

Artistic representations of characters involved in narrative might appear to be ideal evidence for the way Romans conceived of and dealt with nonverbal behaviors: engraved in stone, painted on a wall, constructed in a mosaic floor, they showcase body language, gestures and facial expressions in ways which should shed light on Roman nonverbal behavior. But as soon as we question the meaning of an illustrated gesture, we find ourselves face to face with the issue of interpretation. While literary sources, like Homeric poetry, for instance, may nudge their readers towards particular interpretations of characters' nonverbal behaviors (Lateiner 1995), there is no such guidance in a visual context: we are looking at an image without any sort of *didascalie*. Is it possible, then, to make something of it, to try and understand what is there, what behavior was represented?

This paper will explore some possibilities for interpreting nonverbal behavior—taking the perspectives of both ancient Roman viewers and scholars today. In order to do so, it will look at a late-imperial mosaic floor from the Sicilian villa del'Casale at Piazza Armerina. The paper will argue that such a representation involves, both for the ancient and the modern viewer, an interpretative challenge, a game of interpretation.

In fact, the scene depicted on this mosaic has proven controversial in modern scholarship, interpreted either as a dance (Gentili 1959), or as a scene of abduction referring to the foundation story of the rape of the Sabine women by Romulus and his soldiers as we find it in our literary record—e.g. Livy I, Plutarch *Rom.* 17, 5, Ovid *Ars.Am.* 115-132—(Settis 1975, Kähler 1974), or as a pantomime of this same foundation episode (Carandini 1982). These different interpretations immediately appear as striking and problematic: what were the Roman conventions for representing the nonverbal behavior of violence? How could the same scene possibly be read both as a rape and as a dance? Could a scene of extreme violence be turned into a dance? Was it appropriate to have a 'dance of violence' depicted on the floor of your house? Why? The paper will put this image next to the story of the rape of the Sabine women as told by Ovid in his *Ars Amatoria* (115-132), in the context of the games held at the circus. In these verses, Ovid features a self-consciously ambiguous illustrated behaviour, as he plays around the *topoi* of abduction, hunting and dance.

The ambiguity in pinpointing what precise behavior is represented on our mosaic opens a space for us to reflect on our own nonverbal behaviors, as was surely the case also for a Roman viewer. In fact, our case study, removed from a 'classical Roman' context (set in Sicily and the fourth century AD), is already part of this process of reception. Nonverbal behavior was and is open to a neverending interpretation, and, therefore, as the paper will seek to show, key to the construction of identity in relation to gender and

space.