

HERCULES' GESTURE AT OVID, MET. 9.210

Since the meanings of gestures and the vocabulary used to describe them were common knowledge to the ancients, classical authors rarely bothered to explain them¹). This causes many problems for the modern scholar who is often at a loss when confronted with such expressions. C. Sittl's *Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer*²), a classification of gestures found in literary, epigraphical, and plastic sources, is helpful, but it cannot deal with every instance of every gesture, let alone associated euphemisms and slang terminology. Hence there is a tendency for scholars to fall back on stock translations, but these are often at odds with the context.

Consider, for example, Ovid, Met. 9.152–210. During a sacrifice, Hercules dons a cloak imbued with the blood of Nessus. The heat of the sacrificial fire releases the poison which, in turn, burns his skin. Hercules overturns the altar and, in an attempt to tear off the cloak, succeeds only in ripping away large chunks of his own flesh. Then, *tollens ad sidera palmas* (175), he shouts '*cladibus, . . . Saturnia, pascere nostris!*' and engages in an angry tirade against Juno and the injustice of the gods, ending with a denial of the divinities: *et sunt, qui credere possint / esse deos* (203–4). Although *tollere ad sidera palmas* commonly describes the gesture associated with prayer, the context clearly shows that Hercules did not use the gesture for this purpose, but rather to deliver an angry, sarcastic, and even blasphemous mes-

1) Hesychius is of some help, but he deals only with Greek expressions.

2) Leipzig, 1890. Also R. Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art*, *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 14 (1963); K. Groß, *Finger*, *RAC VII* (1969) 927–931; B. Kötting, *Geste u. Gebärde*, *RAC X* (1978) 895–902.

sage to the gods. The attitude behind this gesture has a direct influence on a similar phrase six lines later, when we see Hercules wandering over Oeta like a wounded bull, groaning, roaring, trying to tear off the cloak, knocking down trees, raging, and *tendentem brachia caelo* (9.210). Scholars interpret this phrase to mean “lifting the arms in a gesture of prayer or supplication”³). This is unlikely, given Hercules’ anger and recent denial of the gods’ very existence. It makes better sense to understand this phrase on analogy with Tacitus, Ann. 4.3. Here, Drusus and Sejanus, mortal enemies, begin to quarrel. *Orto forte iurgio intenderat Seiano manus et contra tendentis os verberaverat*: when a quarrel happened to arise, Drusus raised his fists against Sejanus, and when the latter raised his fists in response, Drusus delivered a blow to his face⁴). “Stretching forth the hand in a threatening manner” is obviously the correct interpretation in this situation where anger and physical abuse are specified. If we accept that synecdoche is involved at Met. 9.210⁵), Hercules’ anger and belligerent attitude toward the gods would warrant a similar translation.

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3) F. Bömer, P. Ovidius Naso: *Metamorphosen* (Heidelberg 1977) ad loc.

4) See also Livy 3.47.7, where *Verginius intentans in Appium manus* when he is forced to surrender his daughter. Cf. Seneca. Epist. 71.22 and Tacitus, Hist. 4.41.

5) Not the “part for the whole”, but the less common “whole for the part”, as at Ovid, Met. 8.432, where the participants in the Calydonian Boar Hunt, angered because Meleager has given the prize to Atlanta, *ingenti tendentes brachia voce*.

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