THE BLESSED ISLES AND COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY IN SALLUST*

Abstract: Sallust's digression on the Blessed Isles in the *Histories* is an exercise in 'what if?' or counterfactual history. Sertorius dreamed of flight to the Isles. He never went, but what if he had? Pompey would not have been granted proconsular imperium to wage the Spanish War; this was an unlawful honour, and the first of many. Sallust invites us to imagine a different history in which Pompey's early career was constrained by law and custom, and which, in turn, did not open the door for Octavian's equally transgressive rise to power.

Keywords: Sallust, Roman historiography, counterfactual history, Sertorius, Pompey, Blessed Isles

In the first book of his *Histories*, Sallust introduces the rebellious commander Sertorius into the narrative with a character sketch and a flashback. Although the *Histories*' narrative proper begins in 78 BCE, Sallust 'rewinds' the story of Sertorius to the late eighties and Sertorius' flight from Rome to Spain after the deaths of Marius and Cinna (1.90–4 M).[1] In 81, after repeated brushes with death in a short period, a weary Sertorius plotted his escape to the Blessed Isles, distant islands on the edge of the known world where a Golden Age was underway. Sallust appears to have included a geographical excursus on these Blessed Isles (1.100–3 M). Although the content of the digression is in some respects conventional, its very existence is surprising. Not only does Sertorius never travel to the Blessed Isles, he never even attempts to; they remain only the object of fantasy, and a fleeting one at that. Sallust has thus in two ways strained convention to include this digression. By 'flashing back' to Sertorius' earlier career, including the Blessed Isles episode, he extends his chronological scope beyond the main framework of the *Histories*. He also contrives to include an excursus on a location to which no one actually goes. Given that Sallust has gone so far out of his narrative way to include it, it seems clear that this digression serves a deeper historiographical purpose. This is often the case in the *Histories*: when an element is out of place in the narrative context, its meaning or purpose

[1] I have used the Maurenbrecher (1891) text and numbering of the fragments of the *Histories*. All translations (of Sallust and of other authors) are my own.

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can be found in the compositional context.[2] I propose that Sallust composed the Blessed Isles excursus in the spirit of 'what if?' or counterfactual history. Read in this way, the digression becomes a thought-exercise in hypothetical outcomes: Sertorius did not travel to the Isles, but *what if he had*? What if the war with Sertorius had ended in 81? Without his triumph (both literal and figurative) over Sertorius, would Pompey's career have continued on such an exceptional track?

For Sallust, this is far from idle musing. Pompey's career defied the *cursus honorum* and the traditional allotment of commands and honours, and set a precedent for the rise of dangerously ambitious men like the triumvirs, who circumvented existing structures to create their office and powers. One of Pompey's defining characteristics in the *Histories* is his excessive personal ambition, and the fury with which it drove his early career.[3] Pompey's rapid ascent in the seventies and sixties defied the existing power structure, procedures, and customs. His first two triumphs (for his victory over the Marians in Africa and the war in Spain) were illegally granted. His first consulship, in 70 BCE, was equally unconstitutional; he did not meet the minimum age-requirement and had bypassed the steps of the *cursus honorum*. Pompey's career was also marked by irregular military commands. He was granted proconsular *imperium* for the war against Sertorius, although he met none of the requirements for that rank. His command over the pirates in 67 was technically legal (granted by the passage of the *lex Gabinia*), but the *imperium* granted for the task was unprecedented and alarming.

The career Pompey built on these illegitimate early honours inflicted a civil war upon Rome before being truncated on the shores of Alexandria. At the time of the *Histories*' composition (c. 38–35 BCE), Sallust and his contemporaries were faced with the consequences of the precedent set by Pompey's exceptional career. The young Octavian had made a thorough mockery of the *cursus honorum* and traditional power hierarchy. He had learned well from his predecessors, and understood that nearly any concession could be obtained from the cowed and weary senate if one's demands were backed by the threat of violence or civil war. Sallust had seen Octavian extort propraetorian *imperium*, senatorial rank, and even the consulship before the age of twenty; the manifestly illegal triumvirate of which Octavian comprised a third was met with minimal resistance, because the certain alternative was continued civil strife. At the time Sallust was

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[2] Gerrish (2012) and (2016) argue for the 'analogical' nature of the *Histories*, suggesting that Sallust's account of the 70s is woven with allusions to the Triumviral period.

[3] Cf. 2.17 M, discussed below: *modestus ad alia omnia, nisi ad dominationem* ('modest toward all other things, except toward tyranny').

writing the *Histories*, it was not yet clear how far Octavian's career and devastation of republican institutions would extend.

One of the common charges against counterfactual history[4] is that it represents a return to the 'Great Man' model of history by suggesting that the past could have been changed—and thus was dictated—by isolated actors. However, Sallust's use of a 'what-if' scenario seems to actually undermine this model by demonstrating the contingency of 'greatness'. The digression on Sertorius and the Blessed Isles suggests that this was a moment when Pompey could—and should—have been restrained. If Sertorius had indeed escaped, Pompey would not have been granted a triumph for victory in Spain—he might well have never been called to Spain at all—and his subsequent career might have followed a more ordinary path, and might *not* have culminated in a civil war. In other words, he might have been shown to be not so 'Magnus' after all. In turn, had Pompey not paved the way for him, Octavian might have encountered greater resistance on his blistering rise to the highest stratum of Roman politics, and the version of the republic in which Sallust was writing might have looked very different. If 'greatness' is not an intrinsic quality and is determined, rather, by contingent circumstances and events, in the early 30s BCE there may yet have been an opportunity to forestall Octavian's Pompey-like progress.

What follows is a thought experiment, perhaps even my own exercise in 'what-if?' thinking. *What if* the Blessed Isles episode is an example of counterfactual history? What interpretative possibilities does that open up to us, and what might it suggest about the programme of the *Histories* as a whole? The fragmentary nature of the *Histories* often precludes certainty, and the fragments of this excursus are regrettably sparse. Still, Sallust is not a complete enigma to us: we know him well from the monographs; and the remains of the *Histories* are not as scanty as the relative dearth of scholarship would lead us to believe.[5] By drawing upon our knowledge of the historian, his style, and his preoccupations, we can venture some interpretations.[6] It is clear (as I hope to demonstrate below) that this digression is unusual and unexpected in the context of Sallust's works. While this application of a counterfactual reading is thus, to some extent, speculative, I hope that it will

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[4] E.g., Hunt (2004).

