

Empress Theodora of Byzantium Through the Lens of Ancient Female Archetypes

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the historical reception of Byzantine Empress Theodora through the lens of her contemporaries and societal expectations. As Theodora was empress of the Eastern Roman empire during the spread of Christianity, she must be seen through the lens of biblical themes as well as through Roman literature. A prevalent Roman example for ideal femininity is found in Lucretia: a noblewoman who toppled the Etruscan kings with her honor. After she was violated, Lucretia chose to expose the perpetrator and end her life rather than live sullied. With such mythos surrounding a woman who chose her honor over her life, it is no wonder Theodora was received with shock. Theodora spent her early years as an actress, meaning she earned much of her living through sex work. Another strong Roman literary comparison comes in the form of Medea. Medea represented the antithesis to feminine ideals because she had murdered her kin. More than anything, familial duties rested upon a wife or mother in a Roman household, and a woman like Theodora who was, inaccurately, rumored to have orchestrated the death of an illegitimate child. Although the rumor is false, it represented a fracture between Theodora and the expectations her society had for her. Finally, in her Christian contemporary, Mary Magdalene, Theodora was viewed as redeemed. Just as Mary did in the Gospel of Luke, Theodora went from "sinful woman" to queen and a dedicated wife. She embodied the story of redemption that is so often told in Christianity.

Introduction

The Byzantine Empress Theodora is one of the most well documented ancient Roman women. Theodora came from humble beginnings; she was born into the lowest caste of Roman society. Her family was destitute for a period of time after her father's death, so Theodora and her sister became actresses. In spite of these origins, Theodora was made the Empress or *Augusta* in 527, three years after her marriage to Justinian I.¹

Despite her life being well documented, Theodora is not entirely understood, especially when considering the flawed nature of her biographies. All stories and biographies in the ancient Roman world were written by male authors who depicted women using tropes and archetypes that still play a role in how we perceive them today, and Theodora is no different. That is why this paper will evaluate Theodora in context to other women in Roman or Christian literature. To understand women in the ancient world, it is imperative to make note of the stereotypes of those times employed in their characterization.

Lucretia and Theodora: The Ideal Woman

¹ Evans, James Allan. *The Power Game in Byzantium : Antonina and the Empress Theodora*, 50, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011. *ProQuest Ebook Central ProQuest Ebook Central - Reader*

To understand Theodora's reception throughout history and novel rise to power, the depictions of women in ancient Rome must be examined. The legends regarding women expound the standards and expectations regarding their values. Myth and Biblical text alike outline the characteristics of this model Roman woman and bring insight to the portrayals of real, powerful female figures as written by men. One of the earliest legends in Roman culture to encapsulate the role of the so-called perfect woman is the story of Lucretia.

Lucretia was not a champion of traditional values in the way other female protagonists such as Antigone, who defied her uncle Creon in giving her brother Polynices a proper burial.² Lucretia was not a rebellious figure—her story is one of violation. Lucretia was a noblewoman and devoted wife: she is recounted as dutifully knitting clothes for her husband away at battle while her peers socialized and drank in their husbands' absences.³ However, Lucretia's fame as a chaste and devout woman were not due solely to her domestic duties, but also to her rape and subsequent suicide. She was brutally assaulted by Sextus Tarquinius, and afterward Lucretia gathered her family and witnesses to hear the story and after making them swear an oath to punish Tarquin, took her own life saying, "Although I acquit myself of the sin, I do not free myself from the penalty; no unchaste woman shall henceforth live and plead Lucretia's example."⁴ This story however, as noted by E. Glendinning, inverts key gender roles in Roman literature. Although Lucretia dies, her chastity and spirit still prevail over Tarquinius, and she becomes the reason for the power shift in Rome. Even more text-oriented details signify this inversion; Lucretia kills herself with a dagger and not the more feminine weapon, poison. Once she is dead, her body is carried through the forum as evidence of Tarquinius's cruelty, similar to Caesar. However, her death does retain key feminine aspects, including the domestic setting.⁵

The comparison of Lucretia to Theodora is an important Roman cultural reference. In many ways they both embody devout, autonomous women. Lucretia chose to take her own life and in doing so changed the political order, Theodora's marriage by definition changed the law against courtesans marrying into the senatorial rank. These mutual transformations of the political scheme speak to Penrose's "female masculinity"⁶. The author relays this concept as the female adoption of what the ancient Greeks believed were masculine traits. However, the examples Penrose draws from liken the idea of "female masculinity" more to general autonomy, which at that time was synonymous with masculine abilities and roles. Women were homemakers rather than rebels or revolutionaries so pursuit of their desires even with noble intentions becomes 'manly.'

