

# The Concept of *Prāotēs* in Plutarch's *Lives*

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THIS STUDY seeks to define Plutarch's concept of *prāotēs* by a close examination of the contexts in which the term occurs in the *Lives*.<sup>1</sup> We are concerned not only with its apt translation, though that is important, but even more with the basic notion underlying particular uses of the word and the nuances which depend upon this basic notion. The question arises as to what extent Plutarch's usage was influenced by the vocabulary of his sources. Although the problem is aggravated by the fact that in most instances we do not have the sources for comparison, I have attempted to demonstrate elsewhere that Plutarch was relatively independent of his source in choice of words.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the various categories of usage we recognize for *prāotēs* are represented by at least several and often by many examples from different *Lives* lends support to this conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Let us begin by examining several passages in which *prāotēs* refers not to a moral quality but rather to a physical characteristic. Plutarch opens the fifth chapter of his *Life of Pericles* with a remark about Pericles' admiration for his adviser, the philosopher Anaxagoras of Clazomenae:

<sup>1</sup>The study is based entirely on the *Lives*. For those references from the *Moralia*, cited in the footnotes, and for several additional references from the *Lives*, also cited in the footnotes, the writer is indebted to Professor Phillip De Lacy.

<sup>2</sup>Hubert Martin, Jr., "The Concept of *Philanthrōpia* in Plutarch's *Lives*," *AJP*, a forthcoming issue. Hartmut Erbse's convincing discussion of Plutarch's originality in handling his source material, "Die Bedeutung der Synkrisis in den Parallelbiographien Plutarchs," *Hermes* 84 (1957) 398-424, points, furthermore, to the *a priori* assumption that he was also independent of his source in his choice of vocabulary.

<sup>3</sup>The forthcoming monograph (XIX) of the American Philological Association by Helmbold and O'Neil, *Plutarch's Quotations*, may shed considerable light on this problem. This article, however, was submitted before the appearance of the monograph.

This man Pericles extravagantly admired, and being gradually filled full of the so-called higher philosophy and elevated speculation, he not only had, as it seems, a spirit that was solemn and a discourse that was lofty and free from plebeian and reckless effrontery, but also a composure of countenance that never relaxed into laughter, a gentleness of carriage (*πραότης πορείας*) and cast of attire that suffered no emotion to disturb it while he was speaking, a modulation of voice that was far from boisterous, and many similar characteristics which struck all his hearers with wondering amazement.<sup>4</sup>

We find a similar usage of *prāotēs* in *TG* 2.2, where Plutarch in contrasting the Gracchi states that Tiberius was *πρᾶος* and *καταστηματικός* in appearance and gait, while Gaius was *ἔντονος* and *σφοδρός*.<sup>5</sup> The difference between the brothers is then illustrated by their behavior on the rostra. Tiberius stood *κοσμίως*<sup>6</sup> in one place, but Gaius was the first Roman to pull his toga off his shoulder as he spoke, just as Cleon was the first Athenian demagogue to pull aside his mantle and strike his thigh.

One's general impression from these two passages, where *prāotēs* is employed to describe the physical appearance of Pericles and Tiberius, is that these men possessed great dignity in expression and carriage, and an inner self-restraint responsible for their outward dignity. So also in the case of the description of Fabius Maximus in *Fab.* 17.7. When all of the other Romans were overwhelmed by grief and confusion as a result of the disaster at Cannae, "he alone went through the city with a dignified walk and a composed countenance and a courteous<sup>7</sup> greeting" (*πράως βαδίσματι καὶ προσώπῳ καθεστῶτι καὶ φιλανθρώπῳ προσαγορεύσει*). And Philopoemen looks his executioner "calmly" (*πράως*) in the face as he speaks his last words (*Phil.* 20.3).<sup>8</sup>

In several other pertinent instances the adverb *πράως* describes a physical action. In *Cat. Mi.* 63 Plutarch tells of the demands made

<sup>4</sup>Tr. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>5</sup>For *πραότης* contrasted with *σφοδρότης*, see *TG* 2.5–6; *Cleom.* 1.4; *Alex.* 4.8; *Pyrrh.* 8.8; *Tim.* 3.4. (In references of this nature the adjectival and adverbial forms will be included under the heading of the nouns.)

