Procopius' Portrayal of Theodora in the Secret History:

"Her charity was *universal*"

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There are many sources for the reign of Justinian (527-565 CE), such as those written by John Malalas, Evagrius Scholasticus, John Lydus and John of Ephesus; there are even the emperor's own legal works. Despite this, it is Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500 - c. 565) and his three works, the *History of the Wars*, *the Buildings* and *the Secret History*, which are inescapable. Procopius' importance is due to his unique first-hand knowledge; he accompanied Justinian's star general Belisarius on campaigns against both the Persians and the West. Yet the use of Procopius as a source is not without its difficulties. What is remarkable is the difference in the descriptions these three works give of Justinian and Theodora. Throughout the *Wars*, Procopius compliments Justinian for his expulsion of the barbarians. In the *Buildings*, Procopius describes how Justinian took a period of disorder and "not only made it greater in extent, but also much more illustrious."[1] The *SH*, on the other hand, has Procopius describing Justinian as the veritable anti-Christ, who along with his wife, was a demon incarnate responsible for all of society's problems:

> "I, like most of my contemporaries, never once felt that these two were human beings: they were a pair of blood-thirsty demons…[f]or they plotted together to

*Quote from title page: Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1776-1788, (edited by Dero A. Saunders, Harmondsworth, 1952), 633, from a footnote commenting on a passage in the SH that tells how Theodora would often sleep with 10 men of common origin at dinner parties and would then proceed to sleep with their servants, as many as 30, all in one night.

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[1] Procopius, Buildings, in Procopius series, Loeb Classical Edition, v.7 (translated by H.B. Dewing, Cambridge, MA, 1914), 1:1-5.

> find the easiest and swiftest means of destroying all races of men and all their works, assumed human shape, became man-demons, and in this way convulsed the whole world."[2]

Many authors seem content to relegate the *SH* to a mere footnote or to a parting remark, instead of trying to determine why Procopius would write the *SH* in such a vehement tone. Perhaps more unsettling than this change of opinion towards the emperor, is Procopius' treatment of Theodora. Justinian's wife Theodora is described in graphic sexual detail as a loose and immoral woman. As Judith Herrin jokingly states: "It is almost as if one of the most respected historians of our time published hard-core pornography under a pseudonym. Perhaps some do?"[3] Aside from the influential works of Averil Cameron and J.A.S. Evans, few other authors have dared to commit more than a small number of paragraphs to Procopius' *SH*.[4] The most important contribution that Cameron and Evans make is their effort to *sh*ow the *SH* as a work worthy of having its historical merit debated, rather than treating its portrayals of Justinian, his wife Theodora, Belisarius, and his wife Antonina as amusing anecdotes. Yet even these authors seem reluctant to evaluate all of the accusations Procopius makes against Theodora, in particular, what has been carefully called "the pornographic section."[5] Procopius' statements about Theodora should not simply be grouped together and dismissed as meaningless slander while the rest of the *SH* is used as historical evidence. The goal of this paper is twofold. The first aim is to discover whether the representation of Theodora is exceptional for the period or representative of literary traditions and other influences. The second goal of this research is to clarify if the sexual portrayals of Theodora can be used as evidence for the period, and if so, how.

Procopius, His World, and His Work

During Justinian's reign, the empire centred in Constantinople was experiencing instability and change. There was heavy religious fragmentation in Christianity between the Nestorians, the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians. The so-called 'Nika' riots broke out in 532 between the incredibly popular, opposing circus factions of the greens and the blues,

[2] Procopius, Secret History, (translated by G.A. Williamson, London, 1966, repr. 1981), 12:14 (102). This translation of Procopius' SH will herein be used as the base text for the work unless otherwise stated. Since Williamson's translation does not contain book and line numbers from the original Greek version, the page numbers from this edition have been included in brackets.[3] Judith Herrin, "The Byzantine Secrets of Procopius" (*History Today* 38, August 1988, 36-42), 36.

[4] Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley, 1985); J.A.S. Evans, Procopius (New York, 1972).

