Raised-Arm Salutes in the United States before Fascism

From the Pledge of Allegiance to *Ben-Hur* on Stage

**The early form** of the American Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag contained both an oath and a saluting gesture, in this way combining the two decisive verbal and visual aspects inherent in such a ritual.¹ The Pledge was introduced in 1892 at the dedication ceremony of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which opened the following year. The Exposition, a world’s fair and simultaneously a commemoration of the quadricentennial of Columbus’ arrival in America, had more than twenty million visitors. Its White City, as it was commonly called, could boast of amazing “palatial plaster-of-paris neoclassical buildings.”² These included the Palace of Fine Arts and the Agricultural Building as oversized Roman Pantheons, the Peristyle topped by a four-horse chariot, an obelisk, and recreations of Pompeii. Although contemporaries also prominently mentioned other ancient cities such as Jerusalem and Athens as models, it seems likely that imperial Rome was the chief Old-World inspiration for the White City. In the words of Barr Ferree, professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and editor of *Engineering Magazine*: “No

¹. On the political and social causes for the origin of the Pledge of Allegiance and on its dissemination and changes in wording see Paul 1992 and Rydell 1996. Rydell, 24 note 4, cites additional sources. Baer 1992, a pamphlet published and distributed by the author, contains much of the same information. Cf. also Leepson 2005, 163–76 and 290–91 (notes; chapter entitled “One Nation Indivisible”). Ellis 2005 is the most detailed account and provides up-to-date scholarship and references.

Roman emperor in the plenitude of his power ever conceived so vast a
festival as this.” The design for the Art Building, for example, was criti-

cized as having been plagiarized from a French *Prix de Rome* project. The
railway station, from which most visitors entered the fair, was modeled
on the Baths of Caracalla in Rome. The fair even had a Rostral Column, a
homage to the famous *columna rostrata* in the Roman Forum. But most
imposing to visitors was Daniel Chester French’s statue “The Republic,”
patterned on Roman victory statues and on the Statue of Liberty. This
was a gilded plaster statue sixty-five feet high—over a hundred feet if we
include the height of its base—and placed prominently in the exposition’s
Court of Honor. The “Golden Lady,” French’s copy at one-third of the
original’s size, now stands in Chicago’s Jackson Park.

Despite its eclectic mixture of architectural styles from different times
and places, the Exposition—“that city of the ideal” with its “white, classic
loveliness”—must have struck many visitors as being quite in the Roman
spirit. To judge by contemporary photographs, it appears to have been
irresistible in its imperial-Roman gaudiness. An encomium to the White
City by American poet Richard Watson Gilder is instructive:

Say not, “Greece is no more!”

Through the clear morn

On light winds borne

Her white-winged soul sinks on the New World’s breast [.]  

Ah, happy West—

Greece flowers anew, and all her temples soar!

Given the combination of neoclassical art and unabashed Kitsch on dis-
play in the White City, these lines make much better sense if we substi-

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4. On this see Badger 1979, 104. On fairs and expositions in the larger context of spec-

5. The quotation is from Rainsford 1922, 329. The Rev. Rainsford was a major figure of
social reform during the Gilded Age.

6. An extensive collection of photographs appears in *The Columbian Exposition Album*
1893. This commemorative volume bears a suitably epic title for what American showman P.
T. Barnum had urged during the fair’s planning stage: “Make it the Greatest Show on Earth”; quoted from Badger 1979, 54. A collection of photos also appears in Appelbaum 1980. For only
the most obvious examples of neoclassical and in particular “Roman” buildings and architec-
tural details see the following illustrations in the book last mentioned: frontispiece, figs. 3–6, 15,
18–21 (basin and Court of Honor), 22–23, 27 (with rostral column), 29–32, 37–39, 52 (again
with rostral column), 93–94, 96, and 109 (vault of banqueting hall with classicizing decoration
and painting).
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None of this is surprising, because ancient Rome had already been lavishly and bombastically recreated in other quintessentially American environments. “Nero; or, The Destruction of Rome,” written and produced by Imre Kiralfy, had first been shown in New York City in 1888 and was then taken over by P. T. Barnum for his circus, “The Greatest Show on Earth.” In 1889 Barnum took Kiralfy’s spectacle to London and in the following year on a tour through the United States. In both venues Barnum’s success was huge. Audiences could admire an immense set of the imperial city, populated by about a thousand actors and dancers.

U.S. President Benjamin Harrison proclaimed October 21, 1892, the National School Celebration of Columbus Day. The earliest publication of the wording of the Pledge of Allegiance and a description of the saluting gestures that were to accompany it appeared on September 8, 1892, in The Youth’s Companion, “a popular children’s magazine filled with stories of moral virtue, adventure, and patriotism.”

3. **SALUTE TO THE FLAG,**

by the Pupils.