[5] We possess over 500 fragments of the *Histories*, including four speeches and two letters. By way of comparison, Ennius' *Annales*, about which rivers of ink have been spilled, survive in just over 600 fragments (and we do not have the luxury of other extant Ennian works to refer to for context and comparison).

[6] Cf. Syme (1964) 179: 'In these diverse ways, the lost masterpiece becomes palpable— content, architecture, and tone … That scholars should be found divergent is no proof that the method is vain and delusive.'

open potentially fruitful lines of inquiry into this compelling but unexpected and perplexing episode.

I. The Blessed Isles

Our most complete account of Sertorius' near-retirement to the Blessed Isles is found in Plutarch's *Life of Sertorius*. In 81 BCE, after barely escaping an attack by Sulla's agent C. Annius Luscus and a violent ten-day storm, Sertorius encountered a group of sailors who had just returned from the Atlantic Islands, also known as the 'Isles of the Blest'.[7] These islands were reported to be a natural paradise, where the weather was mild and the earth fecund, located far off the coast of Africa on the very edge of the known world (1.100 M; Plut. *Sert.* 8). According to Plutarch, upon hearing the sailors' description of the islands, Sertorius 'was seized with an amazing desire to dwell in the islands and live in quiet, freed from tyranny and wars that would never end'.[8] Sertorius did not, of course, act upon this desire; after a brief excursion to Africa, he returned to Spain at the request of the Lusitanians, who sought him as their leader (*Sert.* 10.1).

Four fragments (1.100–3 M) of this section of Sallust's narrative survive:

> quas duas insulas propinquas inter se et decem <milia> stadium a Gadibus sitas … constabat suopte ingenio alimenta mortalibus gignere.[9]

> It was said that these two neighbouring islands, situated ten thousand stades from Gades, produced food for humans entirely of their own accord.

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[7] Much of the scholarship on this episode has focused on the identification of the Blessed Isles with known geographical locations (most commonly the Madeira or Canary Islands): see, e.g., Rebuffat (1976); Spann (1977); Konrad (1994). It is not entirely clear whether the Romans categorised the Blessed Isles as a 'real' or 'mythological' place. On the one hand, they are associated with Homer's Elysium (as noted), and also feature in Lucian's fantastical *True History*; on the other, they are treated as a real geographical location by Pliny in his *Natural History* and by the Alexandrian geographer Claudius Ptolemy.

[8] *Sert.* 9.1: ταῦθ' ὁ Σερτώριος ἀκούσας ἔρωτα θαυμαστὸν ἔσχεν οἰκῆσαι τὰς νήσους καὶ ζῆν ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ, τυραννίδος ἀπαλλαγεὶς καὶ πολέμων ἀπαύστων.

[9] 1.100 M = Nonius 495.40.

> secundum philosophos elysium est insulae fortunatae, *quas* ait Sallustius *inclitas esse Homeri carminibus.*[10]

> According to philosophers, Elysium is the 'Fortunate Isles', which Sallust said are famous from the songs of Homer.

> traditur fugam in Oceani longinqua agitavisse.[11]

> It is said that he had been planning flight into distant parts of the Ocean.

> more humanae cupidinis ignara visendi[12]

> … out of the habit of human desire for seeing unknown things

From these fragments, we can assume that Sallust gave an account of the Blessed Isles episode, although it is difficult to determine the scope of that account. Plutarch's detailed treatment, however, suggests that the episode was not an unimportant one in the *Histories*.[13] While the biographer may have augmented his account of the Isles with details from another source (probably Posidonius), Sallust was a main source for his *Sertorius*.[14] Accordingly, due to the episode's prominence in Plutarch's biography,[15] scholars have been unanimous in their support of the conjecture that Sertorius' near-flight to the Blessed Isles was an important point in the *Histories*.

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[10] 1.101 M = Serv. ad *Aen.* 5.735.

[11] 1.102 M = Serv. ad *Aen.* 2.640 and an anonymous commentator at *Geo.* 2.197; corroborated by the scholiast on Hor. *Ep.* 16.41–2: *Oceanus, in quo sunt insulae Fortunatae, ad quas Sallustius in historia dici victum voluisse ire Sertorium.*

[12] 1.103 M = Gell. 9.12.22; also Nonius 129.9, although there it is incorrectly attributed to the *Jugurtha*. Although La Penna (1963) expressed doubt over Maurenbrecher's assignment of this fragment to the Sertorius narrative based on its lack of transmitted book number and comparison with Plut. *Sert.* 9.1, Funari and LaPenna (2015) have, with reservations, upheld this allocation.

[13] Funari and La Penna (2015) 302 suggest that the episode was substantial: 'Su questo sogno di Sertorio Sallustio si soffermava senza fretta'.

[14] On Plutarch's use of Sallust generally, see Peter (1865) and Maurenbrecher's introduction. On Plutarch's use of Sallust for the *Life of Sertorius* (and the Blessed Isles episode in particular) see Maurenbrecher (1891) 27–32; Peter (1865) 61–5; La Penna (1963) 219–22 and (1969) 263–4; Scardigli (1971); Spann (1987) 155–7; Konrad (1994) xliv–xlv; Funari (1996) 205; Funari and La Penna (2015) 317–22.

[15] The Blessed Isles comprise a little more than a full chapter of the (relatively brief) *Life of Sertorius*.