[5] i.e. Procopius, *SH*, 9:1-29 (81-86), Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 59.

associated politically with the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians respectively.[6] Devasting natural disasters were plaguing the empire, such as the earthquakes at Antioch in 526 and the bubonic plague that hit Constantinople both in 542 and again in 558. Evagrius Scholasticus, who personally lost numerous family members to the plague, writes of the unpredictable nature of the devastation. Not only was the impact of the disease varied, killing whole populations while others escaped, but the nature of the plague and its manner of infection were then unexplainable:

> "The ways in which the disease was communicated were various and unaccountable; some perished by merely living with the infected, others by only touching them, others by having entered their chamber, others by frequenting public places. Some, having fled from the infected cities, escaped themselves, but imparted the disease to the healthy."[7]

In addition to an attempted reconquest of the West, wars with Persia were still being fought. Although Justinian made great advances in legal reform and transformed Constantinople with his building projects, by the end of his reign the attempts at religious unity as well as the reconquest of the West had failed, and his undertakings had left the empire bankrupt. Nevertheless, when Justinian passed away in 565, he had ruled the empire for over 38 years; his was the longest reign in Roman history up to that point save for two emperors: Theodosius II (408-450) and Augustus (27 BCE - 14 CE).

Like most other writers of late antiquity, what little is known about Procopius comes from his works. Born at the turn of the sixth century in Caesarea, he had the chance to receive education in the traditional Greek fashion, i.e. through the use of classical authors, before Justinian banned pagan teaching in 529.[8] A rhetor, a professional orator or lawyer, Procopius' viewpoints throughout his works have led Cameron and Evans to believe that he was from a higher, land-owning class.[9] Throughout the *SH*, Procopius is determined to criticize all that goes against traditional Roman ways, and he was able to find ample fuel in Justinian's increasingly autocratic and 'Byzantine' (i.e., back-door) policies.[10] The *SH* remained unpublished immediately after it was written, although it would be foolish to suggest that Procopius had not meant for it to be seen, at the very least, by a close inner circle. The earliest mention of the text is in the encyclopedic Souda of the 10th century, where it is

[6] Dates for the following paragraph taken from "Table of Dates" in Robert Browning, *Justinian and Theodora* (London, 1987), 173-177.

[7] Evagrius Scholasticus, Ecclesiastical History, in *Theodoret and Evagrius: History of the Church* (London, 1854, 255-467), 4:29.

referred to as the Anekdota, or "the unpublished."[11] The text was only rediscovered in the 17th century, when a single copy was found amongst the Vatican manuscripts.[12]

These, however, seem to be the only things scholars can agree upon; there are numerous debates on various aspects of Procopius and his works. Although in-depth portrayals of all of these discussions would provide enough material for several books and are impossible here, the issues deserve at the very least acknowledgement and minor recapitulation. The contradictory nature of the *SH* compared to Procopius' other works has been explained away in previous years by doubting Procopius' authorship, however the discovery of linguistic continuity between the three works seems to have settled the issue.[13] The dates of Procopius' works are still the topic of a monumental and ongoing debate, in which conclusions seems to change in rapid succession.[14] Although there are ample theories as to the date of each work and the exact order of creation, I would agree with most by stating that the works were written concurrently instead of consecutively between 550 and the author's death c.565. A major issue has also developed over Procopius' true religious sentiment: is there evidence to support the claim that Procopius might have been a skeptical Christian?[15] I believe that much of the evidence often confuses Christian skepticism with pagan influence, which Procopius would have obviously run into during his classical education. Although a look at the descriptions of Theodora in the *SH* would benefit from concrete answers to such questions, a conclusion to this paper is not dependent on the outcome of the aforementioned issues.

Theodora's Representation in the Secret History

As if Procopius' accusation of Theodora as a demon in disguise were not enough, the author also goes on to tell of her greed, her bloodthirstiness, and her sexual escapades. Procopius is appalled at men in charge who have acquiesced power to their wives. In the case of Theodora, "[t]he nation had become a community of slaves with Theodora as slave-

[8] Herrin, "The Byzantine Secrets of Procopius," 38.