At a signal from the Principal the pupils, in ordered ranks, hands to the side, face the Flag. Another signal is given: every pupil gives the

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7. Gilder’s lines are quoted from Gilbert 1991, 90. For analogies to Cole’s painting cf. the illustrations at Gilbert, 85, 90, 106, and 219.—In view of the imminent emergence of cinema I note in passing that Eadweard Muybridge showed his motion studies in the Zoöpraxographic Hall of the Chicago fair and that Thomas Alva Edison’s new kinetoscope may have been on exhibit in its Electricity Building.

8. Verdone 1970, 140–47 (chapter entitled “P. T. Barnum e la ‘distruzione di Roma’”), describes this spectacle and furnishes several illustrations. Most impressive is the two-page color spread of Rome with the Colosseum in the background (142–43). Cf. also Saxon 1989, 319–20, for a description and an eyewitness account. On Kiralfy, Barnum, and comparable Roman spectacles shown in a variety of New York places, including Coney Island, see Malamud 2001a or 2001b. Verdone, 146–47, links Barnum’s show to early cinema epics, and indeed Barnum’s production was redone as a film by the Edison Company. Verdone’s book has the merit of delineating the tradition of spectacle from ancient Rome to the age of silent cinema, with stops on the way concerning medieval and Renaissance pageants, circuses, and even Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show.

Flag the military salute—right hand lifted, palm downward, to a line with the forehead and close to it. Standing thus, all repeat together, slowly: “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands: one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.” At the words, “to my Flag,” the right hand is extended gracefully, palm upward, towards the Flag, and remains in this gesture till the end of the affirmation; whereupon all hands immediately drop to the side. Then, still standing, as the instruments strike a chord, all will sing AMERICA—”My Country, 'tis of Thee.”

The author of the pledge’s wording was New York Baptist minister Francis J. Bellamy of Rome, New York, who had also drafted the presidential proclamation of Columbus Day. Bellamy was employed at The Youth’s Companion. The inventor of the saluting gesture was James B. Upham, junior partner and editor at the Companion. Decades later Bellamy described the process by which he came upon the wording for the pledge. Upham’s reaction to hearing the words for the first time was enthusiastic, and on the spur of the moment he came up with the gesture of the salute to accompany the pledge. As Bellamy put it:

“Read it again,” he said. I read it several times. Then I remember that he took the paper and read it himself; then coming to the posture of salute, he snapped his heels together and said, “Now up there is the flag; I come to salute; as I say ‘I pledge allegiance to my flag,’ I stretch out my right hand and keep it raised while I say the stirring words that follow.” We went over the Salute in unison in that fashion several times to get the effect.11

Upham’s snapping his heels imparts a military aspect to the salute. First schoolchildren and then adults adopted the Pledge of Allegiance as one

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10. Miller 1976 gives a detailed account of Bellamy, Upham, The Youth’s Companion, and the origin and early history of the Pledge of Allegiance. The book is written in the first person as if it were by Bellamy himself; on this cf. Miller, vi. She reproduces a photograph of the first appearance of the pledge in the Companion between pages 125 and 127 [sic].

11. Quoted from Miller 1976, 122. Cf. Rydell 1996, 21, for a slightly different version of what Upham said. See also Rydell, 25 note 19, for more on the authorship of text and gesture. Ellis 2005, 19–20, 44, and 115, confirms that it was Upham who invented the gesture accompanying Bellamy’s words. Leepson 2005, 164, describes an earlier salute to the flag, named after Civil War veteran, teacher, and education official George T. Balch: “Balch’s salute began with students touching their foreheads and then their hearts and saying: ‘We give our Heads!—and our Hearts!—to God! and our Country!’ The students then extended their right arms, palms down, and said, ‘One Country! One Language! One Flag!’” Balch called this “The American Patriotic Salute.”
of their most cherished national rites. Soon new American citizens pledged allegiance upon naturalization. Just as the words of the pledge underwent some changes, so did the gesture. Those pledging allegiance placed their right hands on their hearts during the words “I pledge allegiance”; on the words “to the flag” they extended their arms toward the flag and did not lower them until the end of the pledge.\footnote{12} This straight-right-arm salute to the flag, with palm up or down, continued until the early 1940s.\footnote{13} At that time the extension of the arm as part of this ceremonial salute was abolished because of its close similarity to the Fascist or Nazi salute.\footnote{14} The childhood reminiscences of G. Gordon Liddy, who was to become notorious in the 1970s in connection with the Watergate scandal, are worth quoting:

After morning prayers at school, we all pledged allegiance to the flag. This . . . required dignity and precision. We stood at rigid attention, facing the flag in lines straight enough to rival those of the massed SS in Leni Riefenstahl’s \textit{Triumph of the Will}.