Lucretia's bravery in protecting her chastity, and therefore home, is an example of female masculinity, she borrows the traditionally male trait of bravery to protect her feminine realm: the home. Theodora's own descriptions as powerful in her role as empress and as a "shrewd ally" to Justinian, demonstrate her intelligence, another traditionally male trait ascribed to women complimentarily.⁷ Women being characterized with these 'masculine' traits typically spoke to their success in feminine endeavors. Theodora employed her shrewd intelligence in order to be a strong empress for her husband and to fulfill her role satisfactorily.

Lucretia and Theodora's autonomy parallels when examining their motives for these actions. Before Lucretia commits suicide, she summoned her family around her to make them swear to get revenge and dismantle the cruel rulers of Rome, including Tarquinius's father. Her act, while personal, is heroic in its objective: to change

² Lee, A. G. "Ovid's 'Lucretia' [Ovid's 'Lucretia']." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 22, no. 66, 1953, pp. 107–18. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/641490>. Accessed 9 June 2023.

³ Livy, *The History of Rome Book 1.57-60*, English translation by Rev. Canon Roberts, 1912, [Titus Livius \(Livy\), The History of Rome, Book 1, chapter pr \(tufts.edu\)](https://www.tufts.edu/~lrc/livius/)

⁴ Livy, *The History of Rome Book 1.57-60*

⁵ Glendinning, E. Reinventing Lucretia: Rape, Suicide and Redemption from Classical Antiquity to the Medieval Era. *Int class trad* 20, 61–82 (2013). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.oberlin.edu/10.1007/s12138-013-0322-y>

⁶ Penrose, Walter D. Jr, Surtees, and Dyer. *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020. P.

⁷ Evans, James Allan. *The Empress Theodora: Partner of Justinian*, University of Texas Press, 2002.

the powers at large. While Theodora's work did not bring about revolutionary change as empress, it was her duty to improve the lives of the populace. She is described as sharing many charitable ventures with Justinian, including "two hospices for the destitute" and "the Convent of Repentance for prostitutes".⁸ In doing so, she positioned herself as a strong ruler, and a caring woman.

A departure point between Theodora and Lucretia can be seen in their references to chastity. Lucretia's story is fundamentally about preserving herself so as to not bring dishonor to her family or husband. In contrast, Procopius's descriptions of Theodora portray her as particularly shameless. Not only was Theodora born to a bear keeper of the Hippodrome – the lowest in the Roman social strata- but once he had passed, Theodora was made to become an actress by her mother. While reports of Theodora being a prostitute are not verifiable testimony, most actresses at that time did prostitute themselves. Theodora was not recounted as being shy and indeed had notably scandalous behavior in the Hippodrome, and she was most known for her comedic role in *Leda and the Swan*, which involved her being almost entirely nude and having geese eat feed off her body.⁹

Lucretia's story clearly demonstrates the importance of female chastity in Rome. Rather than allowing the precedence of unchastity, consensual or not, to remain in her example, she killed herself. Lucretia was considered an ideal woman because of this virtuous action. With this standard set-in place as ideal womanhood in Rome, the exaggerated comments of Procopius become easier to understand. Procopius's flagrant dislike for the empress becomes clear in his description of her early life. Evans notes, "Procopius invites our disapproval."¹⁰ . The rumors Procopius recorded as fact were most ruinous to her reputation because they dealt with her virtue. He claimed she had been sexually promiscuous to the degree that "any more respectable man who chanced upon her in the Forum avoided her and withdrew in haste".¹¹ Procopius's critiques and rigid expectations of female sexuality easily contorted Theodora's past and used it against her.

