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Fugitive Sources, *Ben-Hur*, and the Popular Art “Property”

WHEN I STARTED MY WORK on *Ben-Hur* several years ago, I had little idea that it was, in fact, “work.” It began as a curiosity, developed into a passionate interest, and resulted in what I would like to think is an important identification—that *Ben-Hur* is the avatar of the popular culture “property” that enters as a best-selling item, spreads to other artistic genres, and develops into a variety of business synergies.

My education, training, and professional research have been mostly in traditional sources and resources. For my dissertation, a critical edition of Cleonides’ *Harmonic Introduction* (*Eisagogê harmonikê*), I collated forty-four medieval and Renaissance manuscripts that I initially identified in printed European and American library catalogs and then later acquired in microfilm format via letters sent by snail mail. That was in the late 1970s. At the same time, as a diversion, I wrote a book on “ancient” films—that is, films like *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*—which I identified from printed European and American library catalogs and either acquired (or rather rented), in 16mm format, or examined in 16mm or 35mm at the Library of Congress and New York’s Museum of Modern Art. In September 2000, I logged on to eBay for the first time in my life, and there I found, much to my amazement, over 400 *Ben-Hur* items, including an 1880s second edition of the novel, *Ben-Hur* by Lew Wallace. But I also noticed an item that captured my interest—an advertisement for *Ben-Hur* Flour. Little did I know that eBay would soon become the fugitive resource I could use for my research to allow me to expand the frontiers of my knowledge.

I purchased that flour ad, and a label from *Ben Hur* Cigars, as well as a small bottle of Jergens *Ben Hur* Perfume. Encouraged by ephemerists Rob Harris and Diane DeBlois, I became serious about searching *Ben-Hur* items on eBay, applied for and received a grant from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Arizona, and built a *Ben-Hur* collection, learning about its significance along the way.

The Significance of *Ben-Hur*

Before describing the methodology I employed in establishing a useful database from this fugitive resource, it is important that I account for the value of the entire exercise. Lew Wallace's book, *Ben-Hur*, published by Harper & Brothers in 1880, was at first only a moderate success—simply a historical novel set during the ancient Roman Empire à la Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834); or during the life of Jesus, à la Henry Ward Beecher's *The Life of Jesus, the Christ* (1871) or Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Footsteps of the Master* (1877). But beginning in 1886 and continuing into the next century, *Ben-Hur* sold, on average, 50,000 copies a year, and Harper issued edition after edition to maintain that momentum. Wallace had divided his novel into nine "books," and in 1899 Harper sold separately the first book as *The First Christmas*, followed in 1912 by *The Chariot Race*, as separate volumes. In 1913 Sears, Roebuck & Company purchased one million volumes for resale—the largest single book sale at that time, huge even by contemporary standards. The dust jacket of the 1946 Grosset & Dunlap edition estimated that there were 2,600,000 copies in print to date. Even now, 127 years after publication, the novel is still being sold in a variety of paperback, audiobook, and downloadable editions. But *Ben-Hur* was destined to become much more than just a successful popular novel.

In 1898 Wallace and Harper signed an agreement with Broadway producers Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger to dramatize *Ben-Hur*. Beginning in November 1899, this spectacular production—complete with an onstage two-chariot, eight-horse, five-minute chariot race—filled the Broadway Theater in New York, selling 25,000 tickets per week. With a cast and crew of several hundred, only large venues like those in Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago could host the production. But from the surrounding towns, groups took special trains to travel to these cities. Then the production began to play in the Midwest as well, most notably at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. *Ben-Hur*, the drama, visited London twice, as well as Sydney and Melbourne. In the United States, Klaw & Erlanger's *Ben-Hur* played for over two decades. Estimates are that some ten million people saw it, bringing in close to twenty million dollars.

