READING ROMAN CIVIL WAR IN ICELAND: *RÓMVERJA SAGA* AND THE REIMAGINING OF LUCANIAN AMBIGUITY*

By Kathleen Cruz

Summary: Lucan's *Bellum Civile* has long been read through the disjointed persona of its emotional narrator. In its unique adaptation of Lucan's epic, the medieval Icelandic *Rómverja saga* (*The Saga of the Romans*) turns this distinctive equivocation on its head. This paper considers how *Rómverja saga* adapts two key aspects of Lucan's poem – the characterization of the two central figures, Julius Caesar and Pompey Magnus, and scenes of mass battle – along saga literary conventions. In each case, *Rómverja saga* removes key moments of ambiguity in the *Bellum Civile* while simultaneously introducing novel domains of interpretive uncertainty, thus preserving a central Lucanian feature while radically reshaping it.

Medieval Europe offered fecund ground for diverse negotiations with the classical tradition, and sustained interest in the living legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity extended as far northwest as Iceland.[1] As the island developed a rich literary culture following its settlement in the ninth cen-

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1 For investigations of the classical tradition in medieval Europe, cf. Baswell 1995, Comparetti 1997/1872, Clark et al. 2011, Highet 2015/1949: 11-14, Symes 2016, Copeland 2016, Cabré et al. 2018, and Woods 2019.

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tury CE, Iceland shared the greater medieval world's interest in translating and thereby transforming ancient literary texts and historical narratives into its own adaptive works.[2] This is testified by its production of several sagas in Old Norse based on narratives from the ancient Mediterranean, including, among others, *Trójumanna saga* (*The Saga of the Men of Troy)*, *Alexanders saga* (*The Saga of Alexander*), and *Rómverja saga* (*The Saga of the Romans*).[3] While all three works remain relatively understudied, *Rómverja saga* – a late twelfth or early thirteenth century[4] prose text which adapts both Sallust's *Bellum Iugurthinum* and *Catilinae Coniuratio* and Lucan's *Bellum Civile* into a single prose narrative – has received especially little attention as a creative object deserving of close reading. Despite the established view that the saga's use of Lucan's epic is merely

2 See Frank 1909, Walter 1971, Dronke 1971, Würth 1998 and 2005, Eldevik 2004, and Bartusik 2022 on the availability and reception of classical texts in medieval Iceland.

3 See n. 8 and 12.

4 *Rómverja saga* is preserved in two traditions; the fourteenth-century AM 595 a-b 4° records an earlier and lengthier version but is marred by significant lacunae, whereas the fourteenth-century AM 226 fol. records a younger and more condensed version of the saga; the latter version is also recorded in the sixteenth-century and fragmentary Perg. 4:o nr 24. See Helgadóttir 1994-97: 203-4, Würth 1998: 15-19, and Helgadóttir 2010: xiii-lxxvi on the other extent fragments and greater manuscript tradition. Divergent arguments regarding the saga's composition date broadly stem from whether one accepts or rejects parallels with other sagas. Wellendorf 2014: 16-17 offers a succinct description of the relevant points of contention, although I offer a summary for convenience. Most relevantly, Hofmann 1986 dates *Rómverja saga* to c. 1180 based on its perceived influence on the slightly later *Veraldar saga*. Helgadóttir 2010: lxxxvi-cxii argues for a slightly more open dating to the second half of the twelfth century. Her argument rests on a) the alternative claim that *Rómverja saga*, *Veraldar saga*, and *Clemens saga* – dated to c. 1200; see Carron 2005: xxiv-xxv – share a source text; and b) that Pálsson 1988 and 1991 are correct in asserting that the twelfth-century *Sverris saga* shows influence from *Rómverja saga* (p. cxcv). Wellendorf 2014 argues against references to *Rómverja saga* in *Sverris saga*, thereby rejecting a definitive dating to the second half of the twelfth century; he instead advocates for a terminus ante quem of c. 1280 based on references to *Rómverja saga* in *Alexanders saga*.

that of a straightforward prose "paraphrase"[5] intended to fit more comfortably among its Sallustian portion and Icelandic literary conventions,[6] *Rómverja saga* in fact innovatively reshapes distinctive features of Lucan's narrative voice through its application of saga style.

It is certainly the case that for each of the three sagas cited above, we find not a direct translation of an antecedent work – ancient or otherwise – but rather more active engagement with both literary precedent and the greater Icelandic literary tradition. The mid-thirteenth-century *Alexanders saga*, for example, adapts Walter de Châtillon's twelfth-century *Alexandreis* and in the process not only takes the story of Alexander's life from poetry to prose but moves between faithful translation and independent terrain.[7] *Trójumanna saga*, also dated to the mid-thirteenth century, constructs its own take on the Trojan War through prior Latin accounts – although in this case, the saga utilizes much earlier texts including *Daretis Phrygii de excidio Troiae*, usually dated to the fifth or sixth century CE.[8]

The most complicated trajectory of the three in this regard, however, is arguably found in *Rómverja saga*. Unlike the prior two examples, which promise the story of a specific event (*Trójumanna saga*) or person (*Alexanders saga*), *Rómverja saga*'s title initially seems quite nebulous. A *Saga of the Romans* could be many things and might refer to a multitude of periods and actors of Roman history; one could imagine a grand, sweeping narrative or a narrower, more limited historical snapshot. Upon closer examination of the saga, however, we may appreciate how, in a way, its title

5 Helgadóttir 2010: xiii.

6 The description of *Rómverja saga* at Würth 2005: 164-65 is characteristic of this approach.

7 See Wolf 1988, de Leeuw van Weenen 2009: 5-7, and Ashurst & Vitti 2011 on the saga's composition. See Ashurst 2009 for a critical reading of the saga and its ethics; see also Middel 2014.

8 See Louis-Jensen 1981: l-lvi and Eldevik 1987: 5-7 on dating the saga. The saga also makes use of the *Ilias Latina* of c. 60-65 CE (see Falcone and Schubert 2021: 3-4 on this dating) and the fourth-century *Dictys Cretensis*; see Louis-Jensen 1981: xi-lxvii, Würth 1998: 38-43, and Würth 2006 on the saga's transmission and manuscript history. *Trójumanna saga* also influenced other works related to classical characters and themes, including the Arthurian *Ectors saga*; see Kalinke 2012.

says the quiet part out loud. Through its adaptive use of Sallust and Lucan, *Rómverja saga* narrates the decomposition of Republican Rome and its collapse into civil war; the saga's brief conclusion, based on medieval commentaries of Lucan's poem, features Octavian's corresponding rise.[9] *Rómverja saga* thus offers a kind of implicit commentary on the very idea of Rome; considering the ancient state's mythic origins of fraternal bloodshed, what else could a *Saga of the Romans* be but a story of Roman conflict against itself?

This, of course, is a kind of modern (mis)reading, as *Rómverja saga* is not properly a text dedicated to unpacking Roman history as a kind of perpetual civil conflict. Rather, the saga seeks primarily to narrate consequential historical accounts to an interested audience; in this, it follows greater medieval interest in ancient Roman historians as well as Lucan, whose epic – while being "regarded as a model for poetic style"[10] – was also often interpreted as recording a useful historical narrative made sweeter through poetry and thus regularly appeared adapted in prose histories or quoted in works of natural science.[11] This context has motivated previous work on the saga, as scholars have focused on navigating what we might call its external realities – including unpacking the two branches of the manuscript tradition, locating a persuasive date and impetus for composition, understanding what sources were utilized, and identifying the best terminology for the saga's genre.[12] Such investigations have at times also considered more internal details of *Rómverja saga*,

9 *Rómverja saga* is not entirely unique in its composite formation; one might compare the thirteenth-century Old French *Les Faits des Romains*; see Beer 1976, Spiegel 1993, Croizy-Naquet 1999 and 2006, and Hiatt 2016: 218.

10 Hiatt 2016: 211.

11 For the medieval reception of Lucan, see Sandys 1903, passim, Shannon 1919, Crosland 1930, Sanford 1934, Marti 1941, Bendena 1976, Würth 1988: 9-38, Werner 1989-90 and 1994, esp. 344-46, Ambühl 2009, Bobeth 2009, Gropper 2009, Hiatt 2016, Poppe 2016, and Arner 2017, esp. 161-64. The idea that the *Bellum Civile*'s central value for the writer of *Rómverja saga* was its historical qualities – going back to its identity as a school text – is a consistent thread in Helgadóttir 2010: clii-clxiii and cxciv-cc; Peterson 2003 offers valuable discussion of this aspect of Lucan's medieval reception more broadly.

12 Helgadóttir 1994-97 productively delineates earlier scholarship on the saga since Meißner 1903. Most notably, see also Meißner 1910, Würth 1998: 13-36 and 2005 as

including how the saga manages Roman literary conventions – such as Sallust's and Lucan's shared interest in speeches – through saga style and which Norse terms the saga implements to best represent complex Latin concepts. Nonetheless, many rich opportunities to approach *Rómverja saga* through the lens of literary criticism remain. In doing so, we can appreciate not only what the saga removes or reshapes, but also what it creates in the process.