“I pledge allegiance . . .” we began. At the words \textit{to the flag} we shot out our right arms in unison, palms down, straight as so many spears aimed directly at the flag. It was the salute of Caesar’s legions, recently popular in Germany, Italy, and Spain.

. . . I \textit{enjoyed} the mass salute and performed it well, unexcelled in speed of thrust and an iron-shaft steadiness throughout the remainder of the pledge. That habit became so deeply ingrained that even today,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{12.} Cf. the 1899 photograph of schoolchildren’s salute in Miller 1976, following 125 (bottom), hands over their hearts.
  \item \textbf{13.} Miller 1976, 141, reprints the text of a leaflet entitled “How To Give the Salute to the Flag” and distributed by Upham to American schools. It begins: “Right hand lifted, palm downward, to a line with the forehead, and close to it.” Then: “At the words, ‘to my Flag,’ the right hand is extended gracefully, palm upward, towards the Flag, and remains in this gesture.”
  \item \textbf{14.} Rydell 1996 twice refers to Romans in his characterization of the original saluting gesture but does not further discuss this supposed ancestry: “a modified version of the Roman gladiator’s salute” (14) and “the Roman gladiator’s gesture” (23). On the change in the gesture (mentioned by Rydell, 23) cf. especially the following representative articles from \textit{The New York Times}: “New Flag Salute Ruled” (October 16, 1940; page 10: students in the New York City school system are required “to use the military type salute,” i.e., right hand to forehead); “West Virginia Banishes ‘Nazi’ Salute in Schools” (February 2, 1942; page 17: no extension of the right arm); “Flag Salute Like ‘Heil’ Ends for School Pupils” (June 19, 1943; page 28: the same rule for students in the New York State school system). Cf. also Corcoran 2002, 146. The inside back cover of Baer 1992 carries a 1992 drawing of two schoolchildren raising their right arms, palms up, in salute. On this aspect of the American salute see especially Ellis 2005, 91, 113–20, and 251–52 (notes) in a chapter entitled “Making the Pledge Safe for Democracy” (i.e., different from Fascist and Nazi salutes). Ellis, 59–62 and 114, provides photos of schoolchildren giving various forms of the flag salute, including the raised-right-arm variant.
\end{itemize}
Chapter Three

at assemblies where the pledge is made or the national anthem played, I must suppress the urge to snap out my right arm.\(^{15}\)

The cinema here and later, as we will see, provides the most reliable evidence for this salute (and others). It is, in fact, more important than still photography because a film can show an action in motion. An example of the early form of the American Pledge-of-Allegiance ceremony may be found in George B. Seitz’s epic film *The Vanishing American* (1925), a melodrama set on and around an Indian reservation in the American West before, during, and after World War I. It contains a school scene in which a white teacher leads her pre-teen Indian students in the Pledge. One student is holding the flag, and the teacher, reciting the pledge, first puts her hand to her forehead as in a military salute and then extends it toward the flag. This is the cue for the students to raise their right arms, palms down and not up, toward the flag as well. (Figures 8–10).

When the extension of the arm was superseded by the placement of the right hand over the heart, this gesture in turn found its way into historical cinema. Prominent examples, although by no means the earliest, are two epic films directed by Anthony Mann, one on a medieval, the other on a Roman subject. In *El Cid* (1961) Saracens use this gesture as a greeting, and in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) a martial variant—right fist on the heart—appears as the standard salute in the Roman army. Mann distanced his portrayal of ancient Rome from the Fascist overtones of earlier Roman films. (More on this film in chapter 7.) The fist-on-heart salute occurs elsewhere in the cinema as well. An example from among Italian films is Giorgio Ferroni’s *Il colosso di Roma* (1965; *Hero of Rome*), in which Etruscans use it. (Roman senators express their consent to appointing Mucius Scaevola, the film’s titular hero, to the supreme command over the Roman army by the raised-arm gesture, a kind of *acclamatio.* ) The fist-on-heart salute also makes its way into high culture, occurring, for instance, in Lawrence Carra’s ancient-dress video production of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (1983). Yet another military variant had appeared on American television in a modern-dress adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (1951): the open right hand, palm down, is put over the heart.\(^ {16}\)

In American popular culture the raised-arm salute, albeit with variations, survives without any political or historical connotations in other contexts as well. Again the cinema provides representative instances in

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16. This one-hour version, adapted by Worthington Miner and directed by Paul Nickell for Westinghouse Studio One, was broadcast live by CBS-TV on June 11, 1951.
a film genre which is quintessentially American but in which viewers would not readily look for occurrences of raised-arm salutes. This is the Western. Scenes of greeting, mainly between Indians and whites, regularly display raised-arm salutes, if not always the kind associated either with modern history or with ancient Rome. In a scene of Raoul Walsh’s *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), an epic about George Armstrong Custer, no less famous a war chief than Crazy Horse raises his right arm to a brave whom he is sending away with an important message shortly before the battle at the Little Bighorn. But even the form of the raised-arm salute that is indistinguishable from the Fascist salute—or almost so—can occur on screen. A characteristic scene appears in Andre de Toth’s *The Indian Fighter* (1955), in which an Indian chief so salutes an American army officer. (Figure 11) More famous is the ending of Sydney Pollack’s *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), when an Indian brave raises his right arm in a solemn greeting to the eponymous hero. (Figure 12) Jeremiah acknowledges it with the same gesture. Instances from other films could be added.

