike Up the Band* was a satire on War," Ira Gershwin wrote years later, "and *Of Thee I Sing* one on Politics, *Let 'Em Eat Cake* was a satire on Practically Everything . . . Kaufman and Ryskind's libretto was at times extremely witty—at other times unrelentingly realistic in its criticism of the then American scene" (Gershwin, quoted in Jablonski 1998.242). In early 1933, as George Gershwin's biographer Edward Jablonski put it: "Kaufman and Ryskind had plenty of Practically Everything to shoot their barbs at" (1998.243).

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated in March of 1933, fifteen million unemployed—twenty-five percent of the labor force—clamored for relief. Many lived in "Hoovervilles," shacks built of tin, cardboard,

and castoffs in city dumps. The banking system was on the verge of collapse, and Roosevelt declared an emergency Bank Holiday to stop runs on the banks to help salvage it. There were strikes, protests, and marches; the nation was in a turbulent state. Drastic political intervention was both feared and desired by many in the United States. Some were attracted to fascism, and many thousands of other Americans were members of the Communist Party, including Frank Tuttle, the director of *Roman Scandals*. Anticipating by two years Sinclair Lewis' 1935 bestselling novel about the fragility of democracy and the rise of fascism in America, *It Can't Happen Here*, Gershwin and Ryskind's musical comedy *Let 'Em Eat Cake* chronicled the rise of an American dictatorship through the machinations of politicians, industrialists, and the military (Jablonski 1998.243–45). But this musical comedy, which opened in October of 1933, was not a popular success. Many audiences simply wanted escapism in hard times—a desire that is defended by Preston Sturges in his ending to *Sullivan's Travels* which makes the point that comedy may be more socially useful than the portrayal of social realities.¹⁰ Americans who wanted to give the new president's administration and the New Deal a chance were alienated by the production's unrelenting darkness (Green 1980.94–95). *Let 'Em Eat Cake* did not do well at the box office.

A JEWISH-AMERICAN IN A TOGA

Roman Scandals opened at the end of 1933 and did top business in every city it played, making it one of the fifteen most popular films of 1934 and United Artists' top grossing film of the year. Much of the humor in the film comes from Eddie Cantor (born Israel Iskowitz), a New York Jewish vaudeville performer turned film star.¹¹ Cantor spent his childhood living over a delicatessen on the Lower East Side and spoke Yiddish (when he spoke English, he peppered his speech with Yiddish phrases). He worked first in vaudeville, later performed for over a decade with Florenz Ziegfeld as a revue comic, and then worked in film. By 1932–33, Cantor was one of the top five box-office attractions and a well-known show business personality. In nearly all of his films he played a displaced second-generation

10 Thanks to an anonymous reader for this point.

11 Cantor describes his childhood on the Lower East Side and his years in vaudeville, film, radio, and television in his 1957 autobiography *Take My Life*.

Jewish immigrant: in the American West in *Whoopee!* (1930), in Spain in *Kid from Spain* (1932), in Egypt in *Kid Millions* (1934), and in Baghdad in *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (1937). In *Roman Scandals*, Cantor is clearly an Eastern European Jewish immigrant in ancient Rome—when he is captured by Roman centurions and placed on sale at a slave market, Cantor pitches himself to potential buyers: “Look at these skins, imported—all the way from Russia”—and the incongruity of the ethnic actor and the setting contributes to the film’s humor.

Roman Scandals offered American audiences comic relief from popular images of Rome and Romans in American culture. Just as the Marx Brothers had mocked the value of education in the 1932 *Horse Feathers* and highbrow culture in *A Night at the Opera*, *Roman Scandals* satirized the image of the “noble Romans” of the republic, those toga-clad figures of fortitude, self-denial, and patriotism that used to crop up with great regularity in civics lessons, political discourse, and the arts. Instead of virtuous, civic-minded Romans, Eddie finds a corrupt senate and a pompous and sly emperor. The Roman leaders oppress the Roman citizenry, just as their descendants, the civic leaders in West Rome, exploit American citizens. Eddie, a man of the people, confounds ancient Romans with his smart aleck patter, chutzpah, and cagey, quick-witted maneuvers.