In 1907 Sidney Olcott made a 1,000-foot film adaptation of the novel, but neither he nor his Kalem Company had cleared copyright with the Wallace estate or Harper. The legal dispute that resulted worked its way to the United States Supreme Court, and the decision from *Kalem Co. v. Harper Brothers* [222 U.S. 55 (1911)] established the legal precedent for rendering a copyrighted novel into a copyrighted moving picture play, a case that has been cited as precedent in nearly a dozen subsequent Supreme Court cases. MGM's 1925 cinematic adaptation of the novel was one of the top-grossing films of the silent era, not to mention the costliest to make, and MGM's four-hour, 65mm Technicolor 1959 film adaptation garnered a record

eleven Academy Awards and earned more than \$40 million in box office receipts, and another \$20 million in merchandising. In 1969, this film was theatrically rereleased, had a blockbuster television premiere in 1971, and has performed well for rentals and sales in Beta, VHS, Laser Disk, and DVD formats.

Despite the obvious successes of the *Ben-Hur* phenomenon in multiple genres and over several generations, it was still not easy to convince myself that collecting and analyzing what otherwise might be termed simply *Ben-Hur* memorabilia was a worthy project for scholarly investigation. While research in the scientific disciplines can easily yield results that are unexpected at the outset, this is only rarely true in the humanities. Indeed, in classical studies (other than in subfields like archaeology and papyrology that by their nature involve new discoveries), it is rare to embark upon a scholarly journey the end of which is unknown. Most of the data, and vast amounts of it, have been collected and analyzed for centuries. But the goal, even at the outset of this *Ben-Hur* research, was to bring together materials never before identified as belonging to a scholarly subject.

The above summary, the details of which are available in traditional scholarly resources, should make clear that *Ben-Hur* was an extraordinarily popular novel with an extraordinarily long, successful, and continuing tradition.¹ But I have discovered much more about the *Ben-Hur* phenomenon over the past seven years. Largely by using eBay as a resource, I learned that there is a vast terrain of *Ben-Hur* artistic and commercial products that flourished from the late 1880s through the 1920s and beyond, and that this terrain is so vast and so variegated and so pervasive that I have concluded *Ben-Hur* provided the first popular artistic success to spill over into the commercial world, making it the prototype of the pop culture synergies that we encounter so commonly today.

Collecting the Data

When time and travel permitted, I searched for *Ben-Hur*-related items in second-hand stores, but I spent more time in major municipal and university libraries where I could search business records, telephone directories, and the like. But business records are not comprehensive and vary greatly from locality to locality, while telephone directories provide little assistance in identifying brand names and products—especially for the period in which most of the *Ben-Hur* items were created. Major newspapers like the *New York Times* have developed online, searchable databases that include advertisements; such databases can provide valuable information, but it is mostly of local nature. In contrast, eBay, as “America’s attic,” offers

1. The most comprehensive work on the subject is Robert E. Morsberger and Katharine M. Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic: The Colorful Life of America’s Foremost Literary Adventurer, the author of Ben-Hur* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980).

a much more efficient and comprehensive means of searching. Millions of items that people across the country saved, sold, or passed on to progeny during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are now not only available via eBay to anyone with a few dollars in the general public who owns a computer, but, even more important for professional purposes, are digitally searchable. Because sellers can list almost anything on it, eBay offers a greater opportunity for new discoveries.

eBay's search parameters can easily be reset so that unwanted items can be eliminated. Of the hundreds of "hits" that a general search for "Ben-Hur" or "Ben Hur" will produce, some will be almost entirely unrelated. A description of a *Gladiator* DVD, for instance, reads "this rousing historical epic ... proudly harkens back to such films as BEN-HUR and SPARTACUS." However, eBay permits users to narrow their searches extensively, eliminating multiple terms simultaneously. In addition, while eBay auctions usually last for only seven to ten days, eBay allows one to search completed items for an additional fifteen days. This time factor is both advantageous and disadvantageous. The advantages are that new items appear on a daily basis and that the researcher can search 24 hours per day, including weekends and holidays. A disadvantage is that the researcher has at best a 25-day window to find an item, so diligence is required.