Scholars have also generally agreed that, while the Blessed Isles episode may well have been an actual event in the life of Sertorius, the account in the *Histories* was at least in part a Sallustian literary creation.[16] It seems unlikely that Sallust invented the episode wholesale, since the desire to cultivate an association with a mythological location would be consistent with other aspects of Sertorius' self-presentation.[17] However, it is probable that Sallust's hand is evident here, at least to some extent. Various cases have been made for what might have been at stake for Sallust in fabricating or augmenting such a tale. For example, Katz suggests that the digression is an extended Homeric allusion,[18] while García Moreno sees Sallust casting Sertorius as an ideal hero-ruler in the Cynic-Stoic tradition.[19] Others have argued that Sallust's portrayal of Sertorius' desire to move to the Isles of the Blessed simply may have been a reflection of Sallust's own escape fantasy borne of cynicism, exhaustion, and hopelessness.[20] Although the specific interpretations differ, what they generally agree on is that, while the islands may well have already been part of the Sertorius story by the time Sallust composed the *Histories*, Sallust has appropriated them here for his own purposes.[21]

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[16] Konrad (1994) 108–10 argues for the authenticity of the episode, and downplays Sallust's authorial intervention. Given the Blessed Isles' significance in Celtic thought, he claims that an interest in the islands would be consistent with Sertorius' fascination with all things Celto-Hispanic. Katz (1984) 22–3 also rightly points out that cultivating an association between himself and the Isles would contribute to Sertorius' self-representation as a quasi-mystical figure. Still, Konrad is an outlier in his thorough dismissal of Sallustian (and Plutarchean) literary machinations here.

[17] See, for example, Plut. *Sert.* 11, in which Sertorius claims that his pet white doe is a gift from Artemis, and uses her as a tool to manipulate the Lusitanians (who, as barbarians, are 'naturally prey to superstition' (γινώσκων εὐάλωτον εἰς δεισιδαιμονίαν εἶναι φύσει τὸ βαρβαρικόν)).

[18] Katz (1984) 19–26.

[19] García Moreno (1992) 143–8.

[20] La Penna (1969) 230; McGushin (1992) 165–7.

[21] Modern scholars have recognised that those purposes surely went beyond the 'pleasure' Cicero advised that topographical digressions could provide in a history (*delectationis causa*, Cic. *Inv.* 1.27; cf. *Brutus* 322); on Sallust's rejection of Cicero's historiographical prescriptions, see Woodman (1988) 117–28. As Woodman and Martin have noted (Woodman and Martin (1996) 168; cf. Martin and Woodman (1989) 169–70), historiographical digressions can also serve a structural function, separating parts of the narrative. The Blessed Isles excursus may well have done this, but it is difficult to draw structural conclusions about a fragmentary text. If this were the only function of the digression, Sallust may have more predictably composed a digression on Mauretania, where Sertorius went instead of the Isles. Syme (1964) 192 recognised the value of the digressions for their potential insight to the author's mind-set: 'These devices not only illustrate the talents and technique of a writer—some of them may furnish a clue to his

While scholars have proposed numerous interpretations for this digression, none has noted the peculiarity of its very existence. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, since the excursus seems to have been conventional in content.[22] Sallust locates the islands geographically, describes their vegetation (self-generating), and gives their mythological pedigree (they are to be identified with Homer's Elysium). However, the Blessed Isles digression departs from convention in two primary ways: geographical and chronological. The geographical problem with Sallust's inclusion of a Blessed Isles digression is that Sertorius and the action of the narrative never actually travel to the islands. They are a futile daydream for Sertorius. He is intrigued by the sailors' description of paradise but is brought back to earth by the pragmatic Cilicians (who aided him in his attempt to take the island Pityussa from Annius); these career pirates are nonplussed at the idea of eternal peace, and depart in search of conflict and profit. Sertorius abandons the fantasy and sails for Africa, and none of our sources mentions the Blessed Isles again. It is surprising for a historian as meticulous as Sallust to devote space to a detailed excursus on a location that appears only tangentially relevant to his account. This device is more typically invoked in narrative historiography when people actually *go there*: Herodotus' Cambyses attacks Egypt, Sallust's Jugurthine War is waged in Africa, Tacitus' Vespasian and Titus sack Jerusalem.

The chronological leap required by Sallust to include the Blessed Isles digression also suggests that it holds greater historiographical relevance. The episode is set in 81 BCE, outside the main chronological scope of the *Histories* (78–67 BCE). It is thus in the past of the narrative past, or, as Grethlein and Krebs have dubbed it, the 'plupast'.[23] Its inclusion in a historical work is not mandatory, nor are there strict conventions about what prior events are worth recall. Far from simply providing background information or context, the plupast is fertile ground for metahistorical reflection, and provides us with insight into the historian's themes, aims, and priorities.[24] Because of

innermost preoccupations, since he operates from free choice'. More recently, Wiedemann (1993), Oniga (1995), and Morstein-Marx (2001) have explored the literary uses of Sallust's digressions and their function as thematic vehicles.

[22] Büchner (1982) 146–7; the Blessed Isles digression seems to be similar in content to the *Histories*' other geographical and ethnographical digressions (*Hist.* 2.1–14 on Sardinia and Corsica; 3.61–80 on Pontus; 4.24–9 on Sicily). See Dueck (2012) for a recent reckoning of the vast bibliography on ancient geography and geographical narratives in general.

[23] Grethlein and Krebs (2012).

[24] Grethlein and Krebs (2012) 8–11. As is common in recent scholarship, Grethlein and Krebs expand on Hayden White's more narrow definition of metahistory to include 'the kind of implicit auto-reflection of literary texts that in other genres has been studied under the term of meta-narrative. According to this definition, an act of memory that is

their analogical nature[25] and dual emphasis on narrative and compositional time, the *Histories* have already blurred the line between past and present. Sallust's dip into the plupast is well-suited to a work characterised by temporal disruption.

Given that the Blessed Isles are thus out of place both chronologically and geographically, it is reasonable to ask what is at stake in including this digression. I suggest that it functions as an exercise in 'what if?' (or counterfactual) history. By delaying the narrative in the Blessed Isles, Sallust allows the reader to imagine a hypothetical version of history in which the narrative in fact *does* belong there, a version in which Sertorius *did* travel to the islands.

II. 'What If?' History

Counterfactual history is, in the simplest terms, the practice of asking *what if?*[26] What if Abraham Lincoln had not gone to the theatre that night? What if Hitler had found success as a young artist? To judge from the diverse representations of counterfactual thinking in various media, from TV series and plays[27] to novels[28] and blogs,[29] and the popularity of time-travel entertainment more generally, this mode of historical exploration has broad appeal. This is unsurprising. We are naturally curious about the past and its

embedded in a commemorative text can entail a comment on the text's own representation of the past and thereby open a metahistorical perspective.'

[25] See above, n. 2.

[26] Evans (2013) xv: 'By counterfactuals, I mean alternative versions of the past in which one alteration in the timeline leads to a different outcome from the one we know actually occurred.'