[9] Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 5-7; Evans, *Procopius*, 30-32.

[10] Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 5-7.

[11] Pierre Maraval, "Introduction," *Histoire Secrète de Procope de Césarée* (Paris, 1990, 1-26), 11, originally "les Inédites".[12] Ernest Renan, "Anekdota," in Histoire Secrète de Procope de Césarée (Paris, 1990, 199-211), 201.

[13] G.A. Williamson, "Introduction," in Secret History (London, 1981, 7-35), 29, 33.

[14] For the most recent opinions in the debate see J.A.S. Evans "The Dates of Procopius' Works: A Recapitulation of the Evidence" (Greek, Roman & Byzantine Studies 37, Fall 1996, 301-13); Cameron, Procopius and the Sixth Century, 9-12.

[15] For reasons why and opinions of, see Averil Cameron, "The "Skepticism" of Procopius" (Historia 15, 1966, 466-482), which seems to have the most sound take on the issue; M.A. Elferink, "Tychè et Dieu chez Procope de Césarée" (Acta Classica 10, 1967, 111-134); J.A.S. Evans, "Christianity and Paganism in Procopius of Caesarea" (Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies 12, 1971, 81-100).

driver."[16] A similar description is given of Belisarius' wife Antonina, who is also blamed for having an unexplainable control over her husband. Procopius writes that "[r]umour has it also that his wife used magic arts to enslave him, instantly destroying his resolution" which led Belisarius to swear, "he would be her faithful slave, not her husband."[17] Procopius' descriptions do not end here; he graphically describes the sexual behaviour of Theodora during her lowly upbringing. Her early days working in the circus as an actor are vividly portrayed; Procopius tells how Theodora was a prostitute in every possible way, who would even accept slaves as clients.[18] According to Procopius, "by constantly playing with novel methods of intercourse she could always bring the lascivious to her feet" and Theodora would also "invite both those who had already enjoyed her and those who had not been intimate as yet, [by] parading her own special brand of gymnastics."[19] As those who have read the work know, these excerpts are among some of the tamer comments that Procopius writes in these passages.

Just how out of place are the sexual descriptions in Procopius' *SH*? Although sexual depravity is described as negative, this does not mean that the subject itself was taboo in Procopius' society. Translations of the *SH* often fall prey to historical anachronisms with modern ideals; Gibbon is the key example of this with his statement regarding Theodora: "her murmurs, her pleasures, and her arts must be veiled in the obscurity of a learned language."[20] The first edition of the *SH*, printed in 1623, left out the sexual passages altogether.[21] The most influential description of these passages has been Averil Cameron's insistence that they are invective; in her opinion, trying to gather factual information from them is fruitless.[22] Invective is portrayed as a sort of negative, secular hagiography, with a focus on an individual history as a representation of the whole. The aim is to provide an example of what not to do, by using extremely insulting, abusive and insincere language. The sexual descriptions of Theodora and Antonina are then just "rhetorical flourishes" in Procopius' overall description of the imperial couple.[23] Thus, the general knowledge that Theodora had been an actress might have been all that was needed for contemporary readers of Procopius' time to accept these embellishments.

Procopius' Contemporaries

It is safe to say that other authors writing about the reign of Justinian did not portray

[16] Procopius, *SH*, 15:16 (115-116).
[17] Ibid., *SH*, 3:2 (52) and 4:30 (59).
[18] Ibid., *SH*, 9:10-15 (83).
[19] Ibid., *SH*, 9:15 (83) and 9:23 (85).