Roman Scandals also deflated the myth of the grandeur and decadence of imperial Rome, a myth the Hollywood film industry in general, and Cecil B. DeMille in particular, helped to disseminate in American culture. Robert Sherwood made no secret of his dislike for cinematic spectacles set in antiquity. He believed that colossal sets and special effects dwarfed narrative content and meaning. He had sharp words for the 1926 film *Ben-Hur*: “When the novel was dramatized, it became essentially a spectacle; now on the screen, it is about one million more times one—and the resultant orgy of huge sets, seething mobs and camera effects contains little of the spirit of the original story . . . I find myself limited to that section of the thesaurus which offers synonyms for ‘big.’ Colossal—tremendous—gargantuan.”¹² Sherwood also intensely disliked DeMille films: “Think of all the grotesque absurdities with which the movies abound, and which have made the screen a tempting target for satirists, and you will find that most of them may be traced back, by direct or indirect routes, to Cecil B. DeMille.” In Sherwood’s view, DeMille’s flair for combining pious sentimentalism with spectacle

12 *Literary Digest* 6 February 1926.

was a cheap kind of success, it came from a “gaudy form of hokum” and a sentimental sensationalism (1925.12).

Sherwood and Kaufman’s screenplay parodied sword-and-sandal films and the established cinematic conventions of the historical epic’s representations of Rome. This is not the corrupt Rome of mad emperors like Nero, and Romans are not the decadent oppressors of Christians. Stereotypical images of cinema’s ancient Rome provide the writers with the material for gags, jokes, and burlesque humor. Later, in the 1960s, director Richard Lester parodied the ponderous 1950s Hollywood epics set in Rome in a similar fashion in his cinematic adaptation of the smash Broadway musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.¹³ In *Roman Scandals*, when the empress Agrippa attempts to seduce him, Eddie acts like a coy and blushing maiden intent on preserving her chastity. He uses a mud bath to disguise himself as a woman when he enters the imperial harem, and then uses a blackface routine to impersonate an Ethiopian male beauty specialist so that he can move freely about the harem. The long chariot race in which Eddie is pursued by the Roman emperor’s soldiers was particularly popular: “The idea of a noble Roman being hurled about by nothing more than a so-called chariot whip proved to be popular both times it was tried” said *New York Times* critic Mordaunt Hall (25 December 1933). DeMille’s films may have been the target of some of *Roman Scandals*’ comic barbs, but Sherwood, Kaufman, and Goldwyn recognized and capitalized on the public’s desire for entertaining narratives about Rome and Romans.

RESTORATION NOT REVOLUTION

Roman Scandals ends with restoration rather than revolution: in ancient Rome and modern West Rome, corrupt officials are exposed, resulting in the establishment of a cleansed political system. The film thus stops short of advocating radical change; it offers a vision of social reconstruction through a reaffirmation of the values of the American democratic tradition rather than a politics of social revolution (Thompson and Rant 1987.35–36). John Belton describes how comedy functions “as a kind of cultural safety valve—letting off steam that would otherwise build up and explode, destroying the entire system”; its goal is integration and the re-establishment of

13 I analyze the Broadway production and the film in “Brooklyn-on-the-Tiber” in Malamud 2001.

social and political order (1994.141). Similarly, in *Roman Scandals*, comedy and the spirit of populism erase economic and class divisions, the town's citizenry dance together as one united group, and democracy and decency prevail—a formula that would be repeated successfully again and again in the popular screwball comedies of the 1930s.

Nearly all successful film comedies of the 1930s flirted with the need for social change, but ultimately responded to the crises of the Depression era by reasserting a faith in traditional values.¹⁴ The Marx Brother's 1933 *Duck Soup* went too far; it parodied the very idea of patriotism, and thus it did not do well at the box office. The mood and message of *Roman Scandals* is closer to the sentimental optimism of the films of immigrant director Frank Capra such as *It Happened One Night* (1934) or *You Can't Take It with You* (1938) than the anarchic humor and cynicism of the Marx Brothers. Writing for the leftist *The New Masses*, Nathan Adler (unsurprisingly) criticized Eddie Cantor in *Roman Scandals* for precisely this reason (1934.28–29):

The petty bourgeois temper recognizes at all times a “social” problem—“bad” government in need of reform, “unfortunate” circumstances (evictions, unemployment)—and the tendered solution is always with the “good” individual. Though the recognition of the current social predicament is present, Cantor, and the petty bourgeoisie, are too much rooted in the sentiments and values of the golden age, they still retain the smug optimism, the drooling, mawkish sentimentality and the glittering tinsel.