A key feature of how *Rómverja saga* adapts Lucan's poem for its medieval Icelandic audience is not only its elimination of Lucan's characterful narrator, as has been well noted,[13] but its replacement of that narrative voice with a new kind of interpretive openness as determined by saga conventions. Rather than demanding its audience grapple with a desperate and at times contradictory narrative persona, as Lucan does,[14] the

well as Gropper 2009 on the question of genre and form. Regarding genre in particular, *Rómverja saga* – along with the aforementioned *Trójumanna saga* and *Alexanders saga* as well as *Breta sögur* (*The Saga of the Bretons*) and *Gyðinga saga* (*The Saga of the Jews*), two further sagas drawing on ancient sources – has been labelled a "pseudo-history," further emphasizing the view that the value of these texts was found in the historical narratives they translated for Icelandic readers; see Würth 1998 and 2005 as well as Gropper 2009. In addition, see Helgadóttir 2010: lxxvii-cc on the saga's sources and points of translation; on the latter, see also Birnudöttir 2017: 14-20. See also Stoltz 2009, which responds to the work of both Gropper (née Würth) and Helgadóttir regarding the Sallust portion of the saga. Bartusik 2019 (non vidi) offers an expansive treatment of *Rómverja saga* as both a cultural product and representative of a greater intellectual exchange between Greco-Roman antiquity and medieval Scandinavia; for those who, like myself, unfortunately lack Polish, Bartusik 2017 provides a summary of the project in English.

13 See esp. Würth 1998: 25-26, Würth 2005: 164, and Gropper 2009: 159 and 169.

14 The characterization of the *Bellum Civile* as a fractured, contradictory, open-ended, and/or even nihilistic work which drives its audience to destablizing conclusions has been a recurrent thread throughout scholarship of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. For varying approaches in this vein, cf. Johnson 1987, Henderson 1987, Masters 1992, Bartsch 1997, O'Higgins 1998, Hershkowitz 1998: 197-246, Sklenář 2003, Dinter 2012, Day 2013, and Caterine 2015. Several recent doctoral studies of the *Bellum Civile* reiterate the continued influence of such views; cf. Keefe 2000, Caterine 2014, and Crosson 2020. Manuwald 2014 also discusses ambiguity as a notable feature of historical epic as a genre. A milder version of this view seems also to appear in medieval engagement with the poem, as Marti 1941: 248 records how certain commentators assert that Lucan's "technique is that of a poet" since "a poet ...

saga instead removes any such focalization and prompts the reader to reconcile seemingly inconclusive narrative details. To appreciate how the saga accomplishes this transformation of Lucan's text, I begin by outlining central features of the saga genre that influence *Rómverja saga*'s divergence from the *Bellum Civile*. After this broader framing, I consider two case studies which elucidate the saga's active adaptation of Lucan's poem: the portrayal of Julius Caesar and Pompey Magnus and its depiction of mass battle. By offering a very different vision of the war on the whole through the transformation of its participants – from its generals to the myriad bodies they in turn command – *Romverja saga* retains its own form of the pervasive ambiguity which has often been identified as a central feature of the *Bellum Civile* while also producing a very different Roman civil war than that of the Latin "original."

1. Icelandic Saga Style and the Burden of Interpretation

Rómverja saga belongs to two related but distinct cultural-historical contexts; as noted above, it is a representative of a much broader European engagement with the classical tradition in the medieval period and, more narrowly, Old Norse saga literature. Certain uses to which *Rómverja saga* puts the *Bellum Civile* may be traced to parts of this greater European tradition, such as its reconfiguring of Lucan's poetic narrative into a historical prose account. This wider context, however, does not fully explain the saga's active innovations regarding the finer details of its literary technique, including in respect to characterization and framing. Instead, it is the distinctive narratology of the Icelandic saga tradition which influences the choices we will go on to explore and makes the content of Lucan's epic legible to the readers of medieval Iceland and Scandinavia more broadly.

Old Norse saga literature refers to a collection of prose texts generally

does not attempt to prove anything and ... when he presents many systems he does not bind himself to any one."

dating to the twelfth to late fourteenth centuries written in the vernacular, predominately in Iceland.[15] While the sagas are often divided into sub-groupings based on their content and style – from the *konungasögur* ("kings' sagas") which describe the feats of various Scandinavian monarchs to the *fornaldarsögur* or "legendary sagas" which narrate a distant, mythic Scandinavian past – they exhibit narratological strategies across these categories that unite them beyond their shared language. A central feature of particular interest to us is the absence of an overt narrative voice, as narrative interjections and voiced interpretations are famously limited; their inclusion, in fact, is usually identified as a mark of the genre's decline over time.[16] Without the guidance of a narrative voice, the reader must draw their own conclusions regarding characters' internality, leading in turn to varying interpretations regarding characters' motivations and ethical standing. A brief examination of this aspect of saga style will suffice to illustrate how this works in practice and thus the immediate challenges, and opportunities, faced by the author of *Rómverja saga* in taking on Lucan's epic.

Gunnarr Hámundarson's demise in the thirteenth-century *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*The Saga of Burnt-Njáll*), praised as "one of the most original and memorable chapters in saga literature,"[17] stands as a useful example.[18] The saga relates how, despite originally being a well-respected figure on the island, Gunnarr is temporarily outlawed in the Icelandic law courts after a series of violent conflicts. To be outlawed is to be stripped of legal protections while on Icelandic soil – meaning that one can be killed with impunity, at least in theory – and is therefore considered "a sentence of social death."[19] A prevalent response to being outlawed is therefore to

15 For an introduction to saga literature, see Clover & Lindow 2005, McTurk 2005, Clunies Ross 2010, and Phelpstead 2020.

16 Cf. Einarsson 2019/1957: 133-35, Óskarsson 2005, Phelpstead 2020: 13-51, esp. 43, and O'Donoghue 2021: 113-52. See n. 12 and 13 for previous scholarly approaches to this feature in respect to *Rómverja saga.*

17 Lönnroth 1976: 160; similarly Helgason 1999: 16.

18 *Njáls saga* belongs to the *Íslendingasögur* ("Icelanders' sagas," often called the family sagas), which narrate the feats of famous inhabitants. See Sveinsson 1971: 88 n. 2 for bibliography on Gunnarr's characterization throughout the saga.

19 Schweitzer VanDonkelaar 2018: 146.

leave Iceland for as long as the sentence stands.[20]

The saga's titular character Njáll Þorgeirsson, who possesses some prophetic ability and is a great friend of Gunnarr, warns him that he should follow this tradition: should Gunnarr stay in Iceland, he will certainly be killed. Gunnarr and his brother, Kolskeggr, prepare to follow Njáll's advice and leave the island, but they run into an unexpected obstacle:

> Þeir ríða fram at Markarfljóti, þá drap hestr Gunnars fœti ok stǫkk hann ór sǫðlinum. Honum varð litit upp til hlíðarinnar ok bœjarins at Hlíðarenda ok mælti: "Fǫgr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfǫgr sýnzk, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi." "Ger þú eigi þann óvinafagnað," segir Kolskeggr, "at þú rjúfir sætt þína, því at þér myndi engi maðr þat ætla. Ok máttú þat hugsa, at svá mun allt fara sem Njáll hefir sagt." "Hvergi mun ek fara," segir Gunnarr, "ok svá vildi ek, at þú gerðir."
>
> (*Njáls saga*, ch. 75)

> They rode out from Markarfljót, and then Gunnarr's horse tripped and threw him out of the saddle. He caught sight of the top of the slope and the homestead at Hlíðarendi and said: "The slope is beautiful; it has never seemed as beautiful to me as it does now, with its pale crops and mowed field. I will now ride home and never leave." Kolskeggr said, "Don't do this thing that will bring joy to your enemies – that you break your conciliation – because no man would think this of you. You must consider this also, that all will happen as Njáll has said." "I will never go," Gunnarr said, "and I want you to do the same."[21]

20 On outlawry in medieval Iceland and the sagas, cf. Byock 1982, Miller 1990, Firth 2012, Ahola 2014, Antonsson 2018: 115-38, Noetzel 2018, DeAngelo 2019, Poilvez 2019, Merkelbach 2019: 51-100, and Walgenbach 2021; for further noteworthy studies, see Walgenback 2021: 2 n. 1-2.

21 All translations from Old Norse are my own; the text of *Njáls saga* follows Sveinsson 1954. This is also an interesting passage to consider alongside questions of classical reception, as some have argued for influence from *Alexanders saga* here; cf. Sveinsson 1954: xxxvi and Lönnroth 1970 and 1976: 153-57; contra Ashurst 1998-2001.

Kolskeggr refuses to return with Gunnarr and instead sails away from Iceland. Upon Gunnarr's return home, his wife, Hallgerðr, "was happy with Gunnarr when he came home, but his mother contributed few words" (*varð fegin Gunnari, er hann kom heim, en móðir hans lagði fátt til*, ibid).

