

Sergi Grau and Oriol Febrer

Procopius on Theodora: ancient and new biographical patterns

Abstract: The *Anékdota* or *Secret History* of Procopius of Caesarea tends to raise perplexity among scholars for different reasons, particularly the fact that a courtier wrote this work as well as the *Buildings*, a clear praise of Justinian through his constructions and foundations, and the *Wars*, in the most canonical historiographical tradition. It is apparent that the *Secret History*, as it is usually acknowledged, is related to the tradition of the invective and the pamphlet, even to the earlier classic iambography, but we should try to answer the question with the same analytical tools that have been applied in recent years to the study of ancient biography, whence the author takes inspiration, especially for the portrait of empress Theodora. Here we have identified, alongside the ancient biographical patterns of the classical tradition, new ones, mostly inversions of contemporary hagiographical narratives.

Adressen: Dr. Sergi Grau and Oriol Febrer, Department of Classical, Romanic and Semitic Philology, Section of Greek Philology, Faculty of Philology and Communication, University of Barcelona, Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 585 08007 Barcelona, SPAIN; s.grau@ub.edu and o.febrer.i.vilaseca@umail.leidenuniv.nl

Around 550,¹ a couple of years after Theodora's death, Procopius of Caesarea composed a controversial yet rather minor work. Its interpretation has signifi-

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1 The possible dates for the *Secret History* are 550/551 (J. HAURY, *Procopiana*. Augsburg 1891; B. RUBIN, *Prokopios von Kaisareia*. Stuttgart 1954 [= *RE* 33]; A. CAMERON, *Procopius and the sixth century*. London 1985; G. GREATREX, *The dates of Procopius' works*. *BMGS* 18, 1994,

cantly shaped the modern reception of emperor Justinian, his empire and his entire period: the *Anékdota* or *Secret History* (*Historia arcana*, in Latin), as it is usually known among scholars. Its author criticises merciless Justinian and Belisarius, the famous general, alongside their wives, Theodora and Antonina. However, the biographical patterns adopted by Procopius to shape his critique are by no means perspicuous and need to be addressed again.² As we wish to elucidate through these lines, Procopius, a well-trained and excellently nurtured author, makes use, alongside traditional patterns already found in classical biography – and, as far as we are aware, not yet identified by other scholars –, of new ways to convey his enmity towards the reigning couple.

Procopius' education

Procopius, born in Caesarea Palaestina ca. 500 AD to a wealthy family from this active and multicultural city, where Christians of different denominations, pagans, Jews and Samaritans lived together, although not always in good harmony, received a good education, based on the reading of classical authors, rhetoric, jurisprudence and a superficial knowledge of philosophical ideas.³ This upbringing allowed him to pursue a career in public service and to apply for administrative posts that granted rich provincials certain privileges. His works show an accurate acquaintance with legal proceedings, although he conceals their arid formulation and technical language with a more florid literary style,

101–114; J. A. S. EVANS, The dates of Procopius' works: a recapitulation of the evidence. *GRBS* 37, 1996, 301–313; J. SIGNES CODOÑER, Prokops *Anecdota* und Justinians Nachfolge. *JÖB* 53, 2003, 47–82; A. KALDELLIS, The date and structure of Prokopios' *Secret History* and his projected work on Church History. *GRBS* 49, 2009, 585–616 and 558/559 (R. SCOTT, Justinian's coinage and Easter reforms and the date of the *Secret History*. *BMGS* 11, 1987, 215–221; IDEM, Justinian's new age and the second coming, in R. Scott, *Byzantine chronicles and the sixth century*. Farnham/Burlington 2012; B. CROKE, Procopius' *Secret History*: rethinking the date. *GRBS* 45, 2005, 405–431). We consider the first one to be more plausible, mostly after Kaldellis' response (KALDELLIS, *GRBS* 49, 2009, 585–598) to Croke's objections (CROKE, *GRBS* 45, 2005), that has not convinced SCOTT, Justinian's new age 13, however. The sole importance of the characterisation of Theodora, who passed away in 548, as an element of invective makes difficult a late dating of the work.

² For *Kaiserkritik* in the other works of Procopius, see, especially, J. SIGNES CODOÑER, *Kaiserkritik* in Prokops *Kriegsgeschichte*. *Electrum* 9 (2003), 215–229.

³ G. GREATREX, Perceptions of Procopius in recent scholarship. *Histos* 8 (2014), 77–82 and, especially, G. GREATREX, L'historien Procope et la vie à Césarée au VI^e siècle, in G. Greatrex / S. Janniard (eds.), *Le monde de Procope / The World of Procopius*. Paris 2018, 15–38.

with an antiquarian taste.⁴ The rhetorical usages that characterise his style situate him at the end of the so-called Third Sophistic, mostly because of his Atticism and the use of canonical authors typical of rhetorical handbooks. Those who exerted most influence on Procopius were Homer, Herodotus and, by far, Thucydides, but he shows a rather in-depth understanding, beyond the simple quote of a particular passage, of the biographies of the great men of Greece⁵ – such as Themistocles and Alexander the Great. He also eminently references Roman history – the republican Numa, Camillus, Apius, Hannibal, Pompey; and the imperial Augustus, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Trajan, Zenobia, Diocletian and Constantine are all mentioned, only to name a few. Moreover, all of them are anecdotally used as a reference point, positive or negative, for the contemporary material he is dealing with.⁶

