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Abusing Theodora: Sexual and political discourse in Procopius

INTRODUCTION

The *Anecdota*, rediscovered only in the 17th century, are easily Procopius most puzzling and hence perhaps most original work¹. Whereas the *Wars*, on the surface at least, can be seen as a classical continuation of the mainstream tradition of Greco-Roman historiography, and the *Buildings*, despite their exclusive focus on Justinian's construction projects, can be grouped together with all the rest of late Roman panegyric, the *Anecdota* defy such easy genre classifications. The *Suda* called them a "komodia", a satire, but even a superficial reading shows that the work is far removed in style, content and intentions from, for example, Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* which otherwise might look like its distant ancestor. The understanding of the *Anecdota* is not helped by Procopius himself who in the introduction presents them as a companion volume to his *Wars* and claims that in the best tradition of Thucydides this work will explain the real reasons behind the events described in the *Wars*².

To some extent of course the *Anecdota* fulfil the function their author claims for them. Whether one agrees with Procopius, or whether one even judges his explanations vaguely plausible, one has to concede that, on the face of it, many of the things Procopius has to say about Antonina explain the actions of Belisarius as they were narrated in the *Wars*³. However the further the narrative progresses, the further it seems to depart from the historical analysis promised in the introduction. Increasingly we are not dealing with an analy-

1. For an introduction to Procopius and the history of his works see A. Cameron, *Procopius and the sixth century*, London 1985, especially chapter 1: *Procopius: the problem*. For the *Anecdota* see p. 4 ff.

2. *Anecdota* 1.3.

3. In *Anecdota* 2.18-25 Procopius alleges that a jealous Belisarius aborts a campaign against Persia, including, Procopius claims, an opportunity to capture Ctesiphon, in order to confront Antonina more quickly. While personal motivations influencing Belisarius' strategic judgement can, of course, not be ruled out, a reading of the passage as a stereotypical topos of Roman men becoming "unmanly" when ruled by women and passion induced by women seems more plausible.

sis perhaps tainted and skewed by personal disillusion, disappointment or even hate and resentment, but with something rather different. Indeed, even though Tacitus in his *Annals* is also far away from his own historiographical slogan of *sine ira et studio*⁴, and revels in the personal abuse of the Julio-Claudian emperors and their women, it would be hard to claim that this is not still some sort of analytical history.

Procopius' *Anecdota* are quite different. The character portraits of Justinian and especially of Theodora which they present have no claim to explaining political events – except perhaps in the most general sense of a “bad” emperor ruining the Roman state. Many of the things Procopius has to say about the protagonists of his work are neither explicitly nor implicitly tied to the history which was presented in the *Wars*. This is the case also for the “information” which Procopius has to give on Theodora's sex life. Virtually everything the historian has to say on this topic belongs to the period before Theodora becomes *Augusta*, and thus shares in the government of the Empire, and indeed takes place even before she meets Justinian.

Of course, a modern psychologically-minded historian might consider all this to be relevant: to understand the empress and her policies, we have first to understand the girl and young woman who became the empress. Modern biographers of Theodora, from Diehl over Beck to Evans, have gone that way⁵. Procopius however does not: no conclusions are drawn from Theodora's performance in the Circus, no *aitiai* deduced from her wild and nymphomaniac parties.

By the time Justinian and Theodora enter into the narrative of the *Anecdota*, the programme announced by Procopius has been abandoned and the genre of the work has subtly shifted from coloured Tacitean history in the chapters on Antonina and Belisarius to straightforward *psogos*, the inversion of the imperial panegyric. Whether this shift is deliberate or subconscious is an interesting question. Is Procopius the insincere historian some modern commentators have accused him of being, pretending to write a serious analytical history just for the purpose of engaging in all out invective? Or is he just a victim of his own frustrated ambitions, who, once he returns to the subject matter of the *Wars* in the 540s and 50s, cannot refrain himself from blaming the character and nature of the imperial couple for his personal and political disappointment? The question is interesting, but the answer is unknowable.

4. *Annals* 1.1.

5. C. Diehl, *Théodora Impératrice de Byzance*, Paris 1904 – H.-G. Beck, *Kaiserin Theodora und Prokop. Der Historiker und sein Opfer*, Munich and Zurich 1986 – J. A. Evans, *The empress Theodora. Partner of Justinian*, Austin 2002.