In this passage, the saga does not explain outright what exactly motivates Gunnarr to remain in Iceland. Instead, through both Gunnarr's actions and the varying reactions of his brother, wife, and mother, *Njáls saga* makes several defensible interpretations of and reactions to this choice available to the reader. William Ian Miller's breakdown of Gunnarr's gaze after falling from his horse illustrates the variety of interpretations even of this image alone: "It is not the hauntingly surreal vista that Iceland offers that transfixes Gunnarr but fertile and productive cropland. Not crevices, jagged rocks, bottomless fissures issuing steam. Nor is it any random domesticated farmland that moves him. This is his farm, his property, his place of defense."[22] To unpack Miller's evocative summation, it is perhaps simply the beauty of Iceland that grips Gunnarr and prevents his departure; it may instead be the intimate gaze of his own homestead and an understanding of the family that lives there; it is equally possible, too, that the sight of "his place of defense" rouses in Gunnarr a desire to fight in response to what he perceives to be a legal and social injustice. Denton Fox identifies even further options based on Gunnarr's numerous trials earlier in the saga:

> A weariness from perpetually extricating himself from trouble, a love of his home, perhaps even the human tendency towards self-destruction which the saga so constantly illustrates all enter into his decision to remain. But I think there is another and more important reason. He is Gunnar of Lithend; if he left Iceland he would lose part of his name and part of his identity, and become a homeless wanderer with no position or honor except what he could take by violent means from other men. He feels, perhaps, that if he accepts the sentence of exile, he will be admitting that it was just, and will also be seeking refuge in flight from his enemies.[23]

22 Miller 2014: 138.

23 Fox 1963: 298. See also Sveinsson 1971: 92.

Just as the saga author declines to elaborate on which of these options determines Gunnarr's decision, so, too, do they refrain from offering their own judgement on that decision. Instead, the saga author suggests that Gunnarr's wife and mother represent two possible responses; for example, one may find pleasure, and perhaps even beauty, in Gunnarr's quiet recognition of his love for his home (if that is what motivates him) or, following Gunnar's now taciturn mother, believe he is making a great mistake in moving against Njáll's advice.[24]

This is, broadly speaking, how saga literature works – the form thrives on both succinct storytelling and action-based narration, thus positioning the reader as a powerful analytical agent. This stands in direct opposition to characteristic features of Lucan's poetic style, as an example will demonstrate. In Book 6 of the *Bellum Civile*, Lucan narrates Sextus Pompey's visit to a Thessalian witch named Erictho to request a necromancy and thereby learn the outcome of the war. In doing so, the narrator describes Sextus as "an offspring unworthy of his parent Magnus [Pompey]" (*Magno proles indigna parente*, Luc. 6.420) who soon afterwards defiled (*polluit*, Luc. 6.422) his father's legacy as an exile and pirate (Luc. 6.421-22).[25] Lucan then explains that Sextus is fearful of the future but rejects all appropriate methods of seeking prophetic information, instead pursuing more shameful arts, including witchcraft (Luc. 6.423-37).

In this introduction to Sextus as a character, Lucan's narrator makes abundantly clear to the audience both who Sextus is and what motivates his individual behaviors. Regarding the former, this narrative voice deems Sextus of a shameful character; the audience is thus primed to judge his behavior as unethical and degenerate even before Lucan states that his pursuit of knowledge is not conducted in a way that is *fas* (Luc.

24 As one might anticipate, this scene has been the subject of much scholarly debate, including regarding whether it expresses an Icelandic nationalism. See Sveinsson 1933: 212-13, Lönnroth 1976: 157-60, Wawn 2000: 158-61, and Miller 2014: 139. See Helgason 1999 on the ideological reception of *Njáls saga* in English, Danish, and Icelandic contexts.

25 All translations from Latin are my own. The text of the *Bellum Civile* follows Housman 1926, with reference to Shackleton Bailey 1988.

6.430). In respect to the latter, the audience learns that Sextus seeks information specifically because he is afraid (*stimulante metu*, Luc. 6.423) of what is to come (*uenturisque omnibus aeger*, Luc. 6.424). A knowledgeable audience may certainly disagree with this portrayal, but as far as the *Bellum Civile* itself goes, all is made clear.[26] Such a passage moves in opposition to the brevity and interpretive distance of saga style observed above.[27]

This isolated example offers only a mild representation of a feature of Lucan's poem which perhaps is represented most starkly by its narrator's "devastating pronouncement"[28] lamenting an absence of divine care at 7.445-55 following Pompey's defeat at Pharsalus. That is, in Gordon William's words, Lucan's "extraordinary" persona as narrator, which is marked by "extensive and highly personal entrances into his epic … [W]hat Lucan does goes far beyond anything to be found in any Roman or Greek historian; for he thrusts his personality on the audience."[29] In doing so, Lucan does not merely establish the existence of his narrator qua character throughout the poem but, as observed above, asserts his opinion on current matters. As Jamie Masters observes, "Lucan is always on the sidelines, so to speak; often entering into the poem in his own person, he shouts encouragement or cries out in dismay."[30]

26 For Lucan's portrayal of Sextus, cf. Ahl 1974: 568 and 1976: 114, 130-33, Martindale 1977: 375-79, Makowski 1977: 198-99, Hardie 1993: 88-119, Tesoriero 2002, Nadeau 2009, and Fratantuono 2012: 246, 262-63.

27 *Rómverja saga* itself confirms this fact as it negotiates between Lucan's text and saga style. There, the saga begins only with the fact that Sextus is Pompey's son (Son Pompeius Magnus. hét Pompeius Sextus, ch.72), is very anxious (míok hugsíukr, ch. 72) about the conflict, and seeks out Erictho to know what is to come (uilldi giarna víta huersu ganga mundi, ch. 72); the necromancy then follows (ch. 73). On this, see also Meißner 1910: 324-26.

28 Feeney 1991: 281.

29 Williams 1976: 233-34.

30 Masters 1992: 5; see p. 5 n. 14 for further prior engagements with this aspect of Lucan; see also n. 14 above. Marti 1975 remains a key precedent here. This quality of Lucan's narrator often appears as the basis for greater arguments about the instability or ambiguity of the poem – this is the case for Masters 1992: 87-90 – and takes on special prominence for certain aspects of the *Bellum Civile*, such as its conception of a divine apparatus; see Fantham 2011 and, relatedly, Feeney 1991: 269-86. Asso 2009

This aspect of the *Bellum Civile* represents the most immediate challenge faced by the author of *Rómverja saga* in adapting Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, namely: how to transform a poem dominated by its characterful narrative voice and at times disjointed authorial personality into a prose account that both communicates a historical narrative and fits neatly into the presupposed framework of a laconic literary style. *Rómverja saga*'s answer is an active reframing of Lucan's text that displaces the burden of conflicted interpretation from Lucan-as-narrator and redirects it onto the reader. As we consider the saga more fully, this comes out most clearly in its depiction of two central concerns for the *Bellum Civile*: the characterization of the central pairing of Pompey and Caesar and the depiction of violent mass battle. In each case, the saga innovates by pulling back on Lucan's intense judgement and negative portraits, instead crafting more ambiguous behaviors by which the civil war and its participants might be judged.

2. A More Present Pompey and a Softer Caesar

When we compare the opening of the *Bellum Civile* with the Lucan portion of *Rómverja saga*, it originally seems like the wholescale removal of Lucan's narrator will eliminate any unsettling uncertainty rather than encourage it. The dominant but conflicted nature of Lucan's narrator opens the *Bellum Civile* itself, for in its initial lines, the poem's narrative voice gestures in vain at grasping the reality of the civil conflict through a series of unsuccessful attempts to isolate what exact mechanism caused it in the first place (Luc. 1.1-182). This is exemplified by Lucan's uncomprehending introductory plea: "What madness, citizens, why such an unrestrained license of iron?" (*quis furor, o ciues, quae tanta licentia ferri*?, Luc. 1.8). Lucan's narrator never expresses that it has found an acceptable answer to this question, as the epic instead focuses on describing the *nefas* set in motion in vivid detail.

has also observed the similarly "intrusive" nature of Lucan's use of apostrophe; Henderson 1987: 135 powerfully identifies this and other narrative outbursts as an "attack."

In comparison, *Rómverja saga* offers a much more straightforward account. After the saga has concluded its adaptation of Sallust, the Lucan portion begins more like a prose history than historical epic, with a series of stated certainties in contrast to Lucan's barrage of questions:

> Maðr h*e*t Lukanus Romu*e*rskr at kyní. er þe*s*sa fra*s*ǫgn hef*i*r fyrst ritad at vpphafí. ok hefr h*a*nn sua at a*ll*u*m* Romu*e*ria h*e*r v*a*r skipt i þridíunga. ok u*a*r sa hǫfðingi settr yf*i*r hu*e*rn þridíung. er æztr var i Romab*o*rg. ok v*a*ro þe*i*r allír goru*i*r dictatore*s*.
>
> (*Rómverja saga* ch. 47)[31]

> There was a man called Lucan, Roman by birth. He first wrote this narrative from its beginning. He says that the entirety of the Roman army was arranged into three groups, and there was a leader set over each third. This position was the highest in Rome, and all three were made dictators.

Whereas the introduction to the *Bellum Civile* refuses to identify a single source of the civil conflict, *Rómverja saga* states simply that the war begins because Caesar rejects Pompey's request that he return to Rome and give up the men under his command following the death of Marcus Crassus:

> En*n* ept*i*r fall M*a*rcí. send*i*r Pompeíus ord Julio. at h*a*nn fáéri heím til Romab*o*rg*a*r. ella sendi h*a*nn h*o*nu*m* alla sína m*e*nn. Julius uilldi hu*a*rki gǫra... En þá er Julíus uilldi æ*i*gi aptr hu*e*rfa er h*o*nu*m* komu þe*s*si ord þa gorðiz þ*a*r af sundr þycki medr þe*i*m Pomeío. ok Iulio. ok litu sidaʀ hínn mesti fiandskapr.
>
> (ch. 50)

31 The Old Norse text is taken from Helgadóttir 2010; all translations are my own with reference to both Helgadóttir and Birnudöttir 2017. I have also aimed to produce Helgadóttir's orthographic conventions for ease of reference; the exception is my use of ǫ instead of the manuscript variant. For the purposes of this analysis, I refer only to the later edition of the saga preserved in AM 226 fol., which has the Lucan section most intact; notably, Helgadóttir 2010: clii suggests that AM 226 fol. "is not all that much shortened in relation to the Lucan part" of *Rómverja saga* compared to the earlier version.