Theodora in such a light. John Lydus (490 - c. 565) does not mention Theodora's sexual history in his work, *The Magistracies of the Roman State*.[24] However, Lydus does not refrain from using such descriptions in association with the soon-to-be exiled praetorian prefect John the Cappadocian. In fact, Lydus treats John the Cappadocian in much the same way as Procopius treats Theodora: immoral, demon-like, and greedy. Lydus describes how "[h]arlots were wont to entice him, as he was being embraced by other naked-appearing harlots, with lascivious kisses which forthwith impelled him to sexual intercourse; and, after he had been worn out, he used to taste of both the delicacies and drinks offered him by other catamites."[25]

Another contemporary author of the period, John Malalas (c. 490 - c. 570),[26] only mentions Theodora three times: once as "the pious Theodora" who stopped brothel-keepers from enlisting unwilling young girls as prostitutes; second, to relate that while on a trip to Pythion, she was found "giving generously to the churches"; and lastly to report her death.[27] Although Malalas does not describe Theodora sexually, he does not shy away from graphic sexual descriptions of others whom he accuses "of living immorally in matters of the flesh." Malalas is able to write of Justinian's punishment of the bishop Alexander, who had been accused of homosexuality: "he amputated Alexander's genitals and paraded him around in a litter," and immediately decreed that all others practicing homosexuality should receive the same punishment.[28]

One of the most important contemporary writers to compare to Procopius is Evagrius Scholasticus (c. 536 - c. 600).[29] His *Ecclesiastical History* uses Procopius as a source, although Evagrius probably did not have access to the *SH*.[30] Evagrius criticizes Justinian's greed in much the same manner as Procopius did, and in one of the few mentions of Theodora, acknowledges her position of power by showing how correspondence relating to foreign affairs was in addressed in both of their names.[31] Although Evagrius' Ecclesiastical History does not contain the same degree of sexual descriptions as his contemporaries do, he was not averse to describing bodily functions in full detail. In his description of the

[20] Gibbon, 633-634.

[21] Williamson, 33.

[22] Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 59-60.

[23] Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium A.D. 527-1204* (London, 1999), 13.

[24] Date of birth/death in Anastasius C. Bandy, "Introduction," in *The Magistracies of the Roman State* (Philadelphia, 1983, ix-lxxiv), x, xxiv-xxvi.

[25] John Lydus, *The Magistracies of the Roman State* (translated by Anastasius C. Bandy, Philadelphia, 1983) 3:65.

[26] Date of birth/death in Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott, "Introduction," (Melbourne, 1986, xxi-xxli), xxii.

plague, Evagrius tells how:

> "The plague was a complication of diseases: for, in some cases, commencing in the head, and rendering the eyes bloody and the face swollen, it descended into the throat, and then destroyed the patient. In others, there was a flux of the bowels: in others buboes were formed, followed by violent fever…other died in a state of delirium, and some by the breaking out of carbuncles."[32]

Lydus, Malalas, and Evagrius do not write about Theodora's sexual history. However, all three did not refrain from using explicit descriptions of sexual and other bodily functions to further their aims. At the beginning of the 20th century, Charles Diehl thought that the sexual descriptions were the result of Procopius' collection of the rumours which were present in society to describe Theodora's "prodigious good fortune."[33] From the above examples however, it can be shown that each author was not above putting either graphic details or rumours within the pages of their works. Procopius' *SH* is the only one to attack the empress in such explicit terms.

Sex, Rumour and the Literary Tradition

In Cameron's opinion, the sexual passages would have only been shocking to modern audiences. It is her belief that: "[b]ecause of the modern preoccupation with sex, the romanticising and the idealising views alike dwell on the sexual details which for Procopius were probably never to be taken absolutely at face value."[34] Procopius was not the only writer to use explicit language, but does this mean that Procopius' descriptions had little effect on audiences in late antiquity? Sexual descriptions are not only limited to the *SH* in literary tradition. What is important is that sexual descriptions found in the literary tradition are not always the result of invective, nor were they all used for the same purpose. The history of literary slander can provide an excellent framework for trying to determine if the accounts of Theodora in the *SH* are exceptional or representational.

[27] John Malalas, *Chronicle* (translated by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott, Melbourne, 1986) 18:24, 18:25 and 18:104.

[28] Ibid., 18:18.

[29] Date of birth/death in "Account of the Author and his Writings," *Theodoret and Evagrius: History of the Church* (London, 1854, 253-254), 253.

[30] Cameron, Procopius and the Sixth Century, 65.

[31] Evagrius, Ecclesiastical History, 4:30 and 4:11.