[27] A recent example in each genre: Amazon Prime's 2015 series 'The Man in the High Castle' (based on the Philip K. Dick novel of the same name) is set in 1962, 15 years after Germany and Japan won World War II and divided the globe between their empires; Alix Sobler's play 'The Secret Annex' (first produced in Winnipeg in 2014) depicts an adult Anne Frank, who survived World War II and is trying to establish herself in New York as a writer.

[28] E.g., Stephen King's *11/22/63* (New York, 2011), in which a time traveller repeatedly returns to 1963 to avert President Kennedy's assassination in hopes of creating a better future.

[29] *The Counterfactual History Review* (http://thecounterfactualhistoryreview.blogspot.com/) 'surveys the world of historical speculation, collecting and commenting upon examples of counterfactual reasoning that have appeared in recent books, journal articles, reviews, and online texts.' See also *Uchronia* (www.uchronia.net), 'a bibliography of over 3,200 novels, stories, essays and other printed material involving the "what ifs" of history.'

causes, and we often employ this kind of thinking in our own lives.[30] For many, especially those who are in some way dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, the idea that events are not inevitable or predestined is appealing; if things could have turned out differently in the past, we can cling to the hope that they might turn out differently—and that we might choose to act differently—in the future.[31]

Scholars have greeted counterfactual history with a more lukewarm reception than has the general public.[32] Its proponents have made the case that, when thoughtfully deployed, counterfactual history can be a useful interpretative lens. The consideration of alternative histories denies the notion of inevitability and frees us from the interpretative constraints of hindsight.[33] Counterfactual history can also offer us the closest thing possible to a historical 'do-over'. Although it is impossible to turn back the clock and have another go at the past, the contemplation of alternative outcomes can be a useful exercise in preparing us to act better—or at least differently— next time.[34] I suggest that this contemplation of alternative paths is a central function of the Blessed Isles episode. If we understand what factors contributed to Pompey's rise, Sallust suggests, we are better prepared to break the pattern should it present itself again (as it most surely had, in the person of Octavian). R. J. Evans has suggested that, more often than not, the subtext of 'What if?' is 'If only …'; in this formulation, counterfactual history is more an exercise in wishful thinking than a valid theoretical approach.[35]

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[30] Ferguson (1999) 2.

[31] Of course, this is exactly why counterfactual history has come into conflict with Christian theology specifically (Ferguson (1999) 25–6) and historical determinism more broadly.

[32] Counterfactual history has also been denigrated by some historians as useless frivolity and idle speculation at best, or, at worst, 'unhistorical shit' (Thompson (1978) 300). In light of the rapid growth of counterfactual scholarship since the 1990s, it is increasingly difficult to dismiss counterfactual history as a 'parlour game' or hobby; it must now be reckoned with as a legitimate genre of historical writing (however speculative its critics believe it to be).

[33] Wurgaft (2010) 361–83 explains: 'By engaging in counterfactual thought experiments, intellectual historians could restore an awareness of sheer contingency to the stories we tell about the major texts and debates of intellectual history' (361). Cf. Black (2008) 2–3.

[34] Ferguson (1999) 2: 'But the business of imagining such counterfactuals is a vital part of the way in which we learn. Because decisions about the future are—usually—based on weighing the potential consequences of alternative courses of action, it makes sense to compare the actual outcomes of what we did in the past with the conceivable outcomes of what we might have done.'

[35] Tucker (1999) 276. This, according to Evans (2013), is why counterfactual history has generally been more appealing to conservative/right-wing historians than those further to the left: 'Whatever the eddies and countercurrents along the way, the Left has generally

This criticism—and its corollary, that counterfactuals tell us more about the authors' present than the narrative past[36]—are not obstacles in the present discussion, for it is Sallust's worldview we seek to understand.[37] Our task here is not necessarily to interpret the 'actual' history of the 70s and 60s, but rather Sallust's version of it, and, in turn, what that version has to say about the Triumviral period. Sallust's wishful thinking, his longing for a Rome that had turned out differently, is exactly the point.

Ancient authors seem to have been no more immune than we are to the curiosity provoked by alternative versions of history. Livy's Alexander digression in Book 9 is a famous example. How would things have turned out for Rome, Livy muses, if she had been forced to reckon with Alexander?[38] Rome would have been victorious, he supposes, and devotes three sections to outlining the reasons why.[39] The Alexander digression is explicitly counterfactual, and framed as a thought experiment in the same manner as modern essays like those compiled by Ferguson and Black.[40] However, ancient authors seemed to have experimented with more implicit counterfactuals, as well (a point to which we will return below). O'Gorman has convincingly argued that the family tree of the Pisones in Tacitus' *Histories* and *Annals* represent a hypothetical Pisonian dynasty running in parallel to the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties.[41] She likens Tacitus' invocation of a 'virtual history' to a form of declamation, the oratorical last resort of the disenfranchised under the principate.[42] The counterfactual digression seems to be a close cousin of the *suasoria*, in which the speaker positions himself at the side of a Great Man at his critical moment (e.g., Hannibal about to cross

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believed that the tides of history flow in its favor. Why should left-wing historians regret what did not happen in the past when the future is still theirs?' (33).

[36] Evans (2013) 125: 'Counterfactuals are ironical because, ultimately, they always cast more light on the present than on the past.'

[37] Rosenfeld (2002) takes this perspective in an article exploring 'the evolving place of various historical events' in collective memory.

[38] Livy 9.17.2: … *ut quaerere libeat quinam eventus Romanis rebus, si cum Alexandro bellatum, futurus fuerit* (' … so that I am interested in seeking what the outcome would have been for the Roman state if it had waged war with Alexander'); on the digression, see Morello (2002).

[39] Livy 9.17–19.

[40] Other examples of explicit counterfactuals or 'what if?' musings in ancient historiography and biography include Hdt. 7.139, Pol. 3.9.8, Livy 2.1.4–6, Plut. *Nic.* 11 and *Pomp.* 46.

[41] O'Gorman (2006).

[42] O'Gorman (2006) 293–5.

the Alps).[43] With just a little reframing, the elder Seneca's collection of *suasoriae* would read like Part I of Ferguson or Black's recent collections of counterfactual essays; it is a short step from 'Should Agamemnon Sacrifice Iphigenia?' to 'What if Agamemnon *Hadn't* Sacrificed Iphigenia?'[44] Like the counterfactual historian, the *suasor* speculates about plausible alternative histories, and raises the possibility of outcomes besides what we know actually happened.