> But after Marcus Crassus died, Pompey sent word to Caesar that he should return home to Rome or send all of his men to him; Caesar wanted to do neither … But when Caesar didn't want to return after these words reached him, then it seems conflict separated Pompey and Caesar, and a short time afterwards so did that great hostility.

Lucan mentions Crassus' demise in his list of potential causes for the conflict (Luc. 1.99-106), but it is presented as one of several lost forces of moderation rather than the war's prime instigator.

In rejecting such opportunities for interpretive indecision, however, *Rómverja saga* does not simply present a straightforward account on the whole. Instead, it raises its own questions through its reframing of the narrative's foremost antagonists: Pompey and Caesar. To begin with Pompey, the *Bellum Civile*'s conflicted relationship with the first leader of the Republican forces has been well documented.[32] While his indecision and fragility are a central concern throughout the epic, it is Pompey's behavior in Book 7 that has been marked as his moment of greatest failure in the civil conflict.[33] Rather than join his men in the fray, Pompey acts as a spectator at the Battle of Pharsalus, watching from afar as his fortunes fade: "He stood on a hill in the field; from far above he gazed upon all the slaughter spread throughout the Thessalian plains, which themselves were hidden beneath the battle being waged" (*stetit aggere campi, / eminus unde omnis sparsas per Thessala rura / aspiceret clades, quae*

32 See Bartsch 1997: 73-130 for a reading of the *Bellum Civile* that centralizes this relationship.

33 See Leigh 1997: 110-57, which also observes why positive readings of Pompey's behavior in Book 7 are difficult to sustain. See also Gagliardi 1975: 91-92, Ahl 1976: 164-71, and Bartsch 1997: 79-80 (see 73-100 for a greater discussion of the contrast between Pompey's actions and Lucan's narrative commentary); Seo 2013: 84-85 also describes a tension between Pompey's actions and Lucan's desire to aggrandize him before Book 8's "transformation of Pompey's murder into a Stoic death in the Catonian mode." See Narducci 1979: 125 and 2002: 312, D'Alessandro Behr 2007: 85-87, and Clark 2015: 146 for positive readings of Pompey here. On Pompey as a fading figure more broadly, cf. Ahl 1976: 150-89, Feeney 1986, Johnson 1987: 67-100, esp. 71-73, and Masters 1992: 102-4; see Day 2013: 179-233 for Pompey achieving sublimity through his fall.

bello obstante latebant, Luc. 7.649-51). While the audience may at first feel some reassurance that Pompey is at least taking a visual survey of the battle's progress from this vantage point, the narrator then clarifies that Pompey interprets the tableau through what Matthew Leigh labels "terrible" and "ego-centric delusion":[34] "he saw a great number of spears seeking his own life, numerous collapsed corpses, and himself dying in such a sea of blood" (*tot telis sua fata peti, tot corpora fusa / ac se tam multo pereuntem sanguine uidit*, Luc. 7.652-53).

Rómverja saga rewrites this moment in subtle but transformative ways. According to the saga: "When/after Pompey saw that his troops had fallen and the gods wanted to sweep him from victory, he then went up a hill. From there, he saw both the battle and the great amount of death that had befallen his troops" (En*n* er Pompeíu*s* sa at lid h*an*s fell. ok guðin uilldu suipta han*n* sigrínu*m*. pa geck h*ann* upp æ hæð eína. ok sa þadan til or*ros*ton*n*ar. ok sa þ*at* hít mikla man*n*fall er v*ar*d i h*an*s liði, ch. 76). In setting up this movement, the saga introduces a temporal element lacking in Lucan's text, namely "when/after" (*enn er*). This clarifies that Pompey only walks up the hill after noticing that his forces are beginning to fail, which in turn suggests that he previously stood among his men, either fighting or, at the very least, at much closer quarters to the battlefield.[35] Alongside this important change, whereas Lucan describes Pompey as standing (*stetit*) on the hill (and thus his *placement on* in regards to space), *Rómverja saga* illustrates him going or walking (*geck*) up the hill (and thus his *motion towards* a space). Both changes emphasize Pompey's shift in position and elide any suggestion that the general had been spending this consequential battle in a removed place of safety.

Rómverja saga also eliminates Pompey's horrified vision of his own death in the falling bodies of his troops and instead jumps ahead to his speech. In Lucan's poem, Pompey asks the gods to leave off from this slaughter (*'parcite,' ait 'superi, cunctas prosternere gentes ...*, Luc. 7.659) and

34 Leigh 1997: 154; 156. Leigh identifies this behavior as an assertion of Pompey's "monarchical perspective."

35 One could argue that the *iam* at Luc. *BC* 7.647 achieves something similar, but this is difficult to confirm considering it is included in the prior clause; the placement of the Latin suggests the *iam* refers to Pompey's state of mind as he realizes defeat is imminent rather than his state of motion.

states that he can accept misfortune should Rome and the wider world remain (*stante potest mundo Romaque superstite Magnus / esse miser*, Luc. 7.660-61). Both *stante*, describing the world, and *superstite*, regarding Rome, reiterate the image of standing in place from 7.649; the currently standing Pompey wants to see Rome remain standing, even if it means his own fall. *Rómverja saga* offers something slightly different. Before mentioning the little value possessed by his own life, Pompey proclaims, "May the gods thus heal the world so that Rome holds its freedom" (Græði *s*ua godin*n* heim*ín*. at Roma b*o*rg hafi fresli sitt, ch. 76).[36] For this Pompey, it is not enough that Rome survive: he wants it to be free.

Rómverja saga concludes Pompey's behavior at Pharsalus along similar lines. After ending his speech, Pompey instructs his men to remain at his side as he departs ("and he asked them all to follow him," ok bend*ir* oll*um* at h*onu*m skyli fylgia, ch. 77). The saga suggests the men obey by asserting that, following the battle, "Lucan says that afterwards there was still that other best group of choice men" to follow the defeated general and that it is only "after Pompey and all his troops fled" that Caesar declares victory (Sua s(egir) Lucan*us*. at þa v*ar* en*n* ept*ir* hít bezta man*n*ual; En*n* er allt lid Pompeius flyði ...., ch. 77). Things are more complicated in Lucan's telling. There, after asking for Rome's survival despite his own defeat, Pompey "went around to the arms, standards, and troops beleaguered from every side, called back those rushing to a hasty death, and denied that he was worth so much" (*... arma / signaque et adflictas omni iam parte cateruas / circumit et reuocat matura in fata ruentis / seque negat tanti*, Luc. 7.666-69). Lucan goes on to elaborate that Pompey's desire to flee stems

36 It was suggested to me by the journal's anonymous reviewer that this dialogue may be a reformulation of Lucan's exhortations during Pompey's flight at 7.689-97: in particular, the idea that the Republican forces continuing to fight despite their general's departure demonstrates that they do not merely die due to either loyalty to Pompey (7.690-91; 694) or "zeal for war" (*studium belli*, 7.695) but rather because this is a conflict between the two poles of "freedom and Caesar" (*libertas et Caesar*, 7.696). I find this an attractive possibility, especially considering that the saga eliminates this commentary and only claims that Pompey "did not want the people to die there for his sake" (h*ann* uilldi ægi at alþydan felli þ*ar* f*y*rir h*a*ns sakir, ch. 77). Should we see Pompey's speech as absorbing sentiments previously ascribed to Lucan's narrator, this further strengthens the idea put forth here that *Rómverja saga* presents a more active and conscientious Pompey in this episode.

not from the fear of being harmed but of his men refusing to flee should he be killed (Luc. 7.669-72). Yet, he then qualifies: "or [Pompey] wished to hide away his death from Caesar's eyes" (*Caesaris aut oculis uoluit subducere mortem*, Luc. 7.673). A further, third option even arises when Lucan remarks that Cornelia, Pompey's wife, is another "cause of his flight" (*causa fugae*, Luc. 7.676), with fate (*fatisque*, Luc. 7.676) refusing to grant him a death apart from her.

In this layered list of motivations and explanations, the *Bellum Civile* offers a more obscure picture of why and how Pompey departs from Pharsalus than *Rómverja saga*. In the saga, Pompey diminishes his own value and declares that Rome must remain free, and he is successful at prompting his forces to flee alongside him. Lucan's Pompey does tell his men they should withdraw and value their lives over his own, but in contrast to *Rómverja saga*, this is an action many reject; following Pompey's departure, they fight on and thus "the Senate showed itself to have fought for itself as it died" (*ostendit moriens sibi se pugnasse senatus*, Luc. 7.697). While this statement suggests that the men's deaths make their cause noble, as Shadi Bartsch observes, the epic seems to display a "discomfort" with Pompey's behavior here, including in its perceived need to "address Pompey in rapturous terms...for some fifty lines" following his flight.[37] Alongside this, Lucan obfuscates whether Pompey's departure should be viewed highly by suggesting both selfish and selfless motivations for it (to say nothing of Lucan's mention of Pompey's demise in Egypt as set by fate).[38] As a result, Pompey leaves the battle without fully convincing either his men to cease battle or Lucan's audience of his motivations – a sharp contrast to his dignified and protective departure in *Rómverja saga*.