<sup>6</sup>For *πρᾶος* and *κόσμιος*, see *Ages.* 20.7; *Comp. Pel. Marc.* 3.2; *Agis* 14.3. Cf. *Cim.* 5.5 (*πραότης* and *ἀφέλεια*).

<sup>7</sup>For *φιλάνθρωπος* in the sense of "courteous" or "pleasant" see Martin *op. cit.* (*supra* n.2). *πραότης* and *φιλανθρωπία* often appear together in the *Lives* (*Rom.* 7.5; *Cat. Mi.* 23.1; *Agis* 20.5; *Fab.* 22.8; *Pyrrh.* 11.8; *Arist.* 23.1; *Phil.* 3.1; *Cat. Ma.* 5.5; *Galb.* 1.3).

<sup>8</sup>*πραότης* is used to describe the calmness of water in *Moralia* 981 C. The adjective also is applied to things in *Alc.* 16.4.

of Cato by the defeated Republican cavalry that had survived Thapsus. Cato is trying to organize Utica to resist a siege, but the leaders of the horsemen fear that the Phoenician inhabitants of the city will go over to Caesar. The leaders, therefore, refuse to bring their men into the city to participate in the defense unless Cato will drive out or kill all of the regular inhabitants. (In 63.3 Plutarch characterizes these proposals as *οὐ μέτρια*). Cato's reaction and reply are described in 63.6: "Cato thought that these demands were terribly cruel (*ἄγρια*) and savage (*βάρβαρα*), but he replied *πράως* that he would take counsel with the three hundred." There is a pointed contrast between Cato's inward feeling and his outward reaction, for, though he is repelled by the brutality of the request, he nevertheless manages to reply *πράως* — that is, without anger or excitement but rather with calmness and self-control.

A similar usage of the adverb is to be found in *Arat.* 40.4, where Aratus cleverly extricates himself from a plot laid against him by the Corinthians, who had summoned him to the temple of Apollo. "He appeared leading his horse himself, as though he were not distrustful or suspicious, and, when many of the Corinthians jumped up and persisted in rebuking and accusing him, with his countenance and speech somehow well composed (*εὖ πως καθεστῶτι τῷ προσώπῳ καὶ τῷ λόγῳ*) he calmly (*πράως*) told them to sit down and to stop standing there shouting in confusion . . ." There is a strong notion here of deliberate self-restraint in *πράως*; for Aratus is really just putting on an act, since he is fully aware of the plot and is only contriving his own escape, which is recounted in the subsequent narrative.<sup>9</sup>

In the discussion so far, inner character for the most part has only been intimated or reflected in the *prāotēs* of countenance, movement, and voice. Let us now, however, investigate uses of the term for a purely moral concept. In *Alex.* 4.8 Plutarch discusses the *sōphrosynē*<sup>10</sup> of the young Alexander: "While he was still a boy,

<sup>9</sup>The adverb is used with a similar force to describe the manner in which a person speaks in *Cic.* 31.4 and *TG* 19.4.

<sup>10</sup>For a survey of the position of *σωφροσύνη* in Greek ethics see Eduard Schwartz, *Ethik der Griechen* (Stuttgart 1951), especially 51ff., 208ff. In this passage from the *Life of Alexander*, as we might expect, *σωφροσύνη* appears to be the master-virtue, to which *πράότης* stands in a subordinate position. (In *Demetr.* 1.4 *σωφροσύνη*, *δικαιοσύνη*, and

his *sōphrosynē* was revealed by the fact that he was generally violent (*ῥαγδαῖον*) and impetuous (*φερόμενον σφοδρῶς*) but that in the case of bodily pleasures he was not easily aroused (*δυσκίνητον*) and partook of such things with great restraint (*μετὰ πολλῆς πραότητος*). . . ." The intimate connection between *sōphrosynē* and *prāotēs*<sup>11</sup> in this selection is apparent and serves to emphasize the notion of self-control, which is perhaps the basic idea contained in every usage of *prāotēs*.