Moreover, for analysing the image of Theodora which Procopius constructs in the *Anecdota* we do not really require the answer: it is sufficient to understand that Procopius' Theodora is a product of an inverted panegyric not a historical or even plausible reconstruction of the real empress.

The argument this paper presents can be divided into two parts. In a first section we are going to examine why Procopius finds Theodora so distasteful and what kind of figure he really sees in Justinian's empress. Built on this definition we can then analyse different elements of the narrative and see how they contribute to constructing the image of Theodora Procopius intends to convey to his readers

HATING THEODORA

There can be little doubt that despite her low origin and heterodox religious convictions Theodora is a powerful political figure in Justinian's empire. This in itself is problematic in a Roman historiographical tradition where powerful imperial women are seen as intrinsically dangerous. Much of Tacitus' condemnation of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and of the very idea of the Principate is conditioned by the fact that in a monarchy, organised around an imperial court, women play a much larger rôle than they did in Republican times. However, the same objection to women in power is also perceptible in Suetonius who does not share Tacitus' fundamental ideological bias against the imperial system.

Even though the emperors cannot be said to get off lightly in Tacitus' *Annals*, it is often the women of the imperial household on whom most of the blame falls: Tacitus' Claudius is inept and ridiculous, but it is the women behind him, Messalina and Agrippina, who are responsible for many of the "crimes" committed by his regime. Likewise for Nero, who is an imperial monster, but more importantly comes to power only through the scheming of his mother Agrippina. Procopius' narrative follows this same traditional pattern⁶: Justinian and Theodora are a pair of demons⁷, together set on de-

6. S. E. Wood, *Imperial women. A study in public images, 40 B.C. – A.D. 68*, Leiden, Boston and Cologne, p. 261 ff., argues that the ideological stereotypes against powerful imperial women are defined by Tacitus according to a model provided by Agrippina the Elder and then transferred without much change to both Agrippina the Younger and to Messalina. From there onwards, the "canon" – ambition, bloodthirstiness, frigidity, promiscuity, conspiracy with emperors against the state, adultery for political advantage – remains unchanged up to and including Procopius' Theodora.

7. *Anecdota* 12.14 ff. As A. Cameron, *Procopius* (see n. 1) 56-7, points out, the on the face of it extravagant charge that Theodora and Justinian are demons, is in fact a logical consequence of

stroying the Empire, but individually Theodora is treated with much more passionate and eloquent hatred than is the emperor himself.

Patriarchal misogyny may have some part to play in this traditional attribution of rôles by Roman historians, but the pervasiveness of the theme indicates that the opposition to women in power is even more structural than personal. Imperial women, independent of their individual qualities or failures, are unpredictable elements, intruders into the order of the Roman state. That women are perceived as an element of chaos is easily understandable for the first century where the structures of imperial power are still in formation. Agrippina is the first *augusta* after Livia, but in a system where even the powers of the *augustus* are still in the process of definition, this does not make her a predictable factor of Roman government. Granting her the title *augusta* recognises the fact that she exercises political power alongside both Claudius and Nero, it does not confer the circumscribed and limited constitutional power a Roman historian like Tacitus could approve of.

Half a millennium later the situation remains more or less unchanged: since the reign of Arcadius, empresses are routinely crowned on the accession of their husband (or shortly after), but no legal rôle has been defined for them⁸. Theodora is crowned by Justin alongside Justinian, and together with Justinian she is confirmed by the patriarch of Constantinople and acclaimed by the people in the Hippodrome, but the constitutionality of her elevation to the title of *augusta* does nothing to help Procopius and his contemporaries with shaping their expectations of constitutional action by the empress.

Perhaps the unease about women in power has even become worse with the spread of Christianity in the Empire. Tacitus objects to imperial women mainly because their exercise of power is unpredictable, Procopius and his contemporaries “know” that women must not exercise power – but Theodora does. And so, in what may have seemed like a 5th century rerun of the female-dominated Julio-Claudian dynasty – and to mixed reviews from contemporary writers – did Galla Placidia, Eudocia and other Theodosian imperial women and empresses.

It is interesting to note in this context that the only ruling empress of the Roman empire, Irene in the 8th century, is styled “emperor” (*basileus*) to overcome the fundamental dilemma that even then women cannot have a place

the Christianisation of imperial power undertaken by Eusebius for Constantine. If the model emperor of late antiquity is divinely inspired and succeeds because of his exceptional proximity to the Christian deity, it follows that his inversion, Procopius’ “bad” emperor and empress, can also only be conceived as supra- or at least super-humans.