Another problem in searching eBay for research-worthy information is that listings too often offer limited details about an item. In many instances, sellers are simply middlemen obtaining an object from one source and selling it to another; they know little, if anything, specific about it. Part of the reason for this disproportionate amount of ignorance is the sheer volume of sellers one encounters on eBay. Even though some sellers do take the time to investigate and describe an item as best as they can (usually to reach more potential bidders, rather than because of their own particular interest in the item or its category), often their unskilled methods are inadequate. At worst, one finds disinformation, perpetuated errors, or misidentifications. Nonetheless, there have been instances in which I have e-mailed sellers for more details and found that they were indeed knowledgeable collectors with useful data. Early on, these newfound human resources advanced my research considerably, particularly when they identified collection catalogs, Web sites, and databases previously unknown to me. One of the characteristics inherent in investigating a multigeneric topic like *Ben-Hur* is that one encounters book collectors, playbill collectors, cinema memorabilia collectors, toy collectors, and other sellers with varieties of expertise. As in acquiring knowledge about any new subfield or project, acquiring knowledge about *Ben-Hur* items has been a cumulative and selective process, and if just two of a dozen sellers were genuine collectors with some expertise, they often provided enough information to compensate for the other ten who had none.

Organizing the Data

Before I realized that my searches would develop into a large database of well over one thousand items in dozens of categories and subcategories, I would bookmark Web pages as a matter of course. I soon realized, however, that making a PDF of the page was more permanent and could be accessed more quickly. In fact, in many instances, the PDF I saved of the original eBay auction included all the value and information I needed, making an actual purchase of the item unnecessary. I created duplicates of all the PDF files, of course, and I often saved screenshots of the item.

At first I simply divided my files into five folders: (1) Books, (2) Films, (3) Plays, (4) Tribe, and (5) Miscellaneous. These accommodated (1) the more than two hundred American, British, and foreign language editions, imitations, sequels, and the like; (2) the 1907, 1925, and 1959 films; (3) the Klaw & Erlanger production and, optimistically, material relating to several other dramatic renditions mentioned very briefly in Morsberger and Morsberger;² (4) the Tribe of Ben Hur—a fraternal organization turned corporate insurance giant; and (5) various companies, brands, and products named “Ben Hur.” But as my searches continued, I found other types of items, and it soon became apparent that I needed additional folders for the likes of E.T. Paull’s “Ben Hur Chariot Race March,” Ben Hur comic books, places named Ben Hur, people named Ben Hur, boats named Ben Hur, and chariot-related materials—including Coney Island’s Ben Hur Chariot Race.

I now use fourteen discrete folders:

1. Books
2. Lew Wallace
3. Plays & Shows
4. Films
5. Music
6. Prints & Paintings
7. Chariots
8. Horses
9. People
10. Places
11. Boats & Trains
12. Roller Coasters
13. Companies, Products, & Brands
14. Miscellaneous

2. Morsberger and Morsberger, *Lew Wallace*, pp. 453-4.

Each of these main categories is divided into subcategories. The schema is too lengthy to include here in its entirety, but a list of the folders in the “Companies, Products, & Brands” folder demonstrates by its great variety that the name “Ben Hur” [with or without the hyphen] found its way into most types of manufactured consumer retail items available in the decades surrounding 1900:

1. Companies, Products, & Brands:
 - A. Ben Hur Advance Tooth Powder
 - B. Ben Hur Automobile
 - C. Ben Hur Bakelite
 - D. Ben Hur Batteries
 - E. Ben Hur Bazaar (St. Louis)
 - F. Ben Hur Bicycles
 - G. Ben Hur Buggy Blankets
 - H. Ben Hur Chameleon Sunglasses
 - I. Ben Hur China
 - J. Ben Hur Cigar & Tobacco
 - K. Ben Hur Clocks
 - L. Ben Hur Clothes
 - M. Ben Hur Composition Books
 - N. Ben Hur Construction
 - O. Ben Hur Fabric
 - P. Ben Hur Fence
 - Q. Ben Hur Fishing Reel
 - R. Ben Hur Foods
 - i. Ben Hur Baking Powder
 - ii. Ben Hur Bitters
 - iii. Ben Hur Ceylon Tea
 - iv. Ben Hur Coffee & Spices
 - v. Ben Hur Flour
 - vi. Ben Hur Ketchup
 - vii. Ben Hur Oranges
 - S. Ben Hur Fraternal Organizations
 - i. The Tribe of Ben Hur
 - ii. Ben Hur Shrines (Austin, Kansas City, Chicago)
 - T. Ben Hur Freezer
 - U. Ben Hur Hair
 - V. Ben Hur Harness
 - W. Ben Hur Hosta
 - X. Ben Hur Mining
 - Y. Ben Hur Moving & Storage

Z. Ben Hur Oil & Gasoline
 AA. Ben Hur Perfume and Powders
 BB. Ben Hur Pinball, Slots, & Games
 CC. Ben Hur PlayStation 2
 DD. Ben Hur Sewing Machine
 EE. Ben Hur Shoes & Rubbers
 FF. Ben Hur Silver
 GG. Ben Hur Sled
 HH. Ben Hur Soap
 II. Ben Hur Speedway
 JJ. Ben Hur Steel Racer
 KK. Ben Hur Streamline Curler
 LL. Ben Hur Tent
 MM. Ben Hur Tools & Neatsfoot Oil
 NN. Ben Hur Toys
 OO. Ben Hur Trailer
 PP. Ben Hur Washboard
 QQ. Ben Hur Watchbands
 RR. Ben Hur Watches
 SS. Ben Hur Whiskey
 TT. Kaplan’s Ben Hur

This schema does not include the business contracts, personal correspondence, and other ephemera archived and/or microfilmed at the William Henry Smith Library of the Indiana Historical Society, the Lilly Library at Indiana University, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, or the Harper archive at Butler Library, Columbia University. Nor does it graphically account for occasional overlap and cross-referencing: the 1959 Marx Ben-Hur toy set, for instance, could rightfully be filed either within the Film/1959 folder or the Companies/Toys folder.

Results

Best-sellers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, e.g. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *In His Steps, Quo Vadis?*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, all produced such popular culture products as plays, films, and sequels. In 1879 Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* inspired Pain’s Fireworks to create a theme show that traveled around the East and Midwest featuring a nightly eruption of Vesuvius. But none of these books generated the additional popular culture artifacts to the extent or variety that *Ben-Hur* produced. The dozens of companies listed above in folder 13 (Companies, Products, & Brands)—which were the most unexpected but ubiquitous finds from the eBay resource—alone demonstrate the unparalleled commercial influence *Ben-Hur* maintained for decades. More important is that neither the authors nor the publishers of these other books

were careful to guard their copyright; Wallace and Harper were the first to legally protect and cultivate their literary product and turn it into a financial juggernaut.

In durability as well, nothing compares to *Ben-Hur*, the popularity of which has continued for 127 years, with only two periods of relative disinterest. The multiplicity of *Ben-Hur* items found on eBay has allowed me to create a timeline representing the prominence of *Ben-Hur*, although the following includes only a few examples from each decade.