This basic notion is revealed again in *Cor.* 21.1-3, where Plutarch describes how Coriolanus reacted to his condemnation to perpetual banishment. Having concluded the previous chapter with the statement that after the voting there was no need of dress or other marks of distinction to tell one class from another, for those who rejoiced were plebeians and those who were distressed were patricians, Plutarch then turns to Coriolanus himself: "Marcius himself was the exception, for he was neither daunted nor dejected; and he was also composed (*καθεστηκῶς*) in appearance and movement, so that among all of his comforters he alone seemed to be unsympathetic to himself. His reaction, however, was not governed by reason and selfrestraint (*ὑπὸ λογισμοῦ καὶ πραότητος*) nor by his bearing with moderation (*τῷ φέρειν μετρίως*) his misfortune; instead he was numbed by wrath and resentment (*ὑπ' ὀργῆς καὶ βαρυφροσύνης*) . . . And Marcius revealed very soon by his actions that this was his disposition." Plutarch is careful here to stress that Coriolanus' apparent physical composure was not what it appeared to be, that it was not the product of *logismos* and *prāotēs*. This example of *prāotēs* is, in effect, the exception that proves the rule. The presence of *logismos*,<sup>12</sup> furthermore, is instructive for it emphasizes that

*φρόνησις* are referred to as the *τελεώταται* of all the *τέχναι*.) Any guess, however, as to their exact relationship would be hazardous without a thorough examination of Plutarch's usage of *σωφροσύνη*. In view of Dihle's contention that Plutarch's ethical theory is derived ultimately from Aristotle and the Peripatetics (see *infra* in text) and of the coincidences between Plutarch's usage of *πραότης* and the definition of the term given by Aristotle (see *infra* nn. 13, 21, 22), it is perhaps worth pointing out that in this passage Plutarch connects *σωφροσύνη* especially with the control of bodily pleasures, just as Aristotle limits the term to the control of bodily pleasures, in particular those of touch and taste (*Eth. Nic.* III. 10, 1118<sup>a</sup> 1-1118<sup>b</sup> 8).

<sup>11</sup>Aristotle in several instances places *σώφρων* and *πρᾶος* in juxtaposition (*Eth. Nic.* I.13, 1103<sup>a</sup> 8; II.1, 1103<sup>b</sup> 19; V.1, 1129<sup>b</sup> 21-22).

<sup>12</sup>In *Cor.* 15.4 *τὸ πρᾶον* is the product of *λόγος* and *παιδεία* (see *infra* in text for a discussion of the passage).

*prāotēs* contains a certain intellectual aspect: *logismos* and *prāotēs* are contrasted with the emotional qualities *orgē*<sup>13</sup> and *baryphrosynē*. The intellectual association of *prāotēs* is stressed again in Plutarch's remark that Cato the Elder was said to have borne the death of his son *πράως* and *φιλοσόφως* (*Cat. Ma.* 24.10).<sup>14</sup>

Although we saw that a deficiency of *prāotēs* in the character of Coriolanus was in large measure responsible for his treasonable actions against his country, nevertheless in our previous discussion we examined the quality primarily as a state of character within the individual. Let us now turn to those instances in which the second party is more prominent. We see what might happen when a man allows his *thymos* to overpower his *prāotēs* in *Fab.* 9.1, where Plutarch describes the reaction of the Roman people to the threat of the dictator Fabius Maximus to return to camp and punish his subordinate Minucius, who had disobeyed orders and successfully engaged a small portion of Hannibal's army: *καὶ τοῦ Φαβίου τὸν θυμὸν ἐκ πολλῆς πραότητος κεκινημένον ᾤοντο βαρὺν εἶναι καὶ δυσπαραίτητον*. They feared that if Fabius lost control over his *thymos* he would be severe and implacable in his treatment of the offender.<sup>15</sup> *Prāotēs* is, furthermore, associated with legality and contrasted with cruelty, violence, and tyranny in several passages. Lysander's constitutional reforms were accomplished *πραότερον καὶ νομιμώτερον* than were those of Sulla; for Lysander achieved them by persuasion, not by arms, nor did he completely subvert the constitution; he merely revised the manner of appointing the kings (*Comp. Lys. Sull.* 2.1). In *Pel.* 26.2-3 Pelopidas attempted to transform Alexander of Pherae from a tyrant into a moderate ruler who governed by law (*ἐπειρᾶτο καὶ ποιεῖν ἐκ τυράννου πρᾶον ἄρχοντα τοῖς Θεσσαλοῖς καὶ νόμιμον*). "But since the man was incurably brutish and full of savageness, and since