Over this episode, the saga author's interventions in both Pompey's language and actions thus lead to a very different general at Pharsalus.

37 Bartsch 1997: 80.

38 Even if we follow Lucan's initial suggestion that Pompey flees to save his men, Bartsch 1997: 80 observes how the *Bellum Civile* undermines Pompey's claim that "should he die the fighting will never stop" in Book 9 "where his soldiers no longer want to continue the war now that their leader is dead." Ahl 1976: 167 similarly identifies Pompey's assumption as "naiveté," commenting that, "Lucan carefully maintains the illusion that Pompey's motives are of the highest order."

Simply put, *Rómverja saga* takes what might be viewed as a powerful example of Pompey as an ineffective and self-centered leader and instead creates a respectable negotiation of fraught commitment. Importantly, the saga does not entirely rewrite Pompey's character or the narrative trajectory of Lucan's poem – he does not become a dashing figure pushing back the Caesarians, for example. Rather, through the subtle rewriting of Pompey's behavior on the battlefield and the removal of Lucan's own open-endedness regarding the motivations and effects of his flight, *Rómverja saga* presents a more explicitly admirable leader to balance against Pompey's undeniable losses over the conflict. This Pompey is imbued with a different kind of ambiguity compared to Lucan's text and as a result becomes more difficult to evaluate among the narrative's other central characters.

Alongside such reframing of Pompey as an agent, *Rómverja saga* offers more restrained descriptions of Pompeiian suffering, thereby alleviating the sense in the *Bellum Civile* that the general can only lead his men into terrible misfortune. Prior to the Battle of Pharsalus, *Bellum Civile* 6 finds the Pompeians besieged at Dyrrachium. While trapped within the city, the troops endure a terrible sickness after a horse's rotting corpse contaminates the air and their drinking water (Luc. 6.84-90).[39] Lucan describes the men's suffering in painful detail:

> inde labant populi, caeloque paratior unda
> omne pati uirus durauit uiscera caeno.
> iam riget arta cutis distentaque lumina rumpit,
> igneaque in uoltus et sacro feruida morbo
> pestis abit, fessumque caput se ferre recusat.
>
> (Luc. 6.93-97)

> From this the people collapsed, and the water, more prepared than the air to suffer all of this putridity, hardened their innards with filth.

39 See Bonet & Pétrone 2012: 199 for how the use of medical language in this episode heightens the sense of suffering and Fratantuono 2012: 212 for the illness as plague-like in its intensity. Gardner 2019: 192-200 explores how Lucan builds on previous plague narratives to great aesthetic and thematic effect.

> Now their skin, drawn tight, grew rigid, and it burst forth their swollen eyes; a flaming pestilence, hot with an accursed disease, entered their faces, and their weary heads refused to raise themselves up.

While the Pompeians struggle through this illness, the Caesarians outside of the city also face a "savage hunger" (*saeuam … famem*, Luc. 6.108-9) after they consume their limited supplies. Despite this foreboding wording, however, the Caesarians prove able to manage that hunger before it leads to bodily collapse. They cull whatever nutrients they can from surrounding plants, using fire to cook their gathered materials and make them easier to consume and digest (Luc. 6.109-17). As Lucan describes it, this is certainly a desperate situation, and the Caesarians' plight has been read evocatively as paralleling that of the Pompeians in a circle of suffering.[40] At the same time, however, Lucan dedicates twenty lines to describing the corruption of the Pompeians' drinking water and their terrible physical degeneration (Luc. 6.84-103) while he offers only half that number for the Caesarians' hunger (Luc. 6.108-17).[41]

Rómverja saga includes the Dyrrachium episode and the trials of both armies. Its truncated description of the physical harm faced by both groups, however, removes the imbalanced suffering of Lucan's poem: "At that time, a great illness came to Pompey's troops, and Caesar's men starved with the result that they ate the unripe crops and the roots of grasses which were clearly not to be eaten" (I þe*n*na ti*m*a kom sott mikil

40 See Saylor 1978: 248-49 and Garner 2019: 192-93.

41 Saylor 1978: 245-46 observes how Pompey and Dyrrachium are connected as "lofty, isolated because nearly an island, and something natural" in contrast to Caesar and his siege wall's embodiment of "violence to nature and landscape." In making this connection, Pompeiian suffering may be felt even more strongly; not only does Lucan dwell longer on their corporeal collapse, but this collapse in a way happens within a Pompeiian "body" which is unable to protect them. Relatedly, although he sees Lucan as setting up Pompey positively in this episode on the whole, Saylor locates another arguable failing in Pompey's behavior after he breaks free of the siege: "Pompey's refusal to press the Caesarians is made to seem a reasonable, pious act since he claims he will not kill any more Romans. Yet, permitting Caesar's retreat is at least unwise because Pompey only continues to follow Caesar, aware that he must shed Roman blood elsewhere and perhaps with less advantage, less sparingly towards an end of the war" (p. 253).

i lid Pomp(eius). en*n* me*n*n Julíj. sulltu s*ua.* at þ*ei*r atu ak*r*ana o gǫrua. ok grasrætr þær sem b*er*liga v*aro* v ætar, ch. 71).[42] While Lucan magnifies the painful transformation of Pompeiian bodies, *Rómverja saga* offers only a laconic statement of the "great illness" they endured before quickly shifting (*enn*) to a lengthier description of the depths of Caesarian hunger; this condensed narration also eliminates the Caesarian forces' use of fire to cook their food and so only offers an image of desperate and unpleasant eating. This reframing of the discomfort faced at Dyrrachium not only more fully equates both parties' suffering but softens Lucan's image of the Pompeians as facing especially devastating harms as a result of Pompey's approach to the war.

Just as the saga reframes those moments that might be deemed most critical of Pompey's abilities in the *Bellum Civile*, so, too, does it selectively reshape Lucan's Caesar. Throughout, the saga retains the vindicative rage and bombastic pride that marks his portrayal in the *Bellum Civile* – the saga includes, for example, both Caesar's furious claim of possessing a great destiny and the gods' favor in the face of potential mutiny in *Bellum Civile* 5 (*Rómverja saga*, ch. 68; Luc. 5.300-73) as well as his attempt in the same book to cross the storming Adriatic, including his plea that his corpse never be found should he perish in order that he may continue to possess fear-inducing power amongst the living (*Rómverja saga*, ch. 69; Luc. 5.504-677).[43] At the same time, *Rómverja saga* also pulls the narrative back from some of the most intense choices by which Caesar might be judged.[44] In comparison with its characterization of Pompey, Lucan's poem includes a much richer catalog of monstruous behavior for Caesar throughout the epic, and so here three selective episodes will suffice: Book 3's destruction of the sacred grove at Massilia, Caesar's treatment

42 The condensed account of Pompeiian suffering is also observed at Meißner 1910: 223.

43 For Caesar's monstrous character in the *Bellum Civile*, cf. Ahl 1976: 190-230, Narducci 1979: 97-104, Johnson 1987: 101-37, Hershkowitz 1998: 197-246, Narducci 2002: 187-278, Uhle 2006, Day 2013: 106-78, Spentzou 2018, and Joseph 2022: 147-59. On Caesar and the storm, see esp. Matthews 2008; see also Fantham 1985 on the relationship between these two episodes and the mutiny on the whole.

44 Meißner 1910: 256-59 collects several instances where the saga author removes Lucan's more explicit criticisms of Caesar or adds/modifies dialogue or behavior to paint a more flattering portrait; see also n. 50. For Meißner, this demonstrates the saga author's unequivocal support for Caesar; see n. 53.

of the Republican dead in Book 7, and his response to receiving Pompey's head in Book 9.

Even if we do not go so far as to consider the episode to be evidence that he is "a demon out of Hades, a magnificently evil fiend, [and] a superhuman antagonist,"[45] Caesar's mutilation and indeed desecration of the Massilian grove in *Bellum Civile* 3 offers important, relatively early evidence of his transgressive and vicious nature.[46] After the Massilians refrain from siding with Caesar in the civil conflict and refuse him entrance to their city, he locates the grove as a potential source of raw materials for his war efforts (Luc. 3.394-98). The grove is numinous, a site of violent ritual abandoned to the foreboding powers that reside there (Luc. 3.399-425). Considering this, Caesar's men at first refuse to desecrate the grove, as "they believed that the axes would rebound against their own limbs if they should strike the sacred oaks" (*si robora sacra ferirent, / in sua credebant redituras membra securis*, Luc. 3.430-31). In response to their unease, Caesar strikes first (*primus raptam librare bipennem / ausus*, Luc. 3.433-34) and offers his men not only a transference of blame but a bold statement of his own identity: "Trust that I am the one who has committed *nefas*" (*credite me fecisse nefas*, Luc. 3.437).[47] The men subsequently cut down the forest – not because Caesar has assuaged their fear, but rather because they fear his wrath more than that of the gods (*non sublato secura pauore / turba, sed expensa superorum et Caesaris ira*, Luc. 3.438-39).

Rómverja saga retains the broad structure of this episode, from the grove to the men's fear to Caesar's first strike. Unlike Lucan's lengthy

45 Phillips 1968: 300.

46 See Celotto 2023: 257-60 for the scene's use of the language of sexual violence. See Masters 1992: 25-29 and Saylor 2003 on the terrible significance of repetition here and Fantham 1996: 147-53, Augoustakis 2006, Leigh 2010, Day 2013: 136-43, and Chaudhuri 2014: 159-65 for Caesar's trampling over the divine and supernatural and the question of retribution as Lucan's literary innovation. See Joseph 2022: 73-83 on this act's wider ranging sense of devastating finality.