The first “*Ben-Hur*” dramas (such as Clark & Cox’s “Spectacular Tableaux and Pantomime,” which played for nine years) and companies (for example, Ben Hur Cigars, which was thriving well into the new century) came into existence as early as the 1880s. The 1890s produced Ben Hur Bicycles, the multimillion-dollar Tribe of Ben-Hur, and the multimillion-dollar Klaw & Erlanger production, which lasted into the 1920s. In the first decade of the twentieth century, there was an aggressive national ad campaign by Ben Hur Flour, the Pasadena New Year’s Day chariot races, Coney Island’s Ben Hur Race, and the Ben Hur Construction Company (which in 2000–2003 helped build Cincinnati’s Great American Ballpark and still has offices in St. Louis and Indianapolis). The Sears book sale took place in the 1910s, the same decade that introduced the Ben Hur automobile. The 1920s produced the first MGM film, Westclox’ Big Ben, Baby Ben, and Ben-Hur clock models, and Jergens Ben-Hur Perfume. The Depression and World War II brought a diminution of new products, although MGM released a sound version of its 1925 film in 1931 and Ben-Hur Perfume continued to be offered in both the Sears and Montgomery Ward catalogs. Magazine advertisements for Honeywell, Ford, and Green Giant invoked the name and imagery of *Ben-Hur* in the 1930s and 1940s. Ben Hur Hair Products also appeared in the 1940s, as did CBS’s radio production of the story. Although several new editions of the book were issued earlier in the 1950s, it was MGM’s 1959 version of the film that spearheaded a renaissance and produced substantial merchandising. The film was rereleased in 1969 and attracted the third highest network television movie broadcast ratings to date in 1971. Through the subsequent decades, video technology and cable television continued to familiarize an entire new generation with *Ben-Hur*. The evangelical movement embraced this “Tale of the Christ” in the 1990s, when Focus on the Family underwrote “Ben Hur: The Musical” and produced an animated video. And as recently as September 2006, some 250,000 spectators over several nights were attracted to the Stade de France outside Paris to witness a spectacular outdoor dramatic recreation of *Ben-Hur* by French film actor, director, and writer Robert Hossein.

Although there are items that could be placed in more than one category, I have further organized these folders under three functional rubrics—the Art World, Real World, and Business World (headings that do not reflect life in general, wherein the art world and business world are part of the “real” world, and, philosophi-

cally speaking, the latter term has at best a variable definition). Of the three, the *Ben-Hur* items under the Business World rubric are the most extraordinary: no other product of popular culture has ever created such synergy and spillover into the business world. Then again, neither has any other product of popular culture ever had such an effect on the artistic world or the real world. Even if one thinks of *Truth or Consequences*, *New Mexico*, or the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* products, spillovers, and synergies, in terms of the sheer number of items in different categories, not even those titans of the 1970s/1980s and 2000s equal the magnitude of the *Ben-Hur* phenomenon, which preceded them by nearly a century or more.

As for the publishing aspect of the Art World category, eBay searches have made it clear that *Ben-Hur* inspired two excerpted volumes—*The First Christmas* and *The Chariot Race*—each of which was issued in several different bindings and formats; the illustrated *Seekers After the Light from Ben Hur*—a precious 5” x 7” booklet decorated with an embossed silver star and stellar rays on the cover and, within, consisting simply of four etchings by “F.M.” on parchment-backed cloth, paired with four quotations from the novel; a near prequel (*The Boyhood of Christ*—elegantly bound in a gold-tooled black, purple, or morocco leather binding, printed on gold-edged pages, and illustrated with fourteen etchings); Karl Tunberg’s sequel (*The Quest of Ben-Hur*); and more than 200 editions of Wallace’s novel, including German and Polish editions issued in Chicago for turn-of-the-century immigrants. Every week, copies of the Sears edition are auctioned on eBay, as are postcards advertising the novels with a color photo, on the front, of the Roman Empire period painting of Spanish artist Ulpiano Checa. Many of these items are unused, suggesting that they were saved for aesthetic reasons. eBay searches have also turned up such imitations as H.M. Blen’s *Ben-Beor* (1891), J.O.A. Clark’s *Esther: A Sequel to Ben-Hur* (1892), Miles Gerald Keon’s *Dion and Sibyls* (1898), George Croly’s *Tarry Thou Till I Come* (1901), J. Breckenridge Ellis’ *Adnah* (1902), and, of course, Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Quo Vadis*? Meanwhile, Wallace himself became a celebrity in great demand. We know from his correspondence that he earned hundreds of dollars per personal appearance and that he demanded and received a 30 percent royalty on his next novel; but from eBay I learned that he also endorsed John Holland’s fountain pen in 1902 and wrote introductions for several art and photography books related to the subject. Numerous postcards and brochures found on eBay demonstrate that the room in Santa Fe’s Palace of the Governors where Wallace finished writing and proofreading *Ben-Hur* became a tourist attraction early in the century, as did the beech tree behind his home in Crawfordsville, Indiana, under which Wallace loved to write. In addition, his wife Susan Elston Wallace, also an author, endorsed Ben Hur Flour in an April 1903 Harper’s ad.