<sup>13</sup>For *πραότης* in contrast to *ὀργή* or as a quality controlling it, see *TG* 2.5-6; *Fab.* 7.7; *Pyrrh.* 8.8; 23.3; *Oth.* 16.6. It is interesting that Aristotle defines *πραότης* as *μεσότης περὶ ὀργάς*, its excess and deficiency being respectively *ὀργιλότης τις* and *ἀοργησία τις* (*Eth. Nic.* IV.5, 1125<sup>b</sup>26-1126<sup>b</sup>10). Cf. *Eth. Nic.* II.1, 1103<sup>b</sup>17-20; II.7, 1108<sup>a</sup>4-9; II.9, 1109<sup>b</sup>14-17; V.1, 1129<sup>b</sup>19-23. The section in the *Rhetorica* contrasting *ὀργή* and *πραότης* (B.2-3, 1380<sup>a</sup>5-1380<sup>b</sup>34) begins with the statement that *τὸ ὀργίζεσθαι* and *ὀργή* are the opposites of *τὸ πραῦνεσθαι* and *πραότης* respectively.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Alex.* 40.2 (*πράως καὶ φιλοσόφως*); *Dem.* 22.3 (*ἀλύπως* and *πράως*).

<sup>15</sup>For the conflict between *πραότης* and *θυμός*, see *Cleom.* 1.4; *Dio* 39.4; *TG* 2.5; *Cor.* 21.1-2; *Pyrrh.* 8.8.

there was much denunciation of his licentiousness and greed, Pelopidas became harsh and severe with him, whereupon he ran away with his guards."<sup>16</sup> And Plutarch observes (*Comp. Dio Brut.* 2.2) that no savage or tyrannical (*τυραννικόν*) deed resulted from Caesar's rule but that he came as *πραότατος* *ιατρός* at a time when a monarchy was needed.<sup>17</sup>

So far our examination of this last aspect of *prāotēs* has been principally from a negative point of view.<sup>18</sup> Let us turn to the positive. In *Alex.* 13.3 Plutarch remarks that it is said that the destruction of Thebes often caused Alexander distress and made him *πραότερον* to many people thereafter. A convenient translation for *πραότερον* in this context is "more forbearing:" the full implication of the term is that Alexander exercised a stricter control over his *thymos* and therefore treated others with greater forbearance. The relation between conqueror and his defeated opponent is again present in *Ant.* 83.6, where Cleopatra tells Augustus that she had held back from her treasures some small gifts for Octavia and Livia, in order that through their intercession she would find her conqueror "gracious and more forbearing" (*ἱλεώ σου τύχοιμι καὶ πραοτέρου*). A similar usage occurs in the last sentence of the *Life of Pyrrhus*: Antigonus Gonatas treated the friends of his dead opponent Pyrrhus *πράως*.<sup>19</sup> In usages of this sort the translation "forbearing," I feel, conveys the proper shade of meaning. The common rendering "gentle" leaves upon the reader the impression that *prāos* depicts a spontaneous, emotional quality; but, as we have previously seen, this is not so, for *prāotēs* is the product of conscious effort; in fact, it means that its possessor is restraining his purely emotional reaction and is substituting for it another, more rational one.

In several instances the adjective is conveniently rendered by "lenient." Aemilius Paulus (*Aem.* 3.6) did not campaign for a sec-

<sup>16</sup>Tr. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. *Phoc.* 29.5 (*πράως καὶ νομίμως*); *Pyrrh.* 23.3 (*ἐπιεικῶς* and *πράως* contrasted with *δеспοτικῶς* and *πρὸς ὀργήν*).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Aristotle's remark (*Eth. Nic.* V.1, 1129<sup>b</sup>19-23): "And the law bids us do both the acts of a brave man (*e.g.* not to desert our post nor take to flight nor throw away our arms), and those of a temperate man (*e.g.* not to commit adultery nor to gratify one's lust), and those of a good-tempered man [*πράως*] (*e.g.* not to strike another nor to speak evil). . . ." Ross' translation.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. *Pomp.* 33.2; *Flam.* 21.1-2 (*πραότης* and *μεγαλοψυχία*); *Crass.* 30.2 (*πραότης* and *φιλοφροσύνη*).