Medea and Theodora: The Sorceress

Medea and Theodora are natural parallels for one evaluating depictions of Theodora in literature. Their stories share many intertwined facets: power and love, marriage and ambition, motherhood and revenge. Where Lucretia was the paragon of devout marital piety and faithful Roman citizenship, Medea was the opposite. She was the daughter of the king of Colchis and betrayed her family to help Jason steal the Golden Fleece.

The myth of Medea was told by many ancient Greek and Roman writers alike, including Euripides, Herodotus, Hesiod, Seneca, Ovid, Apollodorus and more. As all myths do, accounts of her story differ from writer to writer depending on the oral tradition they were accustomed to. By most accounts Medea was a gifted sorceress and descended from the gods, most commonly Helios. She and Jason married after they had secured the fleece and had two children. However, after being married for many years, Jason left Medea to wed another.¹²

In Ovid's *Epistles*, Medea is accused of witchcraft in her seduction of Jason by his first wife, Hypsipyle:

She has not charmed you by her beauty, or won you by her accomplishments. She holds you by her enchantments, and cuts the baneful herbs with a magic sickle. She endeavors to charm the reluctant moon from her orb, and involve the chariot of the sun in darkness. She bridles the waves, stops the winding currents, and removes from their seats the woods and banging rocks.¹³

⁸ Garland, Lynda. *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204*, Taylor & Francis Group, 1999.

⁹ Procopius, *Anekdotia - Secret History*, Translated by Richard Atwater, Delhi Open Books 2021.

¹⁰ Evans, James Allan. *The Empress Theodora: Partner of Justinian*.

¹¹ Procopius, *Anekdotia - Secret History*, Richard Atwater.

¹² Euripides. *Medea 1.1*, lines 1-48, translated by David Kovacs, Harvard university Press, 1994.

¹³ P. Ovidius Naso, *The Heroides*, translated by Grant Showerman, Harvard University Press, 1914.

This characterization of Medea paints her as a scheming woman, who can use her sexuality and magic against a gullible, unassuming man. Because the *epistle* and therefore description is from Jason's wife addressing Medea, and Hypsipyle targets Medea's moral character for enchanting her husband, this work engages with Roman ideals of purity or *pudicitia*. According to Langlands, *pudicitia* is a virtue or section of sexual ethics that specifically applied to women.¹⁴ Langlands's work explain that purity was a measurable quality in women and something to be lauded. Although not all authors wrote women with such direct classification, Ovid's Medea was not beautiful or pure as evidenced by her described lack of "merit", but enchanting, nonetheless. The use of magic in the passage refers to Medea's weaponized sexuality, something Hypsipyle supposes Medea uses on Jason. While the ruling out of beauty and merit as her allure may point to Medea's powers being solely magical, those qualities apply to devout women and their *Pudicitia*. Therefore, Medea is implied as having low *Pudicitia*.

Although the passage of time and transition into monotheism caused the departure from the cult *Pudicitia* and her personifications, the ideas of purity for women continued. This standard for women revolved around the concept of one man for one woman. To be the purest, women were not supposed to have had relationships with multiple men.¹⁵ The Empress Theodora, however, had been recounted as having a relationship with Hecebolus of Syria before her marriage to Justinian, along with descriptions of her relations with men¹⁶:

On the field of pleasure, she was never defeated. Often she would go picnicking with ten young men or more, in the flower of their strength and virility, and dallied with them all, the whole night through. When they wearied of the sport, she would approach their servants, perhaps thirty in number, and fight a duel with each of these; and even thus found no allayment of her craving.¹⁷

Procopius's statements are embellished and unverifiable, but they do represent gossip or common whisperings about the Empress. While Langlands described *Pudicitia* as being a standard that allowed women to gain honor, it seemed to more often give excuse to shame them for lack of virtue.¹⁸ Historians and members of the court at that time used Theodora's lack of perceived purity to draw away from the respect she garnered for her charitable endeavors and ascension through the ranks of Roman Society.