The American cinema, the most popular of all media, continued the tradition of visual presentations of antiquity that were first encountered on the late-nineteenth-century stage. Many of the gigantic spectacles presented in the American theater in the latter part of the 1800s were adaptations of best-selling novels, such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880), and Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Quo Vadis?* (1895). They provide their readers with edifying and exciting stories set during the Roman Empire. Stereotypically the empire is characterized by militarism, luxury, blood lust, and debauchery, a decadent culture which only the new religion of Christianity can rescue from all-pervasive spiritual emptiness. These
popular works set the model for a whole series of such narratives well into the twentieth century. They were often adapted to the stage or provided the direct impulse for stage dramas on similar themes. Wilson Barrett’s *The Sign of the Cross* (1895) is a representative example of the latter, as is Lew Wallace’s pseudo-Shakespearean tragedy *Commodus: An Historical Play*, first published in 1876 but never produced. In early-twentieth-century America stage adaptations of *Ben-Hur* were so popular with audiences that they played in ever bigger productions, replete with sea battle and chariot race, the latter being the show’s main attraction. Over a twenty-year run *Ben-Hur* had more than twenty million viewers and was a huge commercial success. Popular interest in ancient Rome had received an immense boost from the discovery of Pompeii in 1748 and from the city’s subsequent excavations. Paintings, stage plays, and novels set in Roman times took advantage of this renewed interest, moralizing on themes of empire, luxury, decadence, the conflict between paganism and Christianity, and the triumph of the latter over the former. The appeal of *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Ben-Hur* and of their European and American imitators in print, on the stage, and later on film was near universal.

For visual representations of the Roman world, its surviving art and sculpture and the works of later imitators provided readily available mod-

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17. On this subject see especially Mayer 1994.
18. On the stage play of *Ben-Hur* see Mayer 1994, 189–200. Its text is at Mayer, 204–90. The author of the adaptation was William Young.
19. Dahl 1956 provides a brief overview of the influence which the discovery of Pompeii had on art and popular culture before 1840.
els. For instance, classicizing sculpture took up the triumphal Roman iconographic tradition in both the Old World and the New. A representative example from the latter is Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s equestrian statue in gilded bronze of American Civil-War general William Tecumseh Sherman, now in New York City. It is one of the most famous heroic monuments in American art. Begun in 1892 and completed in 1901, it had won a Grand Prix at the Paris Exposition of 1900 before it was unveiled in New York in 1903. The work shows the debt of American art to the art of imperial Rome. The victorious general is led by a winged Victory striding forth and holding up a large palm branch in her left hand. Her right arm is extended upward before her, her fingers slightly spread apart. The gesture is a loose example of what later becomes known as the Roman salute.

But where ancient Roman or later classicizing models are lacking for modern visual representations of the Romans, creative imagination must fill in the blanks. After all, the Romans’ literary and historical record has left numerous gaps regarding specific details about their daily customs and their general way of life. This is a circumstance about Roman culture that becomes problematic to all creative artists who wish to bring the Romans back to life, either in literature or on stage and screen. The problem applies as much to the plot of a play or a film as to its sets and to the actors’ costumes, diction, and gestures. Successful modern additions, however, are likely to acquire a life of their own in that they tend to become canonical for what is—or better: appears to be—“correct” because they have become familiar. In the cinema, the American Western is again a case in point. Over decades, standard Hollywood presentations of the West have become so iconic that any film that tries to achieve a higher degree of authenticity and to avoid the obvious historical errors or anachronisms found in innumerable other Westerns may, paradoxically, look wrong when audiences compare it to what they have come to accept as right from earlier films. The same is true for the genre of ancient spectacle, as an observation by Gore Vidal on the 1959 version of *Ben-Hur* makes evident. Vidal, himself a historical novelist, was one of the uncredited screenwriters for this film. He reports about its director: “William Wyler studied not Roman history but other Roman movies in preparation for *Ben Hur.*” Wyler had worked as an assistant on the silent *Ben-Hur* of 1925. This film and the 1951 *Quo Vadis* are most likely to have satisfied Wyler’s curiosity about the history not of the Roman Empire but of Rome on film because they had been made by MGM, Wyler’s own

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studio, and had been highly successful nationally and internationally. (All three films will be discussed in their contexts in later chapters.)