ond magistracy during the term of his first “by performing favors for those under his command and being lenient to them” (διὰ τοῦ χαρίζεσθαι καὶ πρᾶος εἶναι τοῖς ἀρχομένοις);<sup>20</sup> instead he was φοβερὸς to those disobedient. And Solon (*Sol.* 15.1), though he rejected the tyranny, did not manage affairs “in the most lenient manner” (τὸν πραότατον τρόπον). Some occasions, then, do not demand *prāotēs*.<sup>21</sup> It is not that *prāotēs* per se is a fault, but it is possible for a person to practice it to excess. In the preceding passages a superior dealt with subordinates without *prāotēs*; and, though the usage is basically the same when the adjective is employed to describe the subordinate rather than the superior, in the latter instance *πρᾶος* perhaps comes into English better as “amenable” or “tractable.” This is the case in *Luc.* 2.5, where Plutarch observes that their political disorders and misfortunes “rendered the Cyrenaean amenable to the constitutional reforms of Lucullus (νομοθετοῦντι Λευκόλλῳ πρᾶους).” And in *Lyc.* 30.4 Plutarch remarks: “And just as it is the object of the art of horsemanship to make the horse tractable (*πρᾶον*) and obedient (*πειθήνιον*), so it is the task of the science of kingship to instill *eupitheia* in men.”<sup>22</sup> *Prāotēs* is a thing learned, not a spontaneous or natural reaction; the horse is taught to be *πρᾶος* — that is, to restrain his natural inclinations and to obey the will of his master. And in *Cor.* 15.4 τὸ πρᾶον is spoken of as being produced by *logos* and *paideia*.

The interpretation placed upon *prāotēs* so far presents a problem in several instances where Plutarch speaks of it as a quality

<sup>20</sup>The association between *πρᾶος εἶναι* and *χαρίζεσθαι* is again present in *Phoc.* 31.3. Cf. *Moralia* 1108 B, where *πραότης* and *χάρις* are attributed to Socrates (but see *Phaedo* 116C).

<sup>21</sup>Cf. *Oth.* 16.6 (δευτικὸς and *πρᾶος*). Aristotle also makes allowances for such situations when he observes, in connection with those who tend to the excess with regard to *δργαί* (*πραότης* is defined as *μεσότης περὶ δργάς*, *supra*, n. 13), “. . . and sometimes we call angry people manly, as being capable of ruling” (*Eth. Nic.* IV.5, 1126<sup>b</sup>1–2, Ross’ translation).

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Aristotle’s remarks that *πραότης* “leans toward the deficiency” (soon designated as *ἀοργησία*) and that “sometimes we praise those practicing the deficiency and describe them as *πρᾶοι*” (*Eth. Nic.* IV.5, 1125<sup>b</sup>28, and IV.5, 1126<sup>a</sup>36–1126<sup>b</sup>1, respectively). Throughout this study references have been made in the footnotes to points of contact between Plutarch’s general usage of *πραότης* and Aristotle’s detailed discussion of the term. These observations are not intended either to imply or deny direct influence. A basic difference between the concept of Aristotle and that of Plutarch appears to be that the former confines *πραότης* to the control of the single *πάθος* of *δργή*, while the latter employs it in connection with other *πάθη* in addition to *δργή*.

possessed by *physis*<sup>23</sup>. A certain Crassus, the colleague of the elder Scipio in the consulship, refuses to vie with Scipio for the command of the expedition against Carthage; one of the two reasons given by Plutarch for Crassus' unwillingness to oppose Scipio is that his *physis* kept him at home, since he was not φιλόνηκος but πρᾶος (*Fab.* 25.3-4). A similar connection with *physis* occurs in *Ages.* 20.7, where Plutarch lists the reasons for the political impotence of Agesipolis, the co-ruler of King Agesilaus, whose stronger will he follows: the exile of his father, his youth, and his natural character (φύσει δὲ πρᾶος καὶ κόσμιος).<sup>24</sup>