8. See S. Runciman, Some notes on the role of the empress, *Eastern Churches Review* 4 (1972) 119-124, p. 119-121, for an overview of the powers and titles – and their vague constitutionality! – of late Roman empresses.

of clearly defined, constitutional and at the same time legitimate power in the Roman empire⁹.

Procopius thus objects to Theodora because she is an empress, exercises unconstrained power and violates the Christian principle of female inferiority, but the outrage expressed in the *Anecdota* is also directed against her as an individual. Indeed, the shockingly negative picture Procopius paints of Theodora would be difficult to explain solely on the basis of traditional stereotypes and political unease about imperial women in power – other late Roman observers, sharing Procopius' historiographical and ideological background, are able to express more nuanced opinions.

It can be argued in fact that the danger represented by powerful empresses is mitigated in the perception of contemporaries and historians if at least the empress has indisputable dynastic legitimacy. The distinction between dynastically legitimate empresses and some form of female "usurpers" is a new development of the late imperial period, tied closely to the rising importance of the dynastic principle also for the emperor himself. It is clearly not operational under the early empire where Agrippina has a lot more dynastic credentials than Claudius, without this being any help in her treatment by Tacitus.

Under the late empire the positive impact of dynastic legitimacy, embodied in the female members of the imperial family, can be seen for example in Serena, the niece of Theodosius, who actually confers status and respectability to the semi-barbarian Stilicho. Serena, despite the fact that she undoubtedly is a powerful imperial woman, is even the addressee of her own *encomium* by Claudian. Still, even though Stilicho and Serena are probably the *de facto* rulers of at least the western part of the Empire, we are formally dealing here with an "imperial couple" which constitutionally is one rank below the apex in the Roman hierarchy of political power.

However, a similar case, this time at the very top of the imperial system, could also be made for Pulcheria, the daughter of Theodosius, who is hailed

9. Irene is styled "basileus" in at least one of her novels, issued as sole ruler of the empire. Arguably this can be read as a strong indication that the imperial bureaucracy at least – the lawyers in other words – were unable to conceptualise the constitutional head of the Empire as anything but a man. Also see L. James, *Empresses and power in early Byzantium*, London 2001, p. 2-3.

Irene's *solidi* (and seals) on the other hand do style her as "basilissē", but even this coinage cannot be interpreted as an easy acceptance of constitutional female rule. Different from normal 8th century practise, the coins, instead of a portrait of the preceding emperor on the reverse, have identical images of Irene on both sides. This seems to indicate that the "basilissē" was not seen and did not see herself as an ordinary member of the Isaurian dynasty. It rather likens her – one might argue – to a usurper, disconnected from the principal source of imperial legitimacy which is the unbroken succession of dynastic emperors.

by the Council of Chalcedon as a second Helena – the archetype of the ideal woman in the late Empire – and who is the object of some form of merger with the Virgin in the encomiastic praise of Proclus¹⁰. All this despite the fact that she often seems to exercise more power and unconstitutional influence than Theodosius II himself and that it is she who organises and legitimises the transition from the Theodosian dynasty to Marcian¹¹. However the mitigating effect dynastic legitimacy has on the perceived danger of female power is limited. John of Nikiu accuses Pulcheria both of personal greed, the inversion of the late imperial virtue of *philanthropia*, and of unwomanly arrogance in her interference in Theodosius II's dealings with the Senate¹².

Theodora on the other hand has no imperial legitimacy, worse she is not even a member of the Roman elite. She is neither of noble birth, nor educated and philanthropic – at least not while still a mime actress and prostitute – and if she is pious, it is monophysite piety which cannot recommend her to a historian like Procopius who has no patience for doctrinal fervour¹³. Mime actors, despite their indisputable popularity belong to the lowest social class: the profession is hereditary and carries restrictions both for marriage and church service. Mime actors in this sense are the gladiators of the late Empire: immensely popular with both sexes and all social classes, sponsored by curials, senators and emperors to gain favour with the people, potentially wealthy (with the right sponsor), put personally infamous.