Regarding the visual side of social interaction of theatrical and cinematic Romans with their peers and superiors, archaeological and textual evidence from antiquity is insufficient to serve the purposes of producers and directors. Stage and screen stories must be specific, and where no useful information exists about how a certain moment should be represented, invention must close the gap. Classical scholars and ancient historians often are hired to conduct research for producers or to advise directors, but they may learn a sobering, perhaps even painful, lesson in the process.21 The conclusions reached by P. M. Pasinetti, associate professor of Italian at a major American university and consultant to Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar* (1953), a film adaptation of Shakespeare’s play also for MGM, are telling. They apply to the stage as well:

the producer knows very well that his historical reconstruction is not going to be exact and “scholarly” and, which is more important, that there is no reason why it should be so. A film is being made, not a contribution to a [scholarly] journal; the requirements are those of the film as an artistic whole. . . . [My] sort of research, whatever amount of it might be used, showed one crucial difference between scholarship and film making: while the former can afford to be vague in its results, the latter cannot. However uncertain the evidence, scanty the documents, and numerous the hypotheses, the decision had to be made as to how a piece of garment would be worn, a salute would be given, and so on.22

Much earlier observations on stage productions and theatrical acting bear out Pasinetti’s conclusions. Robert Montgomery Bird, popular author of *The Gladiator* (1831), a play whose subject is the revolt of Spartacus, said about the practical side of acting:

the education of an actor can only be acquired in the theater. . . . First he must learn “stage business,” comprising the mechanical aspects of the actor’s art, the management of voice, gestures, grouping, and so on. He must then learn to act with effect and to see in our great dramas “what it is that is effective.”23

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These words apply to all theatrical and cinematic productions, but nowhere are they more important than for the immense spectacles that had become all the rage on the late-nineteenth-century stage and that have well been characterized as anticipating the emergence of a new art form. The cinema was to eclipse its precursor through its almost limitless technological possibilities. The parallels between theatrical and cinematic spectacles, particularly when they both show a historical or pseudohistorical story, are an important link between the two media in the transitional era when the stage was forced to relinquish its hold over spectators’ emotions and interest to film. The best study of this phenomenon is by Nicholas Vardac, who provides fascinating information about the rise and decline of melodrama and spectacle in the theater, the influence of early cinema on the stage, and the transition from one popular medium of visual storytelling to another.

Vardac’s observations on theatrical writing and acting, especially on styles of gesturing, pertain directly to our topic although he does not specifically mention the raised-arm salute. But he gives important information on the overall context in which these salutes occurred, first on the stage and then on the screen:

Dialogue in many climactic scenes of the melodrama of this period was of secondary importance, and, as in the silent film, pictorial action, pantomime and business, dominated. Actors were unwittingly being trained for the silent film. There was no task here of creative interpretation or of dialogue. It was only necessary to carry out the action routine as outlined by author and stage manager. Drama depended essentially upon the sensational action, the spectacular scenic conceptions, and the cleverness of the overall episodic pattern.

Hence Vardac’s conclusion about audience expectations in general: “In the days which saw the fusion of stage and screen, drama was fancied in visual terms. . . . Audiences . . . had not come into the theatre to participate imaginatively . . . they had come to be shown.”


deriving from “stage melodramatic spectacles” had been standard in early film acting.\textsuperscript{27} Compare the following description of arm gestures from a late-nineteenth-century theatrical actors’ training book:

We may state that so long as in their movement the hands do not rise above the waist, they express sentiments of a quieter nature . . . but so soon as the hands are raised above the waist, and therefore reach the chest . . . their expression assumes much greater force, more intensity.\textsuperscript{28}

Especially significant for gestures in acting are the stage directions that help cast members express their characters’ feelings, attitudes, etc. As Vardac well puts it:

Stage direction, both in its handling of individual character interpretation and in mass groupings, movements, and tableaux, supported and augmented the pictures achieved through scenery, lighting, costumes, and properties. The acting of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry was notable for its pictorial bias, its selection, and its emphasis of visual images, details of business or of pantomime.\textsuperscript{29}

Stage business reinforces the chiefly visual appeal of theatrical spectacle. For example, the following was noted about Henry Irving’s 1881 production of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s \textit{The Cup: A Tragedy}: “Gorgeously armoured Roman officers” had a “peculiarly strong” impact on the spectators.\textsuperscript{30}