In Plutarch's general usage, as we have previously seen, *prāotēs* is the antithesis of a spontaneous, natural quality; yet in the cases just cited it is expressly stated or at least implied that a person is πρᾶος by *physis*. A possible solution to the apparent incongruity is that Plutarch is not concerned with impeccable exactness in terminology and has, therefore, inadvertently contradicted himself. Although Plutarch, fundamentally a moralist and biographer,<sup>25</sup> does not confine himself to a terminology so precise as that of Aristotle, Dihle in his excellent study of Greek biography has contended that the ethical theory set forth by Aristotle and transmitted by the later Peripatetics established itself permanently in Greek biographical method and reveals itself in Plutarch's *Lives*.<sup>26</sup> While Dihle's investigations almost rule out the possibility that Plutarch could have contradicted himself in such a basic ethical matter as the relation between *physis* and moral character (*ēthos*), they do offer a solution to our present quandary. Dihle points out that for Plutarch, as well as for the Peripatetics, a particular moral characteristic (*ēthos*) can not be developed unless a person is endowed by *physis*

<sup>23</sup>For a survey of the importance of φύσις in Greek ethics, see Schwartz *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 10).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. *Them.* 3.3; *Cleom.* 1.4. For πρᾶος and κόσμιος, see n. 6.

<sup>25</sup>Erbse *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 2) has emphasized the fact that the parallel *Lives* were composed within the framework of certain moral qualities common to the pair in question. Furthermore, Plutarch's basic intent in the *Lives* is to inspire the emulation of the virtues of the great men about whom he writes (*Aem.* 1; *Demetr.* 1.1-6), and he is more concerned with character than with great deeds (*Alex.* 1; *Nic.* 1.5). See Konrat Ziegler, "Plutarchus," *RE* XXI (1951) 903-905 for a complete discussion.

<sup>26</sup>Albrecht Dihle, "Studien zur Griechischen Biographie," *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, Phil.-hist. Kl., Dritte Folge, Nr. 37 (1956) 57-103. Cf. Erbse *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 2) 400, n. 1.



with the capacity for this *ēthos*; the *physis*, furthermore, is constant, unchanging.

Let us apply Dihle's conclusions to the passage from the *Life of Fabius* and that from the *Life of Agesilaus*. Although *prāotēs* is the product of deliberate effort, self-discipline, and training, a person can not develop it if his *physis* does not include a capacity for *prāotēs*. Crassus and Agesipolis have this natural capacity; yet their *prāotēs* is still basically self-restraint. The apparent contradiction is the result of Plutarch's incorporating into his narrative a certain ethical doctrine without telling us what he was doing; it is a popular presentation of a technical matter. The situation is similar in *Cor.* 1.3, where a *physis* that is *γενναία* and *ἀγαθή*, but "not properly trained" (*παιδείας ἐνδεής*), is compared to a fertile plain that is not cultivated. Just as the capacity for goodness must be developed by conscious effort, so must the natural capacity for *prāotēs*. The final virtue does not change its characteristics because it derives from *physis*; rather, every virtue, and vice for that matter, has its foundation in *physis*. Likewise, when Plutarch says that both Romulus and Theseus were *πολιτικοί* by *physis* (*Comp. Thes. Rom.* 2.1), he does not imply that they became political figures without conscious effort or that every political decision was a spontaneous reaction.

In summary we conclude that for Plutarch *prāotēs*<sup>27</sup> is essentially a self-restraint which avoids excess of every kind, whether physical or emotional, whether within the individual or in his relations with other people, but which is out of place in circumstances demanding intensity of feeling and severity of action. It is an inner moral condition that manifests itself in the dignity of a person's appearance, his control of an emotional impulse, and the forbearance with which he treats another.

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<sup>27</sup>*πραότης* also occurs in juxtaposition or close connection with *δικαιοσύνη* (*Lyc.* 28.13; *Tim.* 37.5; *Cic.* 6.1; *Pel.* 26.8; *Per.* 2.5; *Num.* 6.3; 20.4; *Comp. Lyc. Num.* 4.13) and *ἐπιείκεια* (*TG* 2.5; *Alex.* 13.2-3; *Sert.* 25.6; *Caes.* 54. 3-4; *Pyrrh.* 23.3; *Comp. Per. Fab.* 3.2).