47 See Green 1994: 221 on this moment as an announcement of Caesar's greater persona: "When he takes the axe to the oak, Caesar proclaims that he *is* the challenger; he is the soldier (*tuus … miles*) of the city and the gods of Rome. He must take responsibility for his crime, because it is only through that crime that he can attain his *regnum*."

description of the dark, foreboding forest and sites of bloody, aged sacrifice, however, the saga records:

> þar var ok blót skogr einn er borgar menn hǫfdu mikinn atrunad æ.ok treystiz lid Julíj þui æigi at hǫGua *hann.* þa liop Iulíus fram at skóginum. ok hio íj. hondum lund einn sterkan sua at ǫxín sǫck at hamrí allt ok mællti. Hræðiz þer æigi at hǫGua þenna skóg. Ek man bera abyrgd fyrir. (ch. 62)

> There was a sacrificial forest in which the townspeople held great belief, and Caesar's troops did not trust to fell it. Then Caesar ran towards the forest. He struck such a strong tree with both hands that the axe sank in entirely to the handle, and he said, "Don't be afraid to strike this forest; I will bear responsibility."

While the much shorter description of the grove could be attributed to the stylistic demands of the saga genre on the whole as well as *Romverja saga*'s own historicizing nature, Caesar's actions and dialogue also contribute to a less damning episode. First, Lucan's poem solely emphasizes Caesar's audacity to be the first to cut down a tree, while *Rómverja saga* also aggrandizes his strength through greater attention to the deepness of the axe's blow.

Second and more significantly, the saga does not try to locate a Norse term that would carry the weight of *nefas* or, at the very least, suggest the transgressive nature of Caesar's act. Old Norse certainly has such a vocabulary, including through its proliferous compounds formed with the adjective *íllr*, which designates that which is "wicked" or "improper"; *nefas* could correspond well to terms such as *íllverk*, "a wicked deed" or *íllræði*, "shameful action." Norse also features a broader vocabulary of improper action outside of *íll-* compounds, including *glæpr*, which designates a "crime" or "wicked, improper deed." Many of these terms appear widely in *Rómverja* saga in both the Sallust and Lucan sections, confirming that the saga author might have used one of them here.[48] Rather than

48 To offer only a few examples, *íllverk* appears as the label for Jugurtha's actions in ch. 9, those of Marius in ch. 31, and Pompey's decapitated head at ch. 87; various acts

making use of this lexicon, however, the saga describes the abuse of the grove as the much more neutral *abyrgd*, "responsibility"; this Caesar will not carry the weight of an unlawful crime but merely liability for a committed action. As a result of these changes, Caesar's attack upon the Massilian grove still showcases his dismissal of divine power and sacred space, but the saga lessens the significance of the attack itself.

The saga's treatment of Caesar in Books 7 and 9 offer more dramatic interventions into Lucan's portrayal. In the *Bellum Civile*, Caesar refuses to bury any of the Pompeians who have fallen and instead gazes upon their rotting corpses as he dines (Luc. 7.789-95).[49] In contrast, *Rómverja saga* records that Caesar ensures that Roman citizens among the Pompeian forces receive proper funeral rites: "He selected those that were Roman citizens. He had them burned following Roman customs and thereafter their bones and ashes buried" (Allan þann hinn Romuerska val. let hann brenna eptir sid Romuería. ok let sidan iarda beín ok ösku, ch. 77).[50] While he does not offer any funeral rites for non-Romans, the saga does share that Caesar finds the site of Thessaly disturbing after the battle has concluded: "It was said that Caesar placed great loathing on that area of Thessaly" (þat er sagt. at Julíus lagdi mikil leidíndi æ þenna stad Thesaliam, ch. 77). Accordingly, he immediately departs from the scene. This is not a Caesar who would enjoy having his breakfast before a tableau of festering flesh and scavenging animals.

Lucan paints a similarly grotesque image of Caesar again in Book 9, when he is presented with Pompey's decapitated and mummified head. According to Lucan:

> non primo Caesar damnauit munera uisu
> auertitque oculos; uoltus, dum crederet, haesit;
> utque fidem uidit sceleris tutumque putauit
> iam bonus esse socer, lacrimas non sponte cadentis
> effudit gemitusque expressit pectore laeto,

along Jugurtha's rise are described as *glæp* in ch. 5, 6, 8, and 12, and the same is true of Caesar's behavior, including at ch. 72.

49 See Lovatt 1999: 130-31, Fratantuono 2012: 303, and Lanzarone 2016: 494 on the grotesque associations of Caesar's character raised by this behavior.

50 This alteration is also listed at Meißner 1910: 259.

non aliter manifesta potens abscondere mentis
gaudia quam lacrimis ...

(Luc .9.1035-41)

Caesar did not reject the gift at first sight nor turn his eyes away. He clung to the face until he believed it; and when he saw the pledge of the horrible deed and believed himself safe, then to be a good son-in-law he poured out tears that didn't fall of their own accord, and he forced out groans from a happy breast. In no other way able to hide the clear joy in his mind than with tears ...

In this initial description, Lucan's narrator suggests that Caesar feels only happiness at the sight of Pompey's mangled head, and all expressions of any negative emotion – first sadness and then disgust (Luc. 9.1064-1104) – are manipulations calculated for his ready audience. While he goes on to entertain the possibility that there is some kind of lamentation present behind the physicality of Caesar's behavior, it is certainly not grief for Pompey himself:

nunc mixti foedera tangunt
te generis? nunc gnata iubet maerere neposque?
credis apud populos Pompei nomen amantis
hoc castris prodesse tuis? fortasse tyranni
tangeris inuidia, captique in uiscera Magni
hoc alii licuisse doles, quererisque perisse
uindictam belli raptumque e iure superbi
uictoris generum. quisquis te flere coegit
impetus, a uera longe pietate recessit.

(Luc. 9.1048-56)

Do the treaties of a mingled family affect you now? Do your daughter and granddaughter now order you to grieve? Do you believe that this will aid your cause among those people who love the name of Pompey? Perhaps you're touched by jealousy of the tyrant, and it pains you that someone else was permitted this act against the innards of the captured Magnus, and you complain that revenge in battle has

> been lost and a son-in-law has been stolen from the rightful authority of the proud victor. Whatever motivation urged you to weep, it stood far away from true piety.

Even if Lucan allows room for Caesar's tears to be inspired by some form of true negative emotion, then, he is also quick to assert that such sorrow must stem from shameful motivations and represent only a further stain on his character.[51]

Rómverja saga offers a strikingly different description of Caesar's response to the Egyptians' offering:

> Sidan bra hann hofdínu vndan mǫttlinum. ok tok af dukinn. enn þat var þa vlikt þi er sa bar er Rækti. Sua at varla mattí kenna. Julíus sá um hrid æ hǫfudít. ok kendi. kom þa i skap honum bædi hǫrmung. ok fagnadr. ok hrutu tarín vm kínnr honum. ok segir Lukanus. at honum kięmí meiR þat tíl at hann villdí engu launa þeim er drepit hann hefdi. (ch. 87)

> Then he lifted the head from under the cloak and took away the cloth – it was so dissimilar to the one who bore it that it could barely be recognized. Caesar looked at the head for a short time, and he recognized it. Both sorrow and joy entered his mind, and tears rolled down his cheeks, and Lucan says that it further came to [Caesar] that he didn't want to reward the one who had killed [Pompey].

Whereas Lucan's Caesar "clings" (*haesit*, 9.1036) to the terrible image evocatively, suggesting both a kind of desired satisfaction and pleasure, *Rómverja saga* observes that Caesar only "looked" (*sá*) at the head "for a short time" (*um hrid*). More importantly, according to the saga, Caesar truly feels both happiness and sadness in equal measure, although the

51 For this scene and its place in Lucan's characterization of Caesar, see Tschiedel 1985, Fantham 1992: 110, Malamud 2003: 37-39, Wick 2004: 89-93, Radicke 2004: 478-89, D'Alessandro Behr 2007: 60-75, and Tracy 2014: 141. Caesar's response is especially damning, too, if the placement of Pompey's head in his hands also stands in for the defeat of Rome; see Hardie 1993: 7 and Dinter 2012: 19-20.

reader is not given any clear articulation of what motivates each emotion. The saga offers only the misleading claim that Lucan asserts that Caesar, for various reasons, did not want to praise the act; while Lucan does have his Caesar overtly reject the Egyptians' gift at 9.1064-1108, his narrator, as noted above, makes clear that he finds the offering very fine indeed. As in the reformulation of his behavior at Pharsalus, *Rómverja saga* does not completely rewrite Caesar or reverse his characterization in the *Bellum Civile* – he still looks at Pompey's head and finds some pleasure in it – but instead reframes his most culpable behavior: here, Caesar's grief could potentially be real and even be inspired by Pompey's fate rather than his own disappointed self-interest. As the saga sloughs off overt condemnation, Caesar becomes a much more ambiguous figure to match the text's more moderated Pompey, and the reader must take on the burden of determining whether he deserves acceptance, full condemnation, or something in between.[52]

While we may consider only limited examples here, this selection reveals how *Rómverja saga* does not simply transform a "Lucan who stands on the side of Pompey"[53] into a source for a pro-Caesarian narrative, as has been argued, but rather reframes both leaders' behavior to place the burden of interpretation on the reader. The portrayal of these central characters thus illustrates a fundamental aspect of *Rómverja saga* as a literary composition, namely: while it is certainly true that Lucan appealed to the saga author due to the historical nature of his text, this does not

52 Beyond its moderation of the *Bellum Civile*'s strongly anti-Caesarian stance, *Rómverja saga*'s laconic inclusion of both Caesar's "sorrow and joy" (*hǫrmung ok fagnadr*) presents a notable contrast with ancient accounts of this episode with a pro-Caesarian bent; see Vassiliades 2022: 29-42. Most relevantly from his findings, the *Periocha* 112 claims Caesar was "enraged and began to weep" (*infensus est et inlacrimauit*); Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae* includes that Caesar "wept" (*fleuit*, *Controv*. 10.3.1) and "averted his gaze" (*auertisse oculos*, *Controv*. 10.3.5); Valerius Maximus does not describe Caesar's physical emotionality but identifies him as acting as a father-in-law rather than an enemy (*oblitus hostis soceri uultum induit*, Val. Max. 5.1.10); Plutarch also describes Caesar as weeping (ἐδάκρυσεν, Plut. *Pomp*. 80.5 and κατεδάκρυσεν, Plut. *Caes*. 48.2).