Procopius' account of her show-business career does not really allow us to judge whether Theodora was one of Constantinople's great stars or merely a starlet, but with no imperial females available to give legitimacy to Justinian's succession, marrying an actress clearly was a shrewd political move. Even Procopius has to concede that at the very least Justinian's marriage to Theodora did not meet any disapproval in Constantinople¹⁴. Some senators and especially the provincial elites to which Procopius belongs¹⁵ might sneer, but marrying Theodora quite plausibly did increase the stand-

10. Cf. L. James, *Empresses* (see n. 9) 14.

11. See S. Runciman, *Empress* (see n. 8) 123. Also discussion of the similar case of Verina who in 474 engineers and legitimises the transfer of power to her son-in-law Zeno.

12. See L. James, *Empresses* (see n. 9) 17-8.

13. See J. A. Evans, *Theodora* (see n. 5) 10-21, for Theodora's social and personal background up to her marriage to Justinian and her coronation as *augusta*.

14. *Anecdota* 10.6-8. Predictably Procopius is outraged by the lack of outrage in the Senate, the Church, the army and among the people of Constantinople – and thus incidentally validates that all four major supports of imperial power in the 6th century approved of Justinian's choice of wife and *augusta*.

15. See H.-G. Beck, *Theodora* (see n. 5) 16-20, for some plausible speculations concerning Procopius' socioeconomic and intellectual background.

ing in Constantinople of a hastily educated Thracian peasant, nephew of an uneducated peasant and soldier: Justin.

It is the mixture of low birth, popularity and upward social mobility which inspires the personal hatred of a member of the municipal elites like Procopius. And it is important to realise that the combination of all three elements is required: the empress Euphemia, a freed slave of Justin, gets comparatively lightly off. It is not really necessary to venture into a reconstruction of Procopius' psyche – the unpopular historian who did not even make it into the imperial bureaucracy versus the prostitute become empress –, it is sufficient to note that the personal background of Theodora which we have outlined reinforces the stereotypical prejudice of Roman historians against imperial women exercising unconstitutional power.

But, looking at the image Procopius constructs of Theodora in his *psogos*, does he really treat her as an imperial woman?¹⁶ The problem here is of course that the genre of the female encomium remains ill-defined and produces few concrete examples, only a tentative canon emerges¹⁷. Empresses are supposed to be of noble birth, educated, kind-hearted, devoted to their husband, generous, philanthropic and pious. It is easy to see that on some points Procopius' portrait is an inversion of this canon, the *Anecdota* stress Theodora's low birth, greed and spiteful character. The sexual slander of Procopius on the other hand does not tie in easily with a simple inversion of female imperial virtue: there is no demonstration that Theodora is promiscuous after her marriage or that she is not devoted to Justinian. The sexual attacks, we are going to argue, are not targeted against Theodora the empress, they rather aim at Theodora the emperor, the woman who exercises power like a man.

ABUSING THEODORA

The part of the *Anecdota* dealing with Theodora's early years¹⁸ is perhaps the one which has elicited most "interest" in modern commentators. While Gibbon teased his readers with the tantalising comment that the precise character of Theodora's "arts must be veiled in the obscurity of a learned language"¹⁹, modern biographies often quote large extracts of the text in

16. The concept is strongly defended by A. Cameron, *Procopius* (see n. 1) 81-82 who sees in Theodora the epitome of the feminine for a misogynistic Procopius and who explicitly refuses the idea that Theodora is presented as a Clytemnestra figure transgressing the boundaries of her sex.

17. For an overview see L. James, *Empresses* (see n. 9) 11 ff.

18. *Anecdota* 9.

19. E. Gibbon, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 4, J. B. Bury (ed.), London 1909, p. 227-228. Gibbon quotes two extracts of *Anecdota* 9 in Greek, assorted with the

translation. While it is reasonable to assume that also contemporary readers snickered at the youthful exploits of the empress, Procopius is not engaged here in simple mud-slinging, the episodes he selects – or invents – are designed to trigger the recognition of specific stereotypes, familiar from sexual invective against male Roman politicians and emperors.

The charge that Theodora habitually had anal intercourse even before being sufficiently mature to have “normal” sex with her clients operates on two levels. On the one hand Procopius wants to stress that Theodora was already corrupted as a young girl, a character flaw which in contemporary conception cannot be redeemed in adult life²⁰. Of course Christianity gradually introduces a concept of redemption into late Roman thinking, but the *Anecdota* consciously appeal to traditional models of historical and moral discourse in which the concept of the redeemed sinner is still alien, and even if it were recognised as operational, would carry no positive connotations.