Although *suasoriae* and declamation in general have traditionally been discussed in an imperial context, they had republican antecedents,[45] and Sallust's use of counterfactual thinking may be seen as a precursor to the formal *suasoriae*. Just as the orators and would-be politicians of the empire were limited in their ambitions by the ceiling imposed by the principate, the ladder of politics was cut short for Sallust and his contemporaries by the existence of the *triumviri rei publicae constituendae* at the top. The imperial *suasoriae* offered a form of escapism from the grim realities of political life.[46] For Sallust, counterfactual history serves a similar purpose, but it is not mere escapist fantasy. As O'Gorman suggests in the case of Tacitus' Pisones, Sallust's inability to act on his his speculations does not necessarily relegate this digression to the realm of 'frivolous activity' rather than 'serious political discourse'.[47]

Sallust himself provides support for reading the Blessed Isles digression from a counterfactual perspective, for he had already experimented with 'what-if' historiography in the monographs. For example, in the *Catiline*, Sallust introduces an explicit counterfactual in his account of the so-called First Catilinarian Conspiracy (*Cat.* 18.7–8):

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[43] Bloomer (2007) 301: 'The historical setting made the scene familiar, but no nicety of historical accuracy, no period piece was required. In writing and speaking as a male adviser to a male potentate, the composer had the duty to deliver a coherent exhortation from the known and general outlines of history. Sometimes the history had not happened, as when Cicero is made to choose between burning his writings and being executed by Antony. This is little matter: the speaker is essentially composing a fantasy that is almost dream-like in its insertion of the self as a speaker and agent in the grand past.'

[44] Seneca's other topics: Should Alexander sail the ocean? Should the 300 Spartans retreat before Thermopylae? Should Alexander enter Babylon, despite having been warned of his imminent death there? Should the Athenians return Xerxes' trophies, or risk war? Should Cicero beg forgiveness from Antony? Should Cicero burn his writings to win pardon?

[45] Bonner (1949) 1–31; cf. Seneca, *Contr.* 12.

[46] O'Gorman (2006) 293.

[47] O'Gorman (2006) 296.

> iam tum non consulibus modo, sed plerisque senatoribus perniciem machinabantur. quod ni Catilina maturasset pro curia signum sociis dare, eo die post conditam urbem Romam pessumum facinus patratum foret.

> At that time, they were plotting destruction not only for the consuls, but also for many of the senators. But if Catiline had not been so quick to give the signal in front of the senate meeting, the most awful crime since the founding of the city of Rome would have been perpetrated on that day.

A terrifying outcome was narrowly avoided because of Catiline's impatience; had he been able to control himself, he might have succeeded in a bloody coup. Sallust uses another explicit contrafactual several chapters later, in a digression about the lamentable state of Roman affairs which Catiline exploited (*Cat.* 39.4):

> quod si primo proelio Catilina superior aut aequa manu discessisset, profecto magna clades atque calamitas rem publicam oppressisset; neque illis qui victoriam adepti forent diutius ea uti licuisset, quin defessis et exanguibus qui plus posset imperium atque libertatem extorqueret.

> But if in the first battle Catiline had been victorious or at least walked away no worse off, surely great destruction and chaos would have overwhelmed the republic; for it would not have been permitted to those who obtained victory to enjoy it for very long before someone more powerful wrenched the power and freedom from their exhausted and drained selves.

Here, Sallust imagines that Catiline had won the Battle of Pistoria. If that had happened, he supposes, 'someone more powerful' would have taken advantage of the disruption to supplant Catiline, and the result would have been a new form of tyranny rather than peace. Although Sallust does not name the 'someone' who would benefit from this discord, it is worth noting that Pompey has just been mentioned at the beginning of chapter 39.[48] While it is far from a 'smoking gun', Sallust has certainly made sure that Pompey is

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[48] *Cat.* 39.1: *sed postquam Cn. Pompeius ad bellum maritimum atque Mithridaticum missus est, plebis opes imminutae, paucorum potentia creuit* ('But after Gnaeus Pompeius was sent to the pirate and Mithridatic Wars, the power of the plebs was diminished, and the power of the few increased').

on the reader's mind when considering this frightening alternative scenario.[49] This, in turn, gives some indication of Sallust's attitude toward Pompey, as will be discussed below.

These examples from the *Catiline* suggest that Sallust was willing to engage with the thought exercise of 'what-if' history. Both of these passages are explicit counterfactuals, in which the 'what if?' is made clear by the past contrary-to-fact conditional construction. No such construction appears in the extant passages of the Blessed Isles digression. However, the absence of formally counterfactual language does not preclude a counterfactual reading here. In fact, implicit 'what-if?' thinking seems to have been a regular feature of ancient historiography. Implicit counterfactualism falls under the umbrella of 'sideshadowing', a term introduced by narratologist Gary Saul Morson to describe a way in which authors invoke alternative histories and undermine teleological narratives (versus *fore*shadowing, which reinforces inevitability):

> Alternatives always abound, and, more often than not, what exists need not have existed. *Something else* was possible, and sideshadowing is used to create a sense of that 'something else' … In sideshadowing, two or more alternative presents, the actual and the possible, are made simultaneously visible. This is a simultaneity not *in* time but *of* times: we do not see contradictory actualities, but one possibility that was actualized and, at the same moment, another that could have been but was not.[50]

Implicit counterfactuals and sideshadowing are regular features of ancient historiography. As mentioned above, O'Gorman demonstrated the way in which Tacitus '*gestures* toward an alternative history'[51] of a Pisonian dynasty rather than explicitly wondering, 'What if this or that Piso had become emperor?'. Hindsight and virtual history are the focus of the 2013 volume *Hindsight in Greek and Roman History*, which examines how ancient historians' knowledge of the past and historical outcomes shaped their narratives. In particular, contributions on Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius demonstrate these authors' use of sideshadowing to emphasise contingency and

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[49] McGushin (1977) 211 also sees a potential reference to Pompey: 'S. is perhaps pointing to the hopes of such powerful intriguers as Crassus and Caesar … A more definite allusion could be presumed, perhaps, to the case of Pompeius, who did have specific hopes that the conduct of the final stages of the counter-measures against Catiline might be transferred to him …'.