As for drama, the popularity and profitability of the Klaw & Erlanger production is evidenced weekly on eBay, not only in the sale of programs from many venues

but also in auctions of additional souvenir programs containing photographs and musical passages from the original New York production. Treated with respect, many have been preserved in excellent condition: two have been bound in leather. eBay also regularly produces copies and printings of Harper's "Players Edition" of *Ben-Hur*, which featured photographs from the New York production. In contrast, "Ben Hur: The Musical" (1999) seems to have flopped soon after its premiere in Orlando, Florida; very little memorabilia is circulating from that show. The Clark & Cox production ran for nine years, and the relatively rare programs that appear on eBay (four in seven years) have made clear to me that dramatizing *Ben-Hur* not only brought extra revenue to Wallace, the producers, and local charities, but also provided an impetus to create still additional commercial synergies through cross-advertising. On the first page of an 1894 Schenectady program, the Gibson Brothers offer Ben-Hur Suits for sale; the advertisement for S.R. James, purveyor of housewares, begins with "B.H. Stands for Ben-Hur, Also for Best House"; the inside of the paper cover repeats the dedication of Wallace's book, "To the Wife of My Youth . . . Who still abides with me" and continues in pseudo-biblical inflection with "Go Thou To Quiri's Shoe Store for the sake of Economy, for Extravagance is sin." The first page of the four-page program printed for an 1889 New York performance, also obtained on eBay, includes Houghton, Mifflin & Company's half-page ad for Wallace's previous, newly reissued first novel, *The Fair God*—sales of which doubled after the publication of *Ben-Hur*. The back page contains a full-page advertisement for Harper's new, second edition of Wallace's novel.

Bordering between drama and film, stereopticon presentations of *Ben-Hur* came to the United States from England in 1896, and eBay has offered programs and advertisements from as late as 1908. Because exhibition of the 1907 film was legally prohibited, few items related to that production appear. But some of the most interesting items associated with the 1925 MGM film version include synergistic endorsements, most particularly Ben-Hur Perfume endorsed by Carmel Myers, who, dressed and styled by Erté, plays Iras in the film. Occasionally there is an offering of a scented blotter—the fragrance is still identifiable—slipped into a wax paper envelope.

Rarely a week goes by without E.T. Paull's "Ben Hur Chariot Race March" being offered for auction on eBay in one of its multiple formats. Published in 1894 with the permission of Wallace and Harper and made visually attractive by its chromolithographed cover, the march was recopyrighted in 1922 and reissued in 1956 and 1961; recorded by John Philip Sousa's band as well as Prince's band, on the Edison, Monarch, and Columbia labels; made available in 78 rpm, amberola, and Olympia disk formats; and transcribed for the recently popular piano roll format on more than a half-dozen labels (Ideal, Cannorized, Supertone, Pianostyle, United States Music, Arto, QRS, MelOdee, and Band Organ). In another innovative synergy, the

Cycle Manufacturing Company of Indianapolis in 1895 offered a free copy of the march to anyone who purchased one of their Ben Hur bicycles.