Showing Theodora’s early sexual corruption is important, because Procopius has no demonstrable – and subject to public knowledge – faults to show for the adult empress, his argument relies on the idea that a character flaw once revealed, is necessarily permanent and also taints adult life. In this sense Procopius’ Theodora is similar to Julius Caesar who also has no chance to shake off the “Queen of Bithynia” epithet which he acquired by supposedly submitting as a young man to penetration by Nicomedes of Bithynia²¹. Admittedly Caesar was already an adult when submitting to Nicomedes, but the argument works in the same way: the reader is not supposed to be shocked by the relative youth of Theodora or Caesar, he is simply meant to understand that the target of sexual slander is intrinsically corrupt.

However the second implication of the episode is even more interesting for our argument of Theodora as an emperor. Procopius puts considerable emphasis on the fact that Theodora was exclusively sodomised during her early brothel career. This, arguably is a pertinent charge only if Procopius and his reader imagine Theodora as a male emperor. Being penetrated in political invective is a stereotypical sign of effeminacy, of improper submission to a

comment that he knew a priest who used to tell the story of the Leda and Zeus re-enactment in conversation – in ancient Greek, I presume.

20. See H.-G. Beck, *Theodora* (see n. 5) 70-94, for a discussion of some standard elements of the *psogos* as applied to Theodora. Cf. p. 70-71 for the impossibility to “redeem” youthful corruption.

21. Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum, Divus Iulius*, 49. It is quite clear from the way the passage is set up in Suetonius that being sodomised represents both a permanent and stereotypical character flaw for a Roman ruler, which a self-respecting historian has to report to his readers. Suetonius starts out by saying that he dismisses the allegations by Licinius Calvus, Dolabella, Curio and Bibulus – nevertheless quoting them in full (for completeness’ sake, I suppose) – only to follow up with four more versions and sources for the same story.

man – see once again Caesar or, perhaps more pertinently for a comparison with a young Theodora sodomised by slaves: Nero who submits to penetration by his freedman Doryphorus²².

Being penetrated turns a man into a woman for whom this is a natural condition. For a woman on the other hand the form of penetration is immaterial, anal penetration is no more a characteristic of submission than is “classic” penetration. Procopius’ charge would have no particular shock value if his discourse in the *Anecdota* did not play on the familiar imagery of the effeminate emperor who desacralises his position of first citizen by behaving like a woman. Without Theodora’s implied masculinity, shown by Procopius to be really effeminacy, anal penetration would be merely an additional factor in his demonstration that Theodora lacks sexual measure and discipline. The point is made of course, but it is not the particular focus nor the main objective of the description of her early brothel career.

A second significant *topos* in Procopius’ treatment of Theodora concerns her alleged hyper-sexuality, revealed both in her party-nights with up to 40 different partners, insufficient to give her satisfaction, and in her complaints that nature allows her only three different forms of penetration. Here again a reading of Theodora as a mere woman is not impossible, her hyper-sexuality in this case would be an illustration of the intrinsic female incapacity for moderation and the control of desire. An *impotentia*, which Roman observers also stereotypically attribute to barbarians²³.

Thus at first sight Procopius’ charge against Theodora in this episode would be that she is a woman and acts like a woman, or perhaps that because she is a woman, she is at the same level of inferiority as a barbarian, a politically somewhat more pertinent charge. However, also for hyper-sexuality there are strong associations with the stereotypical behaviour of “bad” Roman emperors which for contemporary readers are perhaps unavoidable. Hyper-sexuality as transgressive behaviour is a characteristic of the tyrant and constitutes a charge levelled against both Tiberius with his pseudo-arcadian sex-

22. Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum, Nero*, 29. The implications of an emperor being sodomised, and in the case of Nero advertising the fact by marrying the active partner, and thus “officially” becoming their woman, are discussed by C. Vout, *Power and eroticism in imperial Rome*, Cambridge 2007, p. 152 ff., who points out that the greekness of Nero’s “husband” gives the episode an additional anti-Roman angle.