[32] Ibid., 4:29.

Roman emperors have always been subject to sexual slander in written works. The genre of biography has many such examples. Biography focuses on the "quirks and gestures" of a figure which would give readers a window into their soul.[35] That which made it into these biographies was thus hand-picked by the writer; these portrayals do not represent an entire picture of the person being depicted, but only selected incidents which the biographer believed would best reveal their true character. This biography could be both negative and positive, as can be seen in Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, and serves mainly to showcase ideal behaviour by providing examples of people to emulate, or behaviour to avoid.[36] The first century CE writer included explicit sexual descriptions for all those emperors who went against his traditional, senatorial views. The more Suetonius hated an emperor, the more of a sexual invert the emperor became within the pages of *The Twelve Caesars*. Suetonius describes Julius Caesar's sexual relationship with King Nicomedes of Bithynia; Augustus' penchant for deflowering young girls; Tiberius' sexual palace at Capreae, where he used his pool to train young boys to swim through his legs and lick his genitalia; Caligula's incestuous relationship with his three sisters, as well as his homosexual relationships; Nero's passions for his mother Agrippina; Galba's excitement at Nero's death, when he exclaimed to his homosexual lover that he should "get ready and have intercourse with him without delay", as well as Domitian's "bed-wrestling."[37] In Suetonius' works, unlike the *SH*, none of the women associated with the emperors are given these same explicit sexual descriptions. Augustus exiled his own daughter and grand-daughter because of their immoral behaviour, yet Suetonius never describes a word of it except to say: "He came to the conclusion that the Elder and the Younger Julia had both been indulging in every sort of vice; and banished them."[38]

Other authors reflected a fear of women in charge. From the same century, Juvenal was not free from sexual descriptions; his Satires show a writer thoroughly scared of women's sexuality, education, beauty, and money.[39] In one instance he satirises the type of friend who would seduce a man's whole household:

> “Besides, to him nothing's sacred nor safe from his groin,
> Not the lady of the house, not virgin daughter, nor
> Yet her still smooth betrothed, nor the hitherto chaste son.

[33] Charles Diehl, Theodora: Empress of Byzantium (translation of Théodora, impératrice de Byzance, 1904, repr. 1937, Samuel R. Rosenbaum, New York, 1972), 1.

[34] Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 82-83.

[35] Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley, 1983), xi.

[36] Ibid., 15.

If there's none such, his friend's grandmother he prostrates."[40]

The third century author Tacitus told of Messalina, the wife of the emperor Claudius (41-54 CE), who married another man while Claudius was away from Rome. This slander of an emperor's wife does not go into as graphic detail as Procopius does, yet it still has the same end: to show that "everything was under the control of a woman."[41] This insult formed a common literary *topos* in Roman literature. However, the difference between Messalina and Theodora is that while Tacitus *tells* of Messalina's sexual escapades, Procopius *describes* Theodora's.

The *Historia Augusta*, from the late third and early fourth century, shows the same tendency as Suetonius to exaggerate descriptions of bad emperors (and thus bad models), with overt sexual descriptions. The *HA* tells how Commodus promoted a man in his company because he had "a male member larger than most animals," and likewise, how Elagabalus opened a bath for the sole purpose of procuring a "supply of men with unusually large organs."[42] In the cases of Suetonius and the HA those being subjected to sexual descriptions are those in power, not those married to the emperor. Roman morality relied on example and practice, and these authors have used sexual descriptions to further emphasise those whom people should not model themselves on.[43] Christian tradition, and its stress on the individual exemplar would have only reinforced this trend.[44]

Christian works are not exempt from sexual descriptions. Upset regarding Maximin Daia's persecutions, Lactantius tells of his womanising: "Matrons of quality and virgins were stripped of their robes, and all of their limbs were inspected, lest any part should be unworthy of the bed of the emperor."[45] Although sexuality was portrayed in a negative manner in hagiography, its pages were still as full of attention grabbing details as Procopius in regards to sex and lewd behaviour.[46] The repentant prostitute was a common theme in hagiography, the two biggest examples being the legend of Mary Magdalene and Pelagia.[47] As Pelagia walks by the bishop of Nonnos during his trip to Antioch, her beauty, her clothes, jewelry, and fragrance, capture the attention of everyone in his party. Afterwards,

[37] Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (translated by Robert Graves, London, 1957), Caesar: 20; Augustus: 71; Tiberius: 43-44; Caligula: 24,36; Nero: 28; Galba: 22; Domitian: 22.