The tradition of spectacular productions reached its zenith with actor, playwright, and producer Steele MacKaye. MacKaye established on the American stage “a system of acting which arose out of and exploited a purely visual appeal.” This method, developed in France by François Delsarte and “depending upon the pictorial values of body positions and attitudes . . . was thoroughly in accord with the theatrical trends of the times.” A contemporary reviewer observed about MacKaye’s own acting style that it was “distinguished by a profusion of graceful but meaningless gesture and action, very much like a writing master’s flourishes.”\textsuperscript{31} The

\textsuperscript{27} Vardac 1949, 218.
\textsuperscript{28} Garcia 1888, 61. This book’s title page impresses readers with the author’s academic credentials.
\textsuperscript{29} Vardac 1949, 246. Vardac devotes informative chapters to the acting and production history of famous impresarios David Garrick, Henry Irving, and David Belasco.
\textsuperscript{30} Quoted from Vardac 1949, 97.
\textsuperscript{31} Quotations from Vardac 1949, 144. Vardac, 265 note 237, gives the reference for the review he quotes. Pearson 1992, 22–23, provides a brief overview of Delsarte’s method. For more
incredible stage effects which MacKaye developed for his new approach to large-scale theatrical storytelling led to his invention of a kind of stage that was utterly new in its technical advances over anything seen before; MacKaye aptly named it the Spectatorium.\(^{32}\) The Spectatorium was to open at Chicago’s Columbian Exhibition in 1893, but the project was too ambitious and expensive to become reality. MacKaye opened a smaller version, the Scenitorium, in 1894. “Acting . . . , of necessity, would become entirely pictorial” as a result.\(^{33}\)

We may now apply this background information to the stage plays set in antiquity, which were among the most spectacular and thrilling ones in nineteenth-century theater history.\(^{34}\) A number of them were duly filmed. (Cf. the next chapter.) The words of Bird and Pasinetti quoted earlier strongly imply that rituals of greeting between, for example, legionaries and their officers or between army commanders and the emperor are of special importance for visual stories set in Rome, since the theme of empire almost by necessity demands the presence of at least some military personnel. Audiences were then and are still familiar with highly elaborate and strictly circumscribed military rituals, particularly those of saluting. Scenes of militarism invariably occur in the story lines of Roman novels, plays, and films, but history does not reveal what the ancient equivalent of modern military rituals may have been in all circumstances. It is therefore dramatically necessary to invent something. The raised-arm salute readily offers itself as an immediately recognizable gesture, one that can be employed by the military and by civilians alike, especially when the latter form a crowd. On stage and screen it helps make for thrilling moments of spectacle, if accompanied by the exclamation “Hail Caesar!” The gesture, already established through the Pledge of Allegiance, can be traced on the American stage at the end of the nineteenth century, too. Photos of the New York City production of *Ben-Hur* provide the most important evidence.

details see Zorn 1968, a collection of texts by Delsarte and some close associates, with numerous passages on hand and arm gestures. Although saluting gestures are not specifically mentioned, we may compare, in part, the description of a gesture signifying authority: “Extend the arm and raise it in front a little higher than the level of the shoulder; then raise the hand . . . ” (Zorn, 126). On the importance of gesture as stage business cf. Zorn, 157–59, a section entitled “Oratorical Value of Gesture,” which contains statements such as “Gesture is more than speech” (157) and: “It is not ideas that move the masses; it is gestures” (158).

32. Vardac 1949, 146–49, describes the Spectatorium and discusses a number of MacKaye’s special effects.


34. For descriptions see Vardac 1949, 76–79 (Quo Vadis?), 79–82 and 230–32 (Ben-Hur), 109–11 (Passion Play), and 207–9 (Judith of Bethulia).
After Wallace’s novel had become a publishing phenomenon, a theatrical adaptation opened on Broadway in November, 1899.\(^{35}\) It, too, proved a sensational success. It was exported abroad and continued on Broadway in ever more spectacular stagings until April 1920, when it was closed down in anticipation of a film version. This film, however, was delayed until late 1925. The play was, in the words of someone who attended its opening night, “the most stupendous theatrical undertaking of this age.”\(^{36}\) Its success was unprecedented and unparalleled:

*Ben-Hur* filled and overflowed the Broadway day after day, week after week, until it was obviously a unique phenomenon. People were entranced by its magnificence—sets, costumes, lighting, staging, music, and especially the chariot race. Nothing on this scale had been attempted before. . . . Written by a man with a strong theatrical instinct, the play proved a “natural.” It was destined to be performed 6,000 times, mostly in big cities and at high prices, a total of 20,000,000 persons were to pay $10,000,000 to see it. The itinerary for twenty-one years—with enlarged stages, S.R.O. signs, full-length seasons—is unequaled in the history of the theater.\(^{37}\)