23. For the categorisation of women as barbarians due to the coincidence of character flaws like *impotentia* – an absence of self-control, not restricted to the domain of sexual desire – but also characteristics like cruelty and savagery in Roman and late Roman thinking, see Y. A. Dauge, *Le barbare : recherches sur la conception romaine de la barbarie et de la civilisation*, Brussels 1981, p. 205-206.

theme park on Capri²⁴ and Caligula who transforms imperial banquets into sex-trials for women drawn from the Roman elite whose “performance” he subsequently evaluates in front of the other guests²⁵. The fact that Theodora at her parties indulges in all three types of penetration – comparable again to Tiberius the emperor-satyr (and satyrs not only have sex with nymphs, but also submit to anal penetration by their fellows)²⁶ – underlines the parallel with the alleged orgies of “bad” emperors who use participants of both sexes in the attempt to satisfy their uncontrolled and indiscriminate sexual desire.

Also significant to note in this context is Procopius’ insistence that it is Theodora who wears out the first ten men, and that it is she who takes the initiative to subsequently include their slaves. Even though logically we have to assume – given her profession as an entertainer and prostitute – that it is Theodora who was hired for the evening, the narrative strongly insinuates that she has the initiative both in setting up the party and in enjoying it. The image Procopius tries to construct is not the one of a woman submitting to forty men, but the one of an emperor using participants from all classes and of both sexes to live out his hyper-sexuality. Reading the *Anecdota* in front of the stereotypical background of the tyrannical hyper-sexuality of “bad” emperors makes Theodora at best a transgressive woman, but more plausibly a “bad” emperor herself.

The last point we are going to discuss in our analysis of Procopius’ *psogos* as presenting Theodora as a “bad” emperor, concerns her public display of sexuality. Two passages are relevant here, on the one hand there is her public nakedness in the Circus, including the Leda-Zeus parody, and on the other hand there is the episode of her showing off her sexuality – and lust – at a private dinner party. To be sure, shamelessness is a classical charge levelled against women, going back in fact all the way to Homer’s Helena, but also here the *Anecdota* can be read within the context of the stereotypical invective against the imperial tyrant.

There is nothing in Roman culture which marks sex as intrinsically bad – at least not before the widespread acceptance of Christian ideology (and with the *Anecdota* we are in a deliberately archaising genre) – but the acceptability of sexual activity is heavily dependent on it taking place in a private context and at appropriate times of the day, i.e. those for which *otium* is the acceptable form

24. See discussion by F. Dupont - T. Éloi, *L'érotisme masculin dans la Rome antique*, Paris 2001, p. 293-309. In the accounts by Tacitus (*Annals* 6.1.1-2) and Suetonius (*De Vita Caesarum, Tiberius*, 43), Tiberius even “officially” embraces his hyper-sexuality by presenting himself as a devotee of Pan, the personification of unrestrained sexuality.

25. Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum, Caligula*, 36; discussed in F. Dupont - T. Eloi, *Érotisme* (see n. 24) 315-319.

26. See F. Dupont - T. Eloi, *Érotisme* (see n. 24) 300 f.

of “occupation”²⁷. Much of the attraction of sex-charged comedy or mime in fact stems from the breaking of this taboo.

“Bad” emperors on the other hand display their sexual desire in public, in inappropriate contexts and at the wrong time of the day. The topic is in fact so sensitive that even Augustus does not escape criticism for briefly leaving a banquet with a senator’s wife and bringing her back with dishevelled hair and red ears. The *topos* is reinforced for “bad” emperors like Caligula who habitually treats banquets as an opportunity to indulge in the seduction of senatorial women and subsequently evaluates their performance. Nero finally is accused of going even one step farther in bringing “recreational” – and hence in principle acceptable – sex into the public and even sacred sphere by publicly and solemnly marrying Pythagoras, a priest of Cybele, and Sporus, a eunuch.

The parallels between the portraits of these transgressing first century emperors and the image which Procopius constructs for Theodora are evident. With her Leda-Zeus act in the Circus, Theodora has, symbolically at least, sex in public. In fact she goes farther than even the archetypes of the “bad” emperor by showing off her sexual activities to the whole city. However it is probably the dinner-party episode in which the echo of the transgressive sexual behaviour of the Julio-Claudian emperors is the most inescapable. Procopius specifies that the dinner takes place at the house of a member of the Constantinopolitan elite and the fact that Theodora jumps on a couch suggests that we are not dealing with a more or less acceptable lewd banquet, but indeed with a formal dinner, which even in imperial culture retains an almost sacred character.