[50] Morson (1994) 118.

[51] O'Gorman (2006) 284 (emphasis mine).

downplay the notion of inevitability.[52] With the Blessed Isles digression, Sallust seems to be using this same narrative technique; he invokes both the 'actual' (with the rest of his narrative) and the 'possible' (with Sertorius' contemplation of the Blessed Isles).

Even without a formal, explicit counterfactual statement, there are elements of this episode which encourage us to read it through the lens of counterfactuality or sideshadowing. The figure of Sertorius and the Blessed Isles can both be considered models of alterity, and per se invoke the idea of other possible worlds and histories. First, Sertorius himself is associated with the idea of alternative worlds. The very act of daydreaming is itself counterfactual; by contemplating escape, Sertorius is engaging in his own game of 'what if?'. On another occasion, he transforms an escape fantasy into reality. Although the relevant section of the *Histories* has not survived, Plutarch credits Sertorius with the creation of a Spanish *altera res publica*. It was a miniature Rome in exile; there was a 'senate' and a '*cursus honorum*' and schools built on the Roman model to educate local children.[53] In this case, Sertorius seems to have actually followed through on a counterfactual fantasy and attempted to create a virtual Rome in Spain.

Furthermore, the Blessed Isles are particularly fertile ground for speculative or hypothetical thinking. As the fragments tell us, they are associated with Homeric mythology, and are thus already located in the realm of the fantastical. In the Blessed Isles, things are more or less the opposite of what they are 'here': crops spring forth from the earth abundant and flawless without human effort, the weather is temperate year-round, and animals are obedient and docile (plus, there are no snakes).[54] Depictions from the Triumviral period seem to have specifically figured the islands as the locus of a virtual or alternative history free from civil war. In addition to the episode in the *Histories*, the Isles feature prominently in Horace's *Epode* 16, a poem which scholars have observed to be in dialogue with Sallust's *Histories*.[55]

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[52] Powell (2013); see especially the contributions of Baragwanath (25–48), Brock (49–70), Hau (71–90), and Maier (149–170).

[53] Plut. *Sert.* 14.

[54] See, e.g., Hes. *Op.* 171–3; P. *Ol.* 2.69–73; Hor. *Ep.* 16.41–66. Cf. Hom. *Od.* 4.563–9 on Elysium, with which the Blessed Isles were sometimes identified.

[55] See Nisbet (1984) on Horace's awareness of the *Histories*. Watson (2003) points out the similarity between Horace's and Sallust's descriptions of the Isles, and notes that 'the motive which prompted the contemplated escape is the same in both cases, a wish to be quit of the never-ending cycle of civil wars and destruction (480)'. The precise date of this epode is vigorously contested, as is its date relative to the equally fantastical *Eclogue* 4; on dating, see Watson (2003) 486–8 and Mankin (1995) 10–12 and 244–5. Regardless of when, precisely, *Epode* 16 was composed, it certainly falls within the Triumviral period and so belongs to the same literary context as the *Histories*.

Epode 16 addresses Triumviral politics straightforwardly and straightaway. 'Yet another generation is being worn down by civil wars' (*altera iam teritur bellis civilibus aetas*, 16.1–2)', Horace laments, and Rome, which has survived so many and varied external threats, is on the verge of destroying itself (3–10). He exhorts the war-weary Romans to leave these troubles behind and follow him to the islands, where they will find release from their present troubles. Thus, at the time Sallust was writing the *Histories*, the Blessed Isles seem to have offered a way of thinking about alternatives to the discordant world of the triumvirs. Even though they were not a practical solution, they invited consideration of a counterfactual version of Roman history in which Rome was *not* destroying itself in civil war. As a Golden Age-like paradise, the Isles represent everything our world is not; this is precisely their appeal. Invoking the Blessed Isles thus raises the possibility that if Sertorius had gone there, everything would have been different; perhaps not just for Sertorius, but for all of Rome as well.

III. What If Sertorius Had Sailed to the Blessed Isles?

Sallust's lingering description of the Blessed Isles invites us to imagine that Sertorius has indeed—contrary to what we know of history—travelled there. It is as if, by delaying the narrative there, Sallust asks the reader to momentarily forget that Sertorius remained in Spain. This is where we begin to ask *what if*—what if Sertorius *had* abandoned the war and sailed for the Blessed Isles? While it probably would not have prevented him from rising to great heights in Roman public life, the lack of a victory over Sertorius might have at least slowed and regularised Pompey's career track; this, in turn, might have forestalled the rise of other dangerously exceptional individuals like Octavian.[56] By activating this counterfactual version of history, Sallust emphasises the contingency of the 'greatness' of Great Men like Pompey. Something like the 'butterfly effect' is invoked: if just this one thing had changed, everything might have turned out differently. Sertorius goes to the islands, and Pompey misses an opportunity; perhaps another one comes along, but perhaps not. Any intrinsic 'greatness' (for better or worse) is meaningless unless circumstances conspire to allow it to manifest. If this is the case, it would have been urgently relevant to an audience in the 30s, who might have stood some chance of intervening before the young Octavian's career could too closely follow Pompey's (civil war and all).

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[56] The parallel between Pompey and Octavian as *adulescenti carnifices* is noted briefly by Katz (1982) 77.

Pompey and Octavian are not explicitly named in the Blessed Isles episode, but both are present throughout the *Histories*, whether explicitly or implicitly; it does not take a great leap of the imagination to see them lurking here. With his aggressive *ambitio* and shameless duplicity, the young Pompey seems to have had a central role in the *Histories*.[57] Syme argued that Sallust's critique of Pompey was at the heart of the text:

> Sallust's theme is not merely the attack on the post-Sullan system. It is the whole interval of precarious peace between the two ages of civil war … Or better, the decline and fall of the Republic, with Pompeius Magnus the principal agent, one of Sulla's men to begin with, then through long years the enemy of the oligarchs, to become at the end their false friend, and calamitous, bringing them to ruin, their delusion matched with his own jealous ambition.[58]

It is clear from the fragments describing Pompey that he embodied some of Sallust's gravest concerns. Sallust's animosity toward Pompey is one of few aspects of the *Histories* on which scholars are in general agreement.[59] Even though Pompey has not yet appeared at this point in Book 1, a reader familiar with Sallust and with some awareness of the *Histories'* subject matter will be anticipating his arrival in the narrative.