[38] Ibid., *Augustus*: 65.

[39] Juvenal, *Sixth Satire, in Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, *Vol: 2: The Empire* (edited by Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, New York, 1990), 356-8.

[40] Juvenal, *Sixteen Satires Upon The Ancient Harlot* (translated by Steven Robinson, Manchester, 1983), 3:9-12.

[41] Tacitus, *Annals*, in *The Complete Works of Tacitus* (translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, New York, 1942), 12:7.

all are amazed at Pelagia's repentance and how "the mind of this sinful prostitute was set on fire and was burning with the love of God."[48] The purpose of the prostitute as a literary *topos* was twofold: not only could she describe an actual person, showing that salvation was available to even the worst of sinners, but she could also portray all of those in society who were unfaithful to God.[49] Such a theme can be seen in the Bible: Revelations 17:1-18 depicts the "judgment of the great whore," who was "holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication" - the whore is Rome.[50] Hagiography also portrayed its post-repentance women as figures of great strength whose social roles were well respected.[51] Procopius judges Theodora and Antonina's power and influence negatively, but in light of hagiography, it would be unfair to excuse Procopius' viewpoints because any sort of misogyny inherent in Christianity. Rather, the mistrust of women in power had been a trend in pagan literature for centuries. Furthermore, the implication that a woman was in power was an insult to the emperor in and of itself.

The *SH* as Evidence

What could have made Procopius write the way he did? Pushing aside the question of Procopius' religious sincerity, it is important to determine the author's educational influences as they appear in his works. Procopius' Wars is a sixth century CE text which tries hard to follow a model from the fifth century BCE, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. On a greater level, the work tends to imitate many other literary models as well. Not only did Procopius try to replicate Thucydides' use of classical Greek, but he also carefully copied the use of classical subject matter.[52] Procopius was faced with the tough question of how to fit Justinian's religious policy into Thucydides' secular model; only incidents which fit classical criteria were allowed in the *Wars* and this has led some to explain the *SH* as Procopius' outlet for that which he could not include in his reproduction

[42] *Historia Augusta* (translated by David Magie, v.1-3, London, 1921-1932), Comm.10: 9; Heliog.8: 6-7.

[43] Simon Swain, "Biography and Biographic in the Literature of the Roman Empire," in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (M.J. Edwards and Simon Swain, eds., Oxford, 1999, 1-38), 32.

[44] Ibid., 19.

[45] Lactantius, *On the Death of the Persecutors* (accessed electronically), 13:38.

[46] Alexander Kazhdan, "Byzantine Hagiography and Sex in the Fifth to Twelfth Centuries" (Dumbarton Oaks Papers 44, 1990, 131-143), 131.

[47] Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1987), 7.

[48] Pelagia of Antioch, I*n Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (translated by S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey, Berkeley, 1987, 40-62), paraphrase 42-43, quote 51.

of the classical formula.[53] This explanation makes it seems that the reason for the vehemence of the *SH* is because it is the compilation of all the negative comments from three works and not just one. Such an explanation fails to take into account the fact that Procopius was not a machine, but a human who had the capacity to change opinions, and to change writing models and styles.