The New York production was accompanied by a classy souvenir album containing, among other things, numerous photographs.\(^{38}\) Four of these are telling in different ways. Act II, Tableau 2 of the album is entitled “The Open Sea” and shows a scene with Ben-Hur and Quintus Arrius, the Roman tribune whose life he has saved during the sea battle, on the planks of a wrecked ship. Ben-Hur, kneeling, is supporting Arrius with his right hand; his left hand and open palm are stretched out and upward. The image is in itself inconclusive because it does not reveal the purpose of the gesture, which can be Ben-Hur’s appeal to his god (or to a ship approaching outside the picture frame) or a promise or oath to save Arrius rather than to let him commit suicide. Act III, Tableau 3 (“Revels of the Devidasi”) shows a mass of male and female revelers with one or both arms raised. (Figure 13) The Devidasi had been erroneously imported into Greco-Roman antiquity from East India by Lew

\(^{35}\) For the publishing history of the novel, the inspiration it provided to other authors for similar novels, and the history of its stage adaptations see McKee 1947, 164–88, and, in greater detail, Morsberger and Morsberger 1980, 297–312 and 447–66, with 517–18 and 528–29 (notes).

\(^{36}\) Quoted from Morsberger and Morsberger 1980, 460.

\(^{37}\) McKee 1947, 180.

\(^{38}\) *Souvenir Album: Scenes of the Play Ben-Hur* 1900, leaf 2: “Illustrations from flash-light photographs.”
Figure 13. Souvenir program of stage production of *Ben-Hur*; Act III, Tableau 3. Author's collection.
Wallace in his novel and so reappear on the stage. Far more important is the second of two illustrations of Act IV, Tableau 1, both called “Dowar [i.e., tent] of Sheik Ilderim in the Orchard of Palms.” In this photograph a standing Ben-Hur is greeting the seated sheik with his raised and outstretched arm, palm down. (Figure 14) Act V, Tableau 3 (“In the Arena”) shows the crowd of spectators at the chariot race, with many arms raised.\(^{39}\) One other image, not contained in the souvenir album, is of a small crowd so greeting Ben-Hur in his chariot.\(^{40}\)

Three things are noteworthy about these illustrations. First, Wallace’s novel had not contained a single instance of the raised-arm salute.\(^{41}\) The same goes for the text of the theatrical production: no stage direction instructs any actor to raise his arm in greeting. Instead, we find directions such as these: “Officer salutes and exits” or “METELLUS salutes and exits.”\(^{42}\) Similarly, Wallace’s drama \textit{Commodus} contains no stage directions for a raised-arm gesture.\(^{43}\) Wallace and other authors of such plays are evidently unfamiliar with the raised-arm salute. A glance at any number of nineteenth-century stage plays bears out this conclusion.\(^{44}\) The texts

\(^{39}\) Mayer 1994, 203, also shows this picture. The term “arena” (the site of gladiatorial combat) is inaccurate. The documentary \textit{Ben-Hur: The Making of an Epic} (1993), directed by Scott Benson, traces the history of \textit{Ben-Hur} from the novel to the 1959 film. It is accessible in the DVD editions of this version of \textit{Ben-Hur} and contains some of the illustrations from the stage play’s souvenir album and some footage from the 1907 film. All film versions of \textit{Ben-Hur} will be discussed later.

\(^{40}\) This photograph is included in chapter 3 on the DVD edition of Benson, \textit{Ben-Hur: The Making of an Epic}.

\(^{41}\) At least in part this is because Wallace did extensive research for his book. Although he had to take liberties with the plot, which freely mixes historical and fictional characters, he was aware that all else, e.g., his descriptions of Roman triremes and chariots, had to be as authentic as possible. As he put it in Wallace 1893: “Nor would the critics excuse me for mistakes in the costumes or customs of any of the peoples representatively introduced. . . . Of the more than seven years given the book, the least part was occupied in actual composition. Research and investigation consumed most of the appropriated time” (quoted from Wallace 1906, vol. 2, 932 and 934).

\(^{42}\) Quoted from Mayer 1994, 217 and 219. The same observation applies to all other stage plays anthologized in this book.

\(^{43}\) \textit{Commodus} is best accessible in Wallace 1898, 81–168.