This expectation had probably been primed by Sallust's earlier work. Pompey's 'absent presence' in the *Catiline* has already been mentioned above. Although he was not in Rome for the events of 63, Pompey still haunts Sallust's account of that year. He (or, rather, his absence) is listed as one of the conditions creating an opportune moment for Catiline to strike.[60] He is mentioned again in the context of the First Catilinarian Conspiracy when Sallust suggests that hostility toward Pompey may have induced Crassus to participate.[61] Furthermore, as was discussed above, Pompey represents the

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[57] Pompey enters the *Histories* in the context of his Spanish campaign. 2.15–19 M belong to the character sketch discussed above; 2.20–2 also cover the beginning of his command against Sertorius. 2.92 describes reaction to Pompey's march; 2.98 is his letter to the senate. Pompey appears in two fragments in Book 3 upon the conclusion of the Sertorian War (3.88 and 3.89). Although we have no fragments describing Pompey's conduct in the Spartacus War, he returns for the consular election of 70 in Book 4 (4.42–8) and the debate over the *lex Gabinia* in Book 5 (5.19–24).

[58] Syme (1964) 192.

[59] E.g., Syme (1964) 212: 'For malice against Pompey, the *Historiae* offered opportunity ever and again, gladly taken. The denigration looks like an obsession.' Like Syme, Katz (1982) muses about a personal animosity between Sallust and Pompey.

[60] *Cat.* 16.5.

[61] *Cat.* 17.7, 19.1–2.

alternative in the alternative or counterfactual history invoked in 39.4. Had Catiline been victorious early on, 'someone more powerful still' (*qui plus posset*) would have stepped in; as Sallust has just told us earlier in the chapter, Pompey's power was on the rise, and it may well have been him. Particularly in Pompey's first and third appearances, contingency is once again underlined. The reference at 16.5 reminds us that the presence or absence of certain factors (like Pompey) in particular combination was necessary for Catiline's rise, while 39.4 suggests, in turn, that Pompey's track could have been altered by an early success on Catiline's part. The preoccupation with not just Pompey, but Pompey as an exemplar of historical contingency, thus seems to extend to Sallust's earliest work.

Scrupulous readers of Sallust might have been keeping an eye out for Octavian in the *Histories* as well, for there are also traces of Octavian in the first monograph. For example, Syme and McGushin both see an allusion to Octavian's recent march on Rome in Caesar's speech, when he argues for caution in setting a precedent, lest it be exploited 'at another time, when someone else is consul, who is, again, in control of an army'.[62] As Syme notes, it is odd for Caesar to specifically mention an army in this context: 'That is not the customary adjunct to a consul in this period. Is there not a hint of Octavianus, insidious and sinister?'[63] A sinister hint of Octavian is prescient enough, given that the *Catiline* was probably composed around 42, well before the full extent of his tradition-shattering influence was known.[64]

It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that any reader already familiar with Sallust who picked up the *Histories* could have anticipated the presence of these two figures (whether explicit or implicit) in that work. In turn, although Pompey and Octavian are not named in the Blessed Isles digression, we have reason to think some readers would have them in mind here. We can now turn back to Sertorius, what he did or did not do, and consider the implications of a counterfactual reading.

At the time that Sertorius was contemplating flight to the Blessed Isles, he had been proscribed as an enemy of Sulla, but the conflict had not yet escalated to the full-scale war it would become; Sertorius was a nuisance, not a priority. Sulla had more pressing issues closer to home: he had returned to a city full of opposition sympathisers, and he had great numbers of veterans to settle.[65] There were also troubles abroad, specifically the lingering Marian

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[62] *Cat.* 51.36: *alio tempore, alio consule, quoi item exercitus in manu sit.*

[63] Syme (1964) 122; cf. McGushin (1977) 253.

[64] For a summary of arguments on the date of the *Catiline*, see McGushin (1977). The deaths of Caesar and Cato supply a *terminus post quem* of 44; there is no consensus on a precise date, though most guesses fall from 43 through 41.

[65] Spann (1987) 45.

resistance in Sicily and Africa, which Sulla assigned Pompey to quash. In the spring of 81, Sulla sent C. Annius Luscus to dispatch Sertorius; it was later this same year that Sertorius was tempted by the islands. Until the spring of 80, when he accepted the Lusitanians' offer to lead their forces in revolt against their Roman governors, Sertorius was a personal enemy of Sulla but did not pose an obvious threat to the republic. Had Sertorius fled to the Blessed Isles in 81 and abandoned his active resistance to Sulla's regime, an expedition of the magnitude of Pompey's later campaign would have been unnecessary.[66] Furthermore, the will to pursue him may well have died with Sulla in 78. During his consulship in 78, Lepidus broadly repealed Sulla's measures; he ordered the return of confiscated land and the recall and pardon of the proscribed.[67] If Sertorius had been simply in exile in the Blessed Isles, the senate may have judged it not worth the trouble and expense to pursue him.

However, Sertorius did not flee to the Isles, but rather redoubled his resistance to Sulla by accepting the Lusitanians' invitation. A response was needed, and eventually Pompey was appointed to the task.[68] The proconsular authority granted to Pompey for his command against Sertorius foreshadowed the sort of exceptional honours by which the rest of his career would be characterised.[69] It was in Pompey's favour that neither of that

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[66] Pompey's letter to the senate at *Hist.* 2.98 M suggests that the campaign was very expensive (2.98A M): *nihil amplius in absentem me statuissetis, quam adhuc agitis, patres conscripti, quem contra aetatem proiectum ad bellum saevissimum cum exercitu optime merito, quantum est in vobis, fame, miserrima omnium morte, confecistis. hacine spe populus Romanus liberos suos ad bellum misit? haec sunt praemia pro volneribus et totiens ob rem publicam fuso sanguine? fessus scribendo mittendoque legatos omnis opes et spes privatas meas consumpsi, cum interim a vobis per triennium vix annuus sumptus datus est! per deos immortalis, utrum censetis vicem me aerari praestare an exercitum sine frumento et stipendio habere posse?* ('You could have decided nothing greater against me in my absence that what you are doing now, conscript fathers. You have consigned me to starvation, the most wretched of deaths—me whom you sent headlong to a most terrible war, despite my age, along with my most worthy army. Was it with this expectation that the Roman people sent its own free men to war? Are these the rewards for wounds and for blood shed so often on behalf of the republic? Sick of writing letters and sending envoys, I have used up all my resources and even my own hopes, while in the meantime for three years barely a year's expense has been sent by you! By the immortal gods! Is it that you think I'm in charge of a treasury, or that I can maintain the army without food or pay?').