Many of Procopius' narratives take place behind closed doors in the imperial palace, and often contain the 'actual' dialogue used during conversations that were most certainly private. Even in describing sexual encounters, Procopius seems to know exactly what occurred. Perhaps Theodora's lowly origins as an actress and circus performer were all Procopius needed to make these suggestions believable. Theodora's origins would have been no secret to those of the time, and Romans never held actresses, or actors for that matter, in high regard. Yet, Theodora's lowly origins were not that uncommon in comparison to other eastern empresses. Daughters with important status and imperial connection were more often than not sent to the edges of the Empire in an attempt to solidify foreign relations through marriage. Helena, wife of Constantius I (305-306) was an innkeeper, a title synonymous in ancient literature with the word 'whore' while Euphemia, wife of Justin I (518-527) was a freed slave.[54] Justin I himself even paved the way for his nephew's marriage when he had the law changed in order to have Euphemia declared a citizen retroactively, so as to allow their marriage legal status.[55] The fact that Justinian had to change the law against marriage to actresses or prostitutes in order to marry Theodora might be more a reflection of his legal reforms, rather than society's aversion to someone of Theodora's origins being on the throne. An overhaul of the laws was long overdue and, considering the extent of Justinian's legal reforms, this point would seem insignificant when placed in its context.

As for Theodora, the *SH* tells more about the myth of an empress than it does about Theodora as an individual, yet this does not imply that the myth holds no value. In fact, its worth is even greater as a myth, since it reflects much more than the sixth century. In studying its creation historians can gain insight into pre-sixth century periods, while following its diffusion allows for further understanding of history for all periods that follow. Theodora has taken on a life of her own throughout the ages. In what the influential

[49] Ward, 14, 57.

[50] *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (New York, 1989).

[51] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," T*hat Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville, 1990, 36-59), 42-43.

[52] Imitation of language and subject matter from Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, 36.

[53] Herrin, "The Byzantine Secrets of Procopius," 40.

Charles Diehl has called "the legend of Theodora,"[56] portrayals of the Byzantine empress by writers of late antiquity are twofold; Theodora is portrayed as both a saint and a sinner. Although Procopius describes her as a demon, John Malalas calls her "pious" and tells of her charity and benevolence.[57] In the Byzantine historical tradition, Theodora comes to be portrayed as extremely beautiful, intelligent and most importantly, pure.[58] In its simplest terms, even the stories of the *SH* reflect myths and literary traditions; lovers caught in the act, the problem of a gossipy maid, an older woman-younger man scenario, and a cuckolded lover.[59]

Just how negative is Procopius' portrayal of women? It is important to look first at what Procopius really objected to when he criticized. What Procopius objected to most was those in charge acquiescing to their wives. Belisarius is ripped apart for being a completely passive actor in history; his wife is not only Procopius' reason for all of Belisarius' favour, but her husband submits to her like a slave. Justinian lets his wife take control over certain situations: she is allowed to murder, torture, and steal. Theodora is likewise criticized for her lack of shame, yet this was a woman whose background provided her with none of the necessary training on the customs of imperial life.[60] The suggestion that a man's family and household were not in order had a negative connotation in ancient society, for if a man could not control things that were closest to him, how could he have control over anything else.[61] Yet Procopius mentions no incident in which Theodora was unfaithful to her husband after their marriage, unlike Antonina, all of Theodora's promiscuous behaviour occurs before their marriage. Procopius can only replace this insult by attacking her self-indulgence in regards to luxury, vanity, and food.[62] The *SH* does mention one incident in which Theodora was suspected of impropriety with one of her servants - she promptly had him flogged to dispel the myth.[63] No matter how much Procopius strives to portray the imperial couple as demons, he does nothing to suggest that the relationship of Justinian and Theodora was anything other than stable. Much of the time Procopius blames Theodora's and Antonina's beauty for casting a spell over her husband; it is as if Theodora is a passive agent in all that goes on, but her beauty has a mind of its own. Justinian and Belisarius are described as men helpless in face of the magic of their wives' beauty.

[54] Liz James, "Table 1: The social backgrounds of empresses, fourth to eighth centuries" in *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium* (London, 2001), 62-63.

[55] Garland, 14.

[56] Originally "la legende de Théodora" in Charles Diehl, *Figures byzantines*, 2 ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1906), 1: 60.

[57] Malalas, *Chronicle*, 18:24.