53 Würth 2006: 157; orig. "[Lucan] steht auf der Seite des Pompeius." See similarly Meißner 1910: 256-59, Würth 1998: 31, and Helgadóttir 2010: clix.

mean that engagement with his poem began and ended with turning poetry into prose. Rather, this Icelandic work pursues a creative transformation of the *Bellum Civile* through the opportunities afforded by saga style, thus offering the reader direct agency in piecing together both the characterization of specific figures and, as a result of the former, the greater meaning of the civil war on the whole. This quality, however, is not isolated to characters of significant narrative weight like Pompey and Caesar. Rather, the saga's refiguration of scenes of mass battle and death in Lucan's poem follows its reimagining of the war's generals to present the civil conflict in a much murkier light.

3. Finding Dignity in Mass Destruction

Scenes of graphic mass battle are an unavoidable fixture of the *Bellum Civile*, even if interpretations of their effect and their poetic value have varied.[54] For our purposes, I would only like to emphasize their prominence, as well as how much time Lucan gives to these highly descriptive scenes. The lengthy and graphic Massilian battle in Book 3, for example, receives 265 lines in Lucan's text and includes the death of several named soldiers, including Catus, Lycidas, Phoecus, Tyrrhenus, and Argus, alongside numerous unnamed troops (Luc. 3.497-762). In contrast, this encounter receives one-third of one short section in *Rómverja saga* (ch. 62), with attention paid only to the named deaths of Tyrrhenus and Argus.

We might similarly compare each text's treatment of the battle between the forces of Curio and those of Juba and the Pompeians in North Africa. Lucan includes the following description of mass harm and death as the Caesarians face defeat:

> ergo acies tantae paruum spissantur in orbem,
> ac, siquis metuens medium correpsit in agmen,
> uix inpune suos inter conuertitur enses;
> densaturque globus, quantum pede prima relato
> constrinxit gyros acies. non arma mouendi
> iam locus est pressis, stipataque membra teruntur;

54 Cf. Narducci 1979: 83, Hunink 1992: 233, and Sklenář 2003: 21.

> frangitur armatum conliso pectore pectus.
> non tam laeta tulit uictor spectacula Maurus
> quam Fortuna dabat; fluuios non ille cruoris
> membrorumque uidet lapsum et ferientia terram
> corpora: conpressum turba stetit omne cadauer.
>
> (Luc. 4.777-87)

> Thus such great troops were condensed into a tiny circle, and anyone who was afraid and crept through the line could scarcely turn around unharmed by the swords of his own comrades. The crowd was dense, and however much the first line drew back their foot, so greatly did the troops draw the circle tight. Now there was no place for those crushed together to move their weapons, and their limbs, compressed, were ground together. Armored chest was crushed by chest as they crashed together. The victorious Mauretanian did not enjoy the happy sights which Fortune bestowed; that one did not see the streams of blood and the falling of limbs and bodies beating the earth: each corpse remained standing, pressed tight by the multitude.

In comparison to Lucan's affecting description of the Roman soldiers' ruined bodies as they are forced together into a confining space, *Rómverja saga* offers only this on the close of battle: "The king's men bore stones and weapons upon them so that they could not protect themselves. The crowd was so great that the corpses were not at peace to fall, and each sank down on the others" (En*n* ko*nun*gs me*nn* baru æ þa griot ok vápn. s*ua* at þ*ei*r mattu ecki ne*m*a hlífa s*er*. ok v*ar* s*ua* mikil þrǫngín at likin nádu æ*igi* at falla. ok hne hu*err* at oðr*um*, ch. 65). A lengthy description of Curio's subsequent behavior follows.

Comparisons of this kind have led to the conclusion that *Rómverja saga* simply "does not reflect any particular interest in [scenes of battle]."[55] Yet, while it dwells minimally on these two battles, *Rómverja saga* retains in great detail episodes like that of Vulteius and the mass suicide of *Bellum Civile* 4 and the serpentine suffering of Cato's men in *Bellum Civile* 9. One cannot, therefore, simply state that the saga is uninterested in

55 Helgadóttir 2010: clix. Helgadóttir also observes that the saga uses less vocabulary related to "military affairs" in the Lucan section compared to the Sallust portion.

graphic bodily violence altogether or claim that its primary aim of producing a historical account makes such detours unnecessary. In order to provide a more satisfying explanation of these changes' effects on the narrative, I would like to bring these observations into conversation with those considered above regarding *Rómverja saga*'s characterization of Caesar and Pompey. Namely, just as the saga author reframes both generals as more ambiguous leaders within the narrative frame of the civil war, so, too, does the saga prioritize episodes of martial combat that dwell on the courage of an individual and minimize those that display mass suffering. *Rómverja saga* thereby continues to step away from a portrayal of this Roman civil war as saturated with shameful behavior and wasted bodies.

For the sake of space, I will focus my attention here on the mass suicide of Book 4 as a test case. In Lucan's poem, the Caesarians encounter trouble in Dalmatia and, after facing limited resources, decide to cross the strait to join promising allies; to travel over the water, they must build rafts (Luc. 4.402-32). Pompeian forces sabotage their attempt, however, and Vulteius is introduced as the leader of one of the Caesarian rafts (*dux erat ille ratis*, Luc. 4.466) who urges his men to attack when it becomes clear that escape is not possible: "he demanded battle without hope, unknowing of whether the attack would come to their backs or chests" (*poscit spe proelia nulla / incertus qua terga daret, qua pectora bello*, Luc. 4.467-68).

Martial conflict ensues but pauses during the arrival of night, upon which Vulteius shares his view of what future action should be taken with a "great-spirited voice" (*magnanima ... uoce*, Luc. 4.475). His speech has several distinct movements. Vulteius begins by exhorting the value of suicide as having no less glory (*nec gloria leti / inferior*, Luc. 4.479-80) than other ways of dying when death itself is imminent. While no one wants to die (Luc. 4.484-85), the men now have a chance to salvage agency in the face of sure destruction: "decide upon death, and all fear is gone" (*decernite letum, / et metus omnis abest*, Luc. 4.486-87). Furthermore, the Caesarians have a special privilege in this choice, as their position in the strait has made them highly visible to onlookers (Luc. 4.488-504); this is a gift from the gods and Fortuna herself (*dei*; *Fortuna*, Luc. 4.493 and 497) to show their great loyalty to Caesar's cause (Luc. 4.500-3). Finally,

Vulteius exhorts the men to avoid any temptation for a truce (Luc. 4.507-20), closing by affirming death's great reward: "The gods conceal from those that will remain alive that one is fortunate to die so that they may endure living" (*uicturosque dei celant, ut uiuere durent, / felix esse mori*, Luc. 4.519-20).[56]

Vulteius' success at "infect[ing]" the men with "a dire frenzy for death"[57] is affirmed in battle the following day, as "when it seemed that enough blood had flowed in battle, their rage turned away from the enemy" and to their promise of suicide (*utque satis bello uisum est fluxisse cruoris/uersus ab hoste furor*, Luc. 4.539-40). Vulteius then "first offers his bared throat, seeking death" (*primus ... Vulteius iugulo poscens iam fata retecto*, Luc. 4.540-41), prompting "not one sword" (*non unus ... ensis*, Luc. 4.545) but many to strike him; upon their leader's demise, the men glory in their shared, highly visible end:

> pariter sternuntque caduntque
> uolnere letali, nec quemquam dextra fefellit
> cum feriat moriente manu. nec uolnus adactis
> debetur gladiis: percussum est pectore ferrum
> et iuguli pressere manum. cum sorte cruenta
> fratribus incurrunt fratres natusque parenti,
> haud trepidante tamen toto cum pondere dextra
> exegere enses. pietas ferientibus una
> non repetisse fuit. iam latis uiscera lapsa
> semianimes traxere foris multumque cruorem
> infudere mari. despectam cernere lucem
> uictoresque suos uoltu spectare superbo
> et mortem sentire iuuat.
>
> (Luc. 4.558-70)

56 See Asso 2010: 198-99 for a schematic breakdown of the movements of Vulteius' speech following Morford 1967: 8-9. On Vulteius' emphasis on visible exemplarity and the episode's connection with Lucan's larger exploration of *virtus*, cf. Ahl 1976: 117-20, Leigh 1997: 182-83, Hershkowitz 1998: 212-18, Gorman 2001: 280-88, Esposito 2001, Eldred 2002, Sklenář 2003: 13-58, Hill 2004: 215-37, Edwards 2007: 40-45, D'Alessandro Behr 2007: 36-45, Dinter 2012: 127-43, Seo 2013: 75-82, and Utard 2015.