[67] App. *BCiv* 1.107; Livy, *Per.* 90; Florus, 2.11.23. See also Gruen (1974) 12–13.

[68] He joined Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius, proconsul of Hispania Ulterior, who, acting alone, had been ineffective against and exhausted by Sertorius (cf. Plut. *Sert.* 12).

[69] His command against Sertorius was not Pompey's first exceptional or irregular distinction. In 81 he had browbeaten Sulla into awarding him a triumph for his victory over the Marians and their Numidian allies in Africa. Pompey was still a *privatus* and had not yet held the office of either praetor or consul, as was required for a triumph; he was

year's consuls was willing to take it on. Pompey refused to disband his army after the revolt of Lepidus had been settled, and the tacit threat of violence made it impossible for the senate to select anyone else.[70] Although still too young to have stood for any office, all legal requirements were waived and Pompey was granted proconsular authority.[71]

The victory over Sertorius led to several of the most important distinctions of Pompey's early career and arguably opened the floodgates for the unprecedented honours and offices that would define his next two decades.[72] Syme was surely correct that Pompey's role in the dismantling of the republic was a central question of the *Histories*. However, Sallust is concerned with his contemporary world as well as his narrative world, and his objection to Pompey's transgressions extends beyond Pompey himself. Pompey's success at manipulating the senate through implicit threats had set an example from which the young Octavian seems to have learned a great deal. For Sallust, this was a frightening proposition; he had seen the desire of individuals for pre-eminence ignite civil war, and as he composed the *Histories* in the early thirties BCE, the same outcome seemed probable if the power of individuals, specifically Octavian, continued to develop in the same unlawful way. The similarities between Pompey's career and Octavian's are clear enough. Both extorted the senate for rewards and titles that were unprecedented or for which they were not legally eligible.[73] Both recast victories against fellow citizens as foreign or non-citizen conflicts in order to enjoy their triumphs (in every sense of the word) without the stain of civil war.[74] Both readily threatened the senate with a renewal of civil war if their

still too young even to stand for quaestor, the lowest office on the *cursus honorum* (Plut. *Pomp.* 14).

[70] Plut. *Pomp.* 17.

[71] Cic. *Leg. Man.* 62; Plut. *Pomp.* 17.

[72] Ancient sources on Pompey's overall career trajectory include Plutarch's *Life of Pompey* (as well as relevant sections of the *Sertorius, Crassus,* and *Caesar*); among modern sources, Seager (1979) gives a comprehensive account.

[73] E.g., commands (proconsular *imperium* for Pompey through the *leges Gabinia* and *Manilia* for Pompey, propraetorian *imperium* for Octavian through the influence of his army), consulships (Pompey in 70 and Octavian in 43), and irregular or non-traditional offices (Pompey's sole consulship in 52, Octavian's role in the triumvirate).

[74] Sallust suggests that the monument Pompey set up in the Pyrenees on his way back to Rome omitted any mention of Sertorius or his Roman followers (3.89 M): *devictis Hispanis tropaea in Pyrenaei iugis constituit* ('When the Spanish were conquered, he set up the trophies on the ridges of the Pyrenees'). Cf. Octavian's treatment of Fulvia as his primary enemy in the Perusine War and characterisation of the war against Sextus Pompey as a war against pirates.

demands were not met.[75]

Sallust was not alone in recognising the parallels between Pompey and Octavian. In the fifth *Philippic*, Cicero himself had made a flattering comparison between the two in an attempt to curry favour with Octavian. Even though Octavian was younger than Pompey, he had already demonstrated such eminent virtue that he should be granted the greatest rewards, regardless of technical qualifications: 'Why, conscript fathers, should we not desire that he obtain the highest honours as soon as possible?'[76] He soon learned the answer. Within two weeks of the creation of the triumvirate and its extraordinary powers, Cicero was proscribed and executed, his life factored into the price of the alliance between Octavian and Antony. At the time of his own death in 35, Sallust must have felt that any imagined parallels were in the process of coming true. He obviously could not have known that the civil wars would give way to the principate: an autocracy, yes, but also a period of relative stability and respite from intestine strife. In 35, Octavian was the *carnifex adulescens redux*.

In the *Res Gestae*, Augustus casually claimed that he had 'accepted no office that had been offered contrary to ancestral custom',[77] a claim manifestly laughable in light of his early career (unless the precedent set by Pompey is what was meant by 'ancestral custom'). Augustus was a master manipulator of history, and his was the version which was inscribed for posterity. Nevertheless, hidden in the fragments of the lost *Histories* is a voice, a moment, asking whether this outcome was as inevitable as the blandly declarative *Res Gestae* suggests. Through his use of counterfactual history, Sallust implies that greatness, whether good or bad, is not inevitable, but rather contingent upon events, happenstance, and the complicity of others. If Sertorius had followed his instincts and retreated to the Blessed Isles to find peace and respite, Pompey, Octavian, and the republic itself might have met very different ends.

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[75] From Pompey's letter to the senate in the *Histories* (2.98C M): *reliqui vos estis: qui nisi subvenitis, invito et praedicente me exercitus hinc et cum eo omne bellum Hispaniae in Italiam transgradientur* (You are all that's left: unless you help, although I am unwilling but as I forewarned, my army will cross over from here into Italy, and with it the entire Spanish war). Cf. Octavian's march on Rome in 43 (App. *BCiv.* 3.86–94, Dio 46.43–5).

[76] *Phil.* 5.47: *patres conscripti, cur eum non quam primum amplissimos honores capere cupiamus?*

[77] *RGDA* 6: [nullum magistratum contra morem maiorem delatum recepi] / ἀρχὴν οὐδὲ μίαν παρὰ τὰ πάτρια ἔθη διδομένην ἀνεδεξάμην.

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