To take an example from Christian literature, hagiography had two components: first it was a celebration of a saint, second it used "a standardising language of literary topoi that identified the saint as saint."[64] Procopius' work could similarly be described as a denunciation of an emperor that uses a standard language of literary *topoi* for the purpose of slander. Yet Procopius has taken such a literary *topoi* for the slander of an emperor and has put a new and significant spin on it. From what has been shown of the literary tradition, Procopius' attacks on Theodora can be seen as diverted attacks on Justinian, since he was still alive at the time the *SH* was written. Procopius states in the preface to the *SH* that the reason he could not express these opinions earlier was simply because as long as those who were portrayed in his 'behind the scenes' account were still alive, the inevitable discovery of his work would lead to death "in its most agonising form."[65] Even though the *SH* was written after Theodora's death in 548 from cancer, Justinian and Belisarius lived for another 17 years. Procopius used sexual descriptions to add further emphasis to his opinions on the reign of Justinian. By including Theodora in these sexual descriptions, Procopius is including her in the literary tradition of attacking those *in power*. In the case of Theodora, these descriptions were based on such a slight amount of truth, that any real literal meaning from them would be small. This does not mean that the sexual descriptions are unimportant in understanding the reign of Justinian. Their real implication lies in how this slander was used. Those living in late antiquity would have been accustomed to such talk had it been directed at a male in charge. Procopius has spun the tables around by addressing such commentary to an empress.

Conclusion

Procopius' portrayal of Theodora and Antonina should not just be grouped together and dismissed as invective. Although the purpose of these sexual descriptions was similar to invective - as insulting, abusive, and insincere language - such a definition diminishes the impact such descriptions might have had on readers of late Antiquity. They would not, as Cameron states, have thrown such descriptions to the wayside as embellishments. Sexual descriptions were not unique to the *SH*, but describing the sexual escapades of an empress was. The reason for this was two-fold: first, empresses had usually been spared from association with such graphic detail before; second, such graphic detail had usually been reserved only for those in power. Unlike previous authors, Procopius is not simply accus-

[60] Lynda Garland, 7.

[61] Kate Cooper, The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 3.

[62] Procopius, SH, 15:6-10 (114-115).

[63] Ibid., 16:11 (120-121).

ing, he is describing. Dismissing Procopius' explicit passages as amusing anecdotes misses the point. Anecdotes exist solely for the pleasure they bring to readers; they are simply a good story. Procopius uses his description of women to further emphasise and advance his opinions.

In addition, although elements of invective can be found in the *SH*, it is not the only genre influencing the work; various literary traditions are all contributing factors. Grouping all of Procopius' insulting language together for examination limits finding the individual currents that all of these influences have left in the *SH*. The fear of women in power, and the use of sexual slander and feminine power as an insult all appear in the literary tradition, and can be better understood when placed in this context.

The *SH* cannot be used to determine what was really going on inside Procopius' head as his true opinions died along with him over a 1400 years ago. Instead of using these portrayals of Justinian and Theodora as evidence of Procopius' opinions, they should be used to study the literary and cultural trends of his time. Moreover, reactions to the work by subsequent historians can provide evidence of social norms and expectations within their own societies. It is important to determine what influences helped Procopius to write these insults the way he did and what impact they would have had, rather than whether anyone believed them, which is a thoroughly impossible task. Although the type and size of audience the *SH* had in late antiquity is unknown, it is worth discovering the impact such a work would have had in order to gain insight on how exceptional or representational Procopius' style really was.

What is unique in Procopius' use of sexual descriptions is his subject. Antique populations might have been used to sexual descriptions, but they would definitely have noticed such talk about their empress. I agree with Cameron on the factual basis of the sexual passages; they were probably based on a very small amount of truth and are not very useful in reconstructions of Theodora as an individual. However, this is not just insult for the sake of insult. Procopius' sexual descriptions of Theodora are based on a literary *topos*, but take it much farther. Procopius is using these insults to advance his claims, allowing him to project his dislike for Justinian in two ways: he can express the insult of Theodora holding power not only by criticizing her for acting like a man, but by criticising her as one would a man.

[64] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley, 1990), xiii.

[65] Procopius, *SH* 1: 2 (37).

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