CONCLUSION

What has become clear in our analysis of chapter 9 of the *Anecdota* is that despite the fact that Procopius disapproves of Theodora for the traditional reason of women with imperial power representing a danger to the Empire,

27. The problem of in principle acceptable sexual desires and activities becoming morally reprehensible and illicit when exercised in inappropriate contexts or when mixed with official and public activities – which we can take to include the theatre – is discussed by F. Dupont - T. Eloi, *Érotisme* (see n. 24) 271-285. In the example of L. Quinctius Flaminius – excluded from the Senate on the instigation of Cato (Livy 39.42-43) – the transgression lies not so much in the fact that Flaminius takes his toy-boy Philip (or toy-girl, Livy explicitly states that it makes no difference) to Gaul, but in the fact that he transacts official business – receiving suppliants – in a private setting: a drinking party with Philip who moreover influences his judgement and leads him to murdering the suppliants.

he implicitly accepts the fact that the empress for all practical purposes is a co-emperor. In the realisation that imperial women can *de facto* be emperors, Procopius improves on Tacitus' understanding of the – admittedly much earlier – imperial system. While Agrippina the Younger is said to exercise “despotism like a man”, her faults are being attributed by Tacitus to the fact that she is a woman: her “feminine lack of self-restraint and unconstrained ambition”²⁸.

Theodora is not primarily slandered for being a woman – this type of sexual charge is reserved to the men who submit to her, foremost of course Justinian – or for exercising imperial power like a man and necessarily failing in this because she is a woman. Instead the form of Procopius' criticism follows to a large extent the invective paradigms used for “bad” emperors since the beginning of the imperial system. Procopius' hate is not directed against a woman who tries to usurp imperial – male – power, his criticism targets a woman who has perfectly succeeded in this attempt and who rules like an emperor. Indeed in Procopius it is Theodora who is presented as the senior and dominant co-emperor in the shared rule of Justinian and Theodora. It is for this reason that Procopius – perhaps unconsciously, how would we know? – attacks Theodora in the same style and using the same *topoi* Tacitus used for the Julio-Claudian emperors.

28. Tacitus *Annals*, 12.7 and 12.57 respectively. Agrippina's image in Tacitus is discussed by S. E. Wood, *Women* (see n. 6), see especially p. 255 ff.

Summary

The violent attack against Justinian and Theodora in Procopius' *Anecdota*, especially his vivid description of Theodora's sexual perversions and desires, have shocked and puzzled many of his readers. Not only, we can presume, his contemporaries, but also modern commentators. This shock perhaps is responsible for the often moralising reading of the relevant passages – as well as a whole series of 19th century novels set in front of a background of Byzantine sexual depravity. This paper is going to argue that despite the overtly sexual accusations laid against Theodora by Procopius, the relevant passages, especially in chapter 9 of the *Anecdota*, should perhaps rather be read as examples of traditional Roman political invective. Procopius is not so much attacking an immoral woman, but rather uses classical narrative elements habitually employed to denigrate politically powerful Roman men. Procopius is not railing against the inappropriate behaviour of an *augusta* – and where in fact would he find appropriate archetypes? – but really treats Theodora as an *augustus* to whom well established negative stereotypes can be applied.

The argument of Theodora as an inappropriate emperor rather than an inappropriate empress can be pursued along two distinct but related lines. On the one hand we can argue that Theodora submitting to anal penetration puts her into a tradition of Roman politicians and emperors accused of owing their future positions of pre-eminence to the non-virile submission to powerful patrons – Caesar being only one illustrious example for this type of political invective. Indeed, precisely because the submission to anal penetration is effeminate, the charge would lose much of its power if it were applied to Theodora as a woman.

Theodora's lack of moderation in her sexual desires can be read on precisely the same lines. If Procopius were treating Theodora as a woman, the accusation of a lack of control over her desires would not be particularly damning. Women, according to classical conception, are unable to control their desires precisely because they are women. The immoderation of men on the other hand, also but not exclusively sexual, shows them as barbarians who, unlike Roman men, are too weak-willed to exercise control over their passions and desires. Theodora as a sexually immoderate and sodomised woman would be merely a typical woman, the power and relevance of Procopius' accusations become apparent only if Theodora is treated as an emperor to whom traditional stereotypes of political invective can be applied.