\(^{44}\) I have checked, in the modern editions cited, the following representative plays, either produced or unproduced, that are set in antiquity: Thomas Godfrey, Jr., \textit{The Prince of Parthia: A Tragedy} (1765), in Moses 1918, vol. 1, 19–108; John Howard Payne, \textit{Brutus; or, The Fall of Tarquin} (1818), and David Paul Brown, \textit{Septirius; or, The Roman Patriot} (1830), both in Moses 1918, vol. 2, 87–175 and 177–252; George Henry Boker, \textit{Glaucus} (1885–1886, unproduced), in Boker 1940, 119–228; John Howard Payne, \textit{Romulus, the Shepherd King} (ca. 1839, unproduced), in Payne 1940, 127–244; Royal Tyler, \textit{The Origin of the Feast of Purim; Or, the Destinies of Haman and Mordecai, Joseph and His Brethren, and The Judgment of Solomon} (no dates given), all in Tyler 1940, 31–121; Julia Ward Howe, \textit{Hippolytus} (produced 1864), in Russak 1940, 71–128. With the exception of those edited by Moses, the plays listed above are collected in volumes 3, 6, 15, and 16 of Barrett H. Clark 1940–1941.
Figure 14. Souvenir program of stage production of *Ben-Hur*; second image of Act IV, Tableau 1. Author’s collection.
of neither Louisa H. Medina’s adaptation of *The Last Days of Pompeii* nor Bird’s *The Gladiator*, one of the most popular American plays of the early and mid-nineteenth century, make any mention of it. The salute is evidently an addition intended to increase the audience’s involvement and enjoyment of a grand spectacle by means of an effective piece of stage business. This is in keeping with the exaggerated style of acting in nineteenth-century theater, which in turn influenced the acting in silent cinema. The incorporation of new gestures, indeed their invention, is therefore not as remarkable as their very absence would be.

Second, comparison with the Fascist salute in the gestures from *Ben-Hur* described above are loose and unmilitaristic. They will remain so for quite a while in the theater and on film, as we will see. Third, the crowd employing them is ethnically mixed. (The scene of the chariot race is Antioch, capital of the Roman province of Syria.) This aspect, to be dealt with more extensively in the next chapter, reveals that the modern raised-arm gesture and salute were originally not limited to Romans. Indeed, in view of its twentieth-century Fascist use it is almost eerie to realize that Ben-Hur, a Jew, had used it not all that long before the rise of collective anti-Semitism propagated by political ideologies in Europe. With the popularity of such productions the gesture becomes a standard ingredient of ancient spectacles, first on the stage and later on the screen. In its early occurrences, of course, it does not carry the definite overtones or implications it was to acquire later.

Two films are of particular significance for this context. I therefore discuss them here, although this anticipates some of my later arguments. Both are prestigious works, carrying high-culture pretensions and even a measure of snob appeal. Both are based on plays by George Bernard Shaw. They are Gabriel Pascal’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946) and Chester Erskine’s *Androcles and the Lion* (1952). The former is a British production with a screenplay credited to Shaw himself, boasting a stellar and expensive cast headed by Claude Rains and Vivien Leigh in the title roles and filmed in color, not a routine matter at the time. The latter, in black and white, was produced by Pascal but made and financed in the United States. Both exhibit the drawbacks of filmed theater, recapitulating, as

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45. Medina (n.d.). The popularity of the story may be gauged from its parody: Reece 1850, which also has no mention of the salute. Bird’s *The Gladiator* is most easily accessible in Richards 1997, 171–242. Actor Edwin Forrest, for whom Bird wrote the play as a star vehicle, played Spartacus “over a thousand times in his career” (Richards, 167). On the play’s popularity see also Dahl 1963, 56–57.

46. Neither Siddons 1807 nor Barnett 1987 discusses or illustrates it.
it were, the transition from stage to screen that had made possible the silent epics to be discussed in chapter 4 and the rather uneasy mixture of modernity and antiquity that is unavoidable in such productions. (There are a number of anachronisms in both films.) But their most important feature for the present purpose is how they present their Romans saluting. As is to be expected by this time in the history of Roman films, civilians and military personnel employ the raised-arm salute. Civilians do so more loosely than soldiers and officers. In *Caesar and Cleopatra*, for instance, Caesar is so greeted by a contingent of soldiers who immediately afterward draw their swords and extend them toward him. “Hail Caesar!” is heard at the same time. The opening scene of *Androcles and the Lion* displays a raised-arm salute, too. But both films also show instances of the *modern* military salute, with the right hand, palm down, touching the greeter’s helmet or, in one instance in the latter film, the bare head. In one scene of *Caesar and Cleopatra* a Roman officer delivers a message to Caesar. He puts his right hand to his helmet exactly as a modern soldier would do; before he leaves a few moments later, he gives Caesar a straight raised-arm salute. Modern military phraseology (“Yes, sir!” and “No, sir!”) occurs in the two films as well. To anyone who pays attention to the military ceremonial and to the saluting gestures of cinematic Romans, all this is rather disconcerting. (The repeated instances of “Yes, sir!” and “No, sir!” in the opening sequence of Henry King’s *David and Bathsheba* [1951] are especially jarring.) But it tells us that all the gesturing on the screen, here and elsewhere, has nothing to do with Roman or other ancient history and everything to do with modern staging and modern conventions, whether they are based on contemporary social customs or cinematic traditions. When both merge, as they do in these two films, the result is unintentionally revealing because it proves that historical accuracy is not to be expected on stage or screen.