What truly makes Medea the complicated and often vengeful woman, is the murder of her family members, including that of her brother. As Medea's father was tasked with guardianship of the fleece, when sailing away with it Medea butchered her brother so that her father's ship would stop pursuing them to retrieve his body.

When Aeetes discovered the daring deeds done by Medea, he started off in pursuit of the ship; but when she saw him near, Medea murdered her brother and cutting him limb from limb threw the pieces into the deep. Gathering the child's limbs, Aeetes fell behind in the pursuit; wherefore he turned back, and, having buried the rescued limbs of his child, he called the place Tomi. But he sent out many of the Colchians to search for the Argo, threatening that, if they did not bring Medea to him, they should suffer the punishment due to her; so they separated and pursued the search in divers places. When the Argonauts were already sailing past the Eridanus river, Zeus sent a furious storm upon them, and drove them out of their course, because he was angry at the murder of Apsyrtus¹⁹

The significance of family values is demonstrated twice in this text. Firstly, Medea is aware her father will stop to collect her brother's body for burial rites, which is why she chooses to dismember him, Medea only

¹⁴ Langlands, Rebecca. *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, Cambridge University Press, 2006., 51.

¹⁵ Langlands, Rebecca, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, 47.

¹⁶ Procopius, *Anekdotia - Secret History*.

¹⁷ Procopius, *Anekdotia - Secret History*, Richard Atwater.

¹⁸ Langlands, Rebecca, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, 51.

¹⁹ Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca - The Library 1.9.24*, Translated by Sir James George Frazer, Harvard University Press, 1921, [Apollodorus, Library, book 1, chapter 9, section 24 \(tufts.edu\)](https://www.tufts.edu/~ajf16/bibliotheca/1.9.24.html) (10/28/23).

does it out of confidence that her father will stop to collect and bury his son properly. Thus, identifying the unanimous awareness of their duty to honor him. Secondly, the murder of Medea's brother is such an offense to the gods that the Argo is blown off course, which proves the severity of the crime in the eyes of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

The accusation of Theodora murdering her own child is one made by Procopius. According to the historian, Theodora's son from a lover before her marriage came to her to reconcile after the death of his father. When met with her son, Procopius heavily implies Theodora has him killed.

So, the boy, after he had performed the last rites for his departed father, shortly after came to Constantinople and announced his presence to the Empress's chamberlains. And they, not conceiving the possibility of her acting so inhumanly, reported to the mother that her son John had come. Fearing the story would get to the ears of her husband, Theodora bade her son be brought face to face with her. As soon as he entered, she handed him over to one of her servants who was ordinarily entrusted with such commissions. And in what manner the poor lad was removed from the world, I cannot say, for no one has ever seen him since,²⁰

This assertion made by Procopius was deemed unlikely by Evans, "The report seems implausible. Why should Justinian resent Theodora's son when he accepted a bastard daughter?" Evans adds that it is possible that John's existence was a rumor designed to paint Theodora as cruel.²¹ With the precedent of familial duty, any other explanation seems unlikely. For a woman at that time, the most impactful attacks one could make was against their virtue and dedication to traditional values. The accusation of Theodora not only having another bastard but being merciless cements her classification as a lesser woman to her dissenters. The Roman attitude on the death of children added another layer of shame to the rumor:

Conversely, it was a tragedy to be predeceased by a child of any age. Apart from any sense of loss, of missing the child as an individual, it represented the dashing of hopes and, to an extent, the reversal of the natural order,²²

The quote reflects the previously mentioned sentiment towards the death of one's son and furthers Procopius's disapproval for Theodora. If the premature death of a child was considered tragic, then being responsible for it was unconscionable. One of the greatest feats a woman could accomplish was their child rearing and domestic success, to imply failure on both fronts was deliberate slander.

Mary Magdalene and Theodora: The Female Disciples

Given that Theodora's reign took place in a time of Christianity, an evaluation of her in comparison to female exemplars must include Biblical women. Mary Magdalene, much like the empress, was a controversial figure due to her so-called sinful past. However, Mary Magdalene was never explicitly called a prostitute in the Gospel of Luke, this label came with the conflation of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany.

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary of Behtany is recounted as anointing Jesus's feet in an act of service and repentance. Her portrayal as a prostitute comes from two separate descriptions. The first was the mention of a sinful woman anointing Jesus, though sinful did not necessarily mean prostitute, it meant one who did not strictly adhere to the laws, nor was prostitution illegal in the ancient Mediterranean. The second description was the mention of myrrh, which was often used as an aphrodisiac in those times, to anoint Jesus's feet. With the sensuality this scene employed to begin with, the original scenes include Mary kissing Jesus's feet, she was labeled a sex worker.²³

²⁰ Procopius, *Anekdotia - Secret History*, Richard Atwater.

²¹ Evans, James Allan. *The Power Game in Byzantium: Antonina and the Empress Theodora*, 36.

²² Dixon, Suzanne. *The Roman Family, 111*, E-book, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.oberlin.edu/2027/heb01436.0001.001>. (6/15/23).

²³ Surtees, and Dyer. *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

Mary Magdalene, in the Gospel of Luke, was a woman whom Jesus had cast seven demons out of. These were not demons that drove women to be prostitutes as the demons of the New Testament did not have such an ability. Because Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene shared the same given name, their stories were combined, and their characters entwined.²⁴

Looking at Mary Magdalene with this conflation in mind provides a deeper understanding of “sinful women” in Christianity. With the added layer of Mary of Bethany’s sin to Mary Magdalene by preachers in the church, including Pope Gregory I. She becomes a tool to the faith.²⁵ The Marys as a united character provides a story of staunch devotion and repentance. Mary Magdalene’s exorcism and sinful past represents a life before Christ, then on her spiritual journey she is forgiven by Jesus and becomes the role model of absolution from sexual promiscuity and sin.²⁶

Classifications between types of women existed in Roman society as well. While there were official classes like courtesans and nobles for all Romans in the Empire, there were even more distinctions for women. In Strong’s work, she identifies the tropes male authors in Rome used when portraying women. The main two include: the good, dedicated wife (*femina bona*) and the calculating prostitute (*meretrix*).²⁷ Similar to Mary Magdalene, Theodora’s story was also one of female redemption from sexual transgressions. As recounted in previous sections, Theodora’s life before her role as *Augusta* was an actress’s, which in ancient Rome was equated with prostitution. Her ascension to patrician status not only signified her change in social standing, but to her attachment to Justinian.²⁸ Once Theodora was elevated from courtesan status, she legally shed her label as prostitute and became the wife. Theodora’s story was purposefully framed by Procopius in the archetype familiar to a Christian audience of repentant prostitute turned upstanding citizen.

It was important for male writers then to write women into the roles that they were accustomed with, and Theodora is no different. Once she was empress, she was viewed as an ally of Justinian. Not only that, but as mentioned earlier, a contributor to charities and a reformer of prostitution in the empire.²⁹

Conclusion

The parallels between Theodora, Lucretia, Medea, and Mary Magdalene uncover the motives of the authors who wrote about them, and the times they were written in. Male authors in the ancient Roman empire were comfortable representing women in specific roles without much consideration or nuance about the individual. This means that their records of female historical figures are tainted by their own ideas of what a woman, empress or not, should be. Theodora was shamed for her humble beginnings, although no one wished for a life in the Hippodrome. Procopius called her shameless and condemned her success as an actress while ignoring the truth, she was ensuring her survival. During her career as empress, Theodora’s reputation was shifted to that of the reformed actress. But she was always portrayed using a mold, and after becoming aware of the standards for women, the cookie cutters around her story become clear.

²⁴ Ehrman, Bart D.. *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2008. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oberlin/detail.action?docID=3053529>, (6/17/23).

²⁵ Maisch, Ingrid, *Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman Through the Centuries*, Liturgical Press, 1998, 156.

²⁶ Maisch, Ingrid, *Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman Through the Centuries*, 159

²⁷ Strong, Anise K. "Faithful Wives and Greedy Prostitutes.", *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016. 18-41.

²⁸ Evans, James Allan. *The Power Game in Byzantium: Antonina and the Empress Theodora*, 47.

²⁹ Garland, Lynda. *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204*.

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