Belonging to both the Art and Real World categories, chariot racing became all the rage. First there were the widely distributed drawings, prints, and engravings modeled after paintings by Carlo Demollo (1888); Ulpiano Checa y Sanz (1890—used by Sears for its advertisements and dust jacket); and an oil on canvas entitled *The Chariot Race* by Alexander von Wagner (ca. 1882). Postcards and a Santa Fe Railroad magazine advertisement made me aware of the popularity of chariot races held every year on New Year’s Day in Pasadena from 1903 to 1915. Additional postcards found on eBay illustrate the spectacular electric signs depicting the Ben Hur chariot race above the Hotel Normandie in New York and near the Pontchartrain Hotel in Detroit. A unique auction made available a page from the pre-World Series September 4, 1932 *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, which contained a large cartoon depicting Babe Ruth riding a chariot as the “Ben Hur of World Series Classics.” Other auctions offered Ben-Hur chariots in a 1934 ad for Minneapolis-Honeywell air conditioning “control”; a 1946 ad for the Green Giant who races to “pick the fleeting moment of perfect flavor” of corn niblets as a substitute for the Ben-Hur figure in von Wagner’s painting *The Chariot Race* (ca. 1882); and a 1952 ad for REO Gold Comet trucks, which introduces a cartoon “Benny” riding upon a truck chassis.


Representing speed, as well, but belonging exclusively to the Real World category, are the early twentieth-century Ben Hur rides and roller coasters in Coney Island and Ocean Park, and R.J. Lakin’s English merry-go-round of the 1930s. Too numerous to list here are the dozen or so horses and horse races named Ben Hur, circuses with chariot displays, notable artists, places from Wisconsin to Tijuana, and boats and trains named Ben Hur. Some of these were found via Google, but most were brought to my attention through eBay, and they help to fill out the decades in which new Ben Hur products were rarely launched and relatively short-lived. Clearly, as an icon of speed and control, *Ben-Hur* remained in the collective memory of the popular culture throughout the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, eBay sellers often tear out advertisements from stacks of magazines they find or purchase. While they may record the year of publication, they often fail to note from which magazine, let alone the number or date of the issue, they cannibalized their offerings. In most of the instances cited in the previous paragraph, only one example of each ad has been offered for auction in seven years. Print advertisements for Ben Hur Flour, in contrast, proliferated in late 1902 and 1903 issues of *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Century*, *Leslie’s*, *McClure’s*, *Youth’s Companion*, *Munsey’s*, and, of course, *Harper’s*. Ben Hur Flour launched a massive and innovative campaign aimed at several demographic groups, including the diligent, frugal housewife (ergo the endorsement by Susan Wallace in the April 1903 *Harper’s*) and her

children. The latter were targeted with comic characters called “Dough Boys,” whose antics were illustrated and explained in child-friendly poems. These “Dough Boys” preceded by more than a year Grace Weidersein’s “Campbell’s Kids” and Jell-O’s famous “Kewpies” of the following decade and therefore represent an advance in advertising.


Ben-Hur was published in 1880, just as an inchoate popular consumer mentality was beginning its first voracious sweep of the late nineteenth-century American landscape. The artistic object for which this popular consumer mentality developed an initial, broad, keen, and continuous yearning was *Ben-Hur*. Over the next few decades, as the confluence of commercial ingenuity, determined entrepreneurs, and expanding industries provided the American public with the tools they needed to consume and enjoy a fresh variety of popular merchandise, *Ben-Hur* was ready for consumption, already well established as a veritable artistic and commercial brand name. As the consumer element of the American economy continued to expand, *Ben-Hur* would provide a respected, alluring, and memorable reference and, insofar as the chariot race was concerned, a recognizable visual icon ripe for exploitation by fledgling businesses and their freshly developed tools—persuasive visual advertising and mass marketing. But were it not for eBay, the importance of *Ben-Hur* in the history of our nation’s popular culture and commerce might have been forgotten forever.

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