57 Seo 2013: 77.

> They administered and fell from a death wound equally, and no right hand failed even when it struck from a dying limb. Nor was each wound owed from striking swords; they struck iron with their chests, and they pressed their throats against enemy hands. When brothers faced brothers and children their parents by a bloody lot, nevertheless, hardly with a fearful hand, they drew their swords with all their might. The only sign of familial piety to those who struck was that they didn't seek to repeat the action. Now the men, half-dead, dragged their collapsed guts along the boards of the ship, and they poured a mass of blood atop the sea. They took pleasure in seeing the light of life so disdained, looking with an expression of contempt upon those who had defeated them, and feeling death.

Although it includes the Vulteius episode in detail, *Rómverja saga* offers a very different version compared to the *Bellum Civile*'s frenzied slaughter. First, while Lucan introduces Vulteius himself only through his role as the *dux* of the relevant raft, the saga marks him as both a leader (*hofðíngi*) and as "the bravest in respect to weapons" (h*ann* v*ar* hin*n* vaskazti t*il* vapns, ch. 64). In *Rómverja saga*, Vulteius' confidence with a blade is marked as positive, and this reframing carries through in his speech upon the realization that victory is not forthcoming. Unlike in Lucan's text, where the divine gift of suicide is praised as offering men freedom from their fear and glory in the judgement of Caesar, the saga's Vulteius offers a much more restrained case; the men should use this time to consider which death is the most "appropriate" (*likaztr*), and what is most important is that one should not fear death: "Let's make this choice – let's not fear our death" (Gǫrum s*ua* ual. Hrædumz *æigi* bana várn, ch. 64); this will also have the secondary effect of earning Caesar's great admiration.

In this Icelandic adaptation, Vulteius is a man of good reputation; he is skilled with weapons, and so the logic behind his leadership is more clearly articulated. In addition to this, however, he is a man of restraint. Vulteius does not advocate for the men to embrace death at their own hands because death itself is a divine blessing or because it will create an

unforgettable tableau before the enemy, especially if that enemy attempts to intervene with calls for a truce. Here, Vulteius does not even clearly state that the men should end their own lives and so avoids the contradiction, present in Lucan, that while "Vulteius appears to urge suicide…his men kill each other, not themselves, and so reenact the very civil war they have been fighting with the Pompeians."[58] Instead, his focus remains on steeling his men against the fear of death when their end is certain. Following this speech, we learn, "At dawn, the Pompeians set against them and offered them peace and reconciliation, but they rejected this flatly" (En*n* er lysti. þa lǫgdu Pompeíus m*enn* at þ*ei*m. ok buðu þ*ei*m grid ok sáétt. En*n* þ*ei*r níttu þi þu*er*liga, ch. 64). Since in *Rómverja saga* Vulteius never anticipates the possibility of a truce being offered, the Caesarians' rejection of the Pompeians' offer for peace comes wholly from their own volition; *they* – and not Vulteius – confirm that it is better to embrace death than to live at the whims of another.

The saga also rewrites the mass suicide itself. Whereas Lucan dedicates fifty-three lines to this conflict (Luc. 4.529-81) and, within that, thirty-four to the mass slaughter (Luc. 4.540-73), the saga is very brief after remarking that the Pompeians fought well:

> En*n* er Wlt*er*nus sæa at þ*ei*r v*aro* yf*ir* komn*ir*. þa retti h*ann* fr*a*m*m* halsin*n*. ok bað þ*a*nn kompan sin*n* hǫGua sik er næstr h*on*um v*ar*. En*n* er h*a*nn fell. þa hio hu*er*r an*n*an sin*n* vín ok frẹnda. ok hlaıt Vlt*er*nu*s* þa*n*n dauda sem h*ann* uilldi S*er* sealfr kiosa.
>
> (ch. 64)

> When Vulteius saw that they were overcome, he stretched out his neck and asked his companion nearest to him to strike him. When he fell, each one struck his friend and relative, and Vulteius had the death which he wanted to choose for himself.

While the Caesarians' demise remains a form of display before the Pompeians,[59] *Rómverja saga* includes only two references to violent harm

58 Eldred 2002: 58.

59 Wellendorf 2014: 3-6 marks display as a key difference between this scene and the mass suicide of *Sverris saga*.

compared to Lucan's twenty-one and eschews any suggestion that the men envision themselves to be disdainful performers before an audience that sits beneath them.[60] Rather, the saga presents them as brave men dedicated to their cause, and it maintains its attention on Vulteius as a figure who thoughtfully sets out a course for his demise that he can accept. In concluding the episode by affirming that Vulteius achieved the death for which he wished, the saga figures his death as a dignified end. Finally, to accompany this reconfiguration of the Caesarians as restrained even in their self-violence, the saga author adds a closing blow against the Pompeians. While Lucan only describes the "victors" (*uictores*, Luc. 4.572) burning the corpses atop a pyre while their leaders marvel at the dedication of Vulteius' men to their leader (*ducibus mirantibus ulli / esse ducem tanti*, Luc. 4.572-73), *Rómverja saga* states that the Pompeian forces "thereafter took [the corpses'] weapons and money" (Toku nu sidan vápn þeira ok fiar lut, ch. 64).

In the *Bellum Civile*, Vulteius and the Caesarian forces he commands offer an overly devoted dedication to death – from the eagerness with which they bestow it on themselves to the great pride they feel in forcing others to gaze upon their devastated bodies. Regardless of how one interprets this episode in Lucan's greater poetic project, it does thereby offer a marked commentary on the civil war itself as an event that permits and even perhaps encourages such an action to occur. By excluding such details from its own narrative, *Rómverja saga* reconceives exactly how the civil conflict reveals the character of those fighting within it. In this case, the war still presents opportunities to commit harm against oneself, but such decisions are taken to be the outcome of a calm and noble dedication to individual agency and self-control.

As a result, this episode achieves a similar effect to that traced above in the portrayals of Caesar and Pompey. By turning away from the enthusiastic violence of *Bellum Civile* 4 while retaining the Caesarians' determination to die, *Rómverja saga* offers a more open-ended interpretation of the incident and the civil war that creates it; similarly, its recasting of the Pompeians as not only the audience of this display but thieves and corpse-robbers earns the reader's condemnation even while the Cae-

60 See Gorman 2001: 282.

sarians also likely earn criticism for their rejection of a truce. By removing overt judgement and presenting a more neutral, fact-driven narrative, *Rómverja saga* gives the reader significant material to make critical evaluations of its contents without applying a heavy hand regarding which interpretive path they should take.

4. Singing Civil War as Saga

As exemplified by its presentation of Pompey and Caesar as generals and the fates of the men they lead, *Rómverja saga* embodies a nuanced engagement with the *Bellum Civile*. Rather than only considering the epic's potential historical value and truncating the complexities of its poetic identity, *Rómverja saga* finds in the generic demands of saga style active adaptive opportunities to transform key features of Lucan's work. It thereby stands not only as a "competent and independent translation"[61] of plot, formal style, and terminology "interested in the conflict between Pompey and Caesar and the concrete events that resulted from it,"[62] but also as a perceptive and creative reformulation of the *Bellum Civile*'s more complex themes and interpretive challenges for medieval Icelandic readers.

With this in mind, we can now appreciate the greater effects of the saga author's interventions. Here, it is imperative to reiterate that neither Caesar nor Pompey is utterly redeemed in the saga even if the text softens potential moments of high criticism; Caesar does not suddenly become altruistic and restrained and Pompey is not made energetic and decisive. Rather, in moderating the most damning moments of both generals' performance in Lucan's poem, the saga makes greater space for the reader to construct their own judgement of the events at hand. In the same vein, the saga's truncation of certain battles and reshaping of others refocuses its own narrative on the behavior of significant but ethically complex individuals. Through such innovations, the saga presents the civil war not as an incomprehensible, degenerate conflict that plays out upon innumerable victimized bodies, as Lucan does, but instead as a

61 Würth 2005: 165.
62 Helgadóttir 2010: clii.

coherent contention set in motion by two complex leaders which offers selective opportunities for noble behavior. The historical significance of the civil war is not lost in the saga, but the text thus throws its moral character into repeated uncertainty.

In putting forward its distinct version of the Roman state as it falls apart and becomes something new, the saga forges its own path from the *Bellum Civile* and other medieval adaptations of Lucan's work while simultaneously retaining one of its central conceits: looming questions and ambiguous answers. Rather than pondering how such an event could even occur, as Lucan does (*quis furor*, Luc. 1.1), *Rómverja saga* instead prompts the question of what that event should be taken to mean. Rather than exploring that central question with a booming but at times indecisive voice, the saga author silences Lucan's narrator and offers the reader the kind of interpretive puzzle with which they would be much more familiar. As a result, *Rómverja saga* maintains a central aspect of Lucan's work while completely transforming it, creating something both distinct and connected: both clearly Lucanian and yet utterly Icelandic.

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