Adler is critical because the film suppresses political revolution by suggesting that the political system works—it is individuals who are bad, not the system itself.

Roman Scandals and *The Sign of the Cross* offered reassuring and essentially conservative responses to the crises of the Depression era. The

14 “If the films of the early Depression flirted with the need for social change and authority, [Frank] Capra’s political films dealt with the need for a return to the basics of American tradition” (Levine, 1993b.251). Elsewhere, he notes: “The remarkable thing about the American people before reform did come was not their action but their inaction, not their demands but their passivity, not their revolutionary spirit but their traditionalism” (1993a.209).

prospective alternatives for radical change—anarchism and socialism on the left and various brands of right-wing populism or fascism on the right—were both likely to frighten the studios and the distributors of films in the 1930s, as well as many movie patrons. Both films opt for restoration rather than real internal reform or revolution. DeMille's film drew an analogy between Neronian Rome and 1930s America and he wanted *The Sign of the Cross* to serve as a parable for Depression-era America. In DeMille's film, audiences could identify with the Christians who endured Roman oppression from the vantage point of history—and enjoy spectacles of Roman excess and decadence—knowing that Christianity ultimately triumphed in the Roman world.¹⁵ Moral regeneration rather than political revolution was prescribed, and reward and retribution deferred to another, future era.

DeMille's moralistic message for Americans during the crisis of the Depression was rooted in a nineteenth-century vision of an Anglo-Saxon Protestant republic, and his prescription for renewal advocated a revived spiritual nationalism. By contrast, Eastern European Jewish and other immigrant directors and producers created a more spacious and inclusive vision of American identities in their films. In this era, studio producers frequently intervened in film production, and they had ultimate control over the final product. Neal Gabler describes how immigrant Jewish producers created their own celluloid vision of the American dream in their films (1988). Samuel Goldwyn's *Roman Scandals* commented on the social and political ills of the 1930s by evoking and then critiquing traditional American myths about America's relationship to ancient Rome. The film

15 Depression-era audiences found similar pious messages in other “disaster” films from the decade. In another film set in ancient Rome, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (dir. Ernest Schoedsack, 1935), the calamities of the Roman past are conflated with the disaster of the Depression. The effect of Roman greed on individuals is made analogous to the hardship and misery resulting from the crash of the American economic system. In the film, the world of the blacksmith Marcus is turned upside down when he loses his wife and child because he is unable to pay the doctor's bills. He becomes a gladiator, a man who kills for money, and attains fame. After his success in the arena, he marries again, wins great riches through trafficking in slaves and gladiators, travels to Judea where he meets Pontius Pilate and Christ (!), and becomes a leading figure in Pompeii. As Vesuvius erupts, Marcus experiences a conversion to Christianity and gives up his own life to save his son and others. And as he dies, Christ appears as a vision. This uplifting ending is similar to the ending of another popular “disaster” film, *San Francisco* (1936), where a lowlife saloon proprietor (Clark Gable) repents of his errant ways and is reborn at the moment of the great earthquake of 1906. For an analysis of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, see Wyke 1997.147–82.

rewrote that relationship in a conservative vision that urged renewal and accommodation of difference through the American democratic tradition. It offered a pluralistic vision of American society open to new peoples and new experiences. Indeed, for many audiences, Cantor stood for the common immigrant experience in America of stereotyping and oppression: in one scene from his most famous stage and film success, the 1930 *Whoopie!*, set in the American West, Cantor assumed various disguises, including a tough-talking western bandit, a Greek short-order cook, an Indian, and a blackface minstrel in a hilarious burlesque of ethnic and racial stereotypes. In another scene, Cantor meets an Indian chief, and the two have a comic exchange in which they recognize that Jews and Indians have much in common in America: both are the subjects of racism and oppression.¹⁶ The films of the early 1930s allowed for a diversity of voices in the construction of America's metaphoric relationship to Rome and, indeed, used that relationship to articulate and question America's own identities.

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16 This is a comic predecessor to *Blazing Saddles* (1974), where director and actor Mel Brooks plays a Jewish Indian.

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