The strength of tradition: classical biographical patterns

With such an education, one should not be surprised that Procopius created, in the *Secret History*, a portrait of Theodora which is so different from her previous image found in the *Wars*. Although discussions about the historicity of both images have been redebated throughout the decades, it seems that nowadays a consensus has been reached regarding the historical participation of Theodora in political and ecclesiastical affairs, thanks mainly to the use of other sources, even epigraphical evidence. Theodora, as was expected from women in the imperial court, appeared side by side with her husband in court rituals and financed hospitals for indigents, convents and churches – she had financial means at her disposal to act rather independently.⁷ Likewise, attestations of

4 RUBIN, Prokopios (as footnote 1 above), 32–33. Particularly for the style of the *Anékdota*, see A. KALDELLIS, Introduction, in idem, Prokopios. The Secret History with related texts. Indianapolis/Cambridge 2010, xxxv–xl.

5 RUBIN, Prokopios (as footnote 1 above), 35.

6 About the uses of ancient historiography by sixth-century historians, see G. GREATREX, Procopius and the past in sixth-century Constantinople. *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 96 (2018), 969–993.

7 C. PAZDERNIK, “Our most pious consort given us by God”: dissident reactions to the partnership of Justinian and Theodora, A.D. 525–548. *Classical Antiquity* 13 (1994), 266–267; C. FOSS, The empress Theodora. *Byzantion* 72 (2002), 148–149; J. A. EVANS, The empress Theodora: partner of Justinian. Austin 2002, passim; and J. A. EVANS, The power game in Byzantium: Antonina and the empress Theodora. London 2011, passim.

her favour towards the Monophysites, and the ransom for poor young women sold by their parents to brothels and procurers seem trustworthy.⁸ Her likely connection to prostitution prior to her putting on the imperial purple, none the less, has more rhetorical and literary relevance than historical, as we shall see further on.⁹

Her portrait in the so-called *Secret History*, on the other hand, has been rightly interpreted as a quite traditional move to besmirch her husband's reputation through the critique of the character and the habits of his wife.¹⁰ Its ancient parallels are countless, but the most striking ones, due to their obvious connection to Theodora, are Messalina (Plin. *HN* 10.172; Juv. 6; Tac. *Ann.* 11.25–38), Agrippina (Tac. *Ann.* 12.3–7),¹¹ and, particularly, Aspasia. The latter was visited even by Socrates, and was called a whore by the comic play-wrights for her sincere and explicit romance with Pericles – it is transmitted that they tenderly kissed each other every time he came home or went out (Plut. *Per.* 24.8–9). Moreover her cultured disposition, extraordinary in a woman of her time, probably led the general public to think that she could not be one of the conventional wives that abide at their gynaeceum.¹² Similarly, Procopius underlines that Justinian married her out of sheer passion, and it is precisely this irrational passion that causes the ruin of the Empire (*SH* 9.30–32). Further to this, the speech by Theodora during the Nika revolt (*Wars* 3.24.37) is most likely a play of intertextuality with Plato's mocking parody in the *Menexenus* – and with other Socratics, such as Aeschines, author of an *Aspasia* that we have only fragmentarily preserved. The part which mostly clearly relies on these sources is perhaps when Theodora declares that it was she herself who wrote the witty speeches of her husband.¹³

8 A. McCLANAN, Representations of early Byzantine empresses: image and empire. New York 2002, 93–110. For a more detailed account of her actions in favour of the Monophysites, C. Foss, The empress Theodora. *Byzantion* 72 (2002), 143–148.

9 See p. 784–786 below.

10 See, e.g., E. A. FISHER, Theodora and Antonina in the *Historia Arcana*: History and/or fiction? *Arethusa* 11 (1978), 253–279; and McCLANAN, Representations (as footnote 8 above), 107–117.

11 As B. BALDWIN, Sexual rhetoric in Procopius. *Mnemosyne* 40 (1987), 150–152, accurately points out. See also FISHER, Theodora (as footnote 8 above), 275–277.

12 M. TULLI, Filosofia e commedia nella biografia di Aspasia, in M. Erler / S. Schorn (eds.), *Die griechische Biographie in hellenistischer Zeit*. Berlin 2007, 303–318.

13 Another connection can be made if we believe, as suggested by J. SCARBOROUGH, Theodora, Aëtius of Amida and Procopius: some possible connections. *GRBS* 53 (2013), 742–762, that Theodora is behind a character named Aspasia, who gives gynaecological and contraceptive advice, in the work of the physician Aëtius of Amida.

In various previous studies, nonetheless, the sources of the literary treatment of Theodora have already been highlighted and we find it now convenient to analyse her characterisation within the parameters of the new research line in biographical traditions. This has been applied with satisfying results to the analyses of ancient writers.¹⁴ This is, at least, the starting point of this paper.

Some of the common traits of the invective in classical rhetoric, the model for the education of the intellectuals in Procopius' age, have been already pointed out by scholars. It is apparent that here takes place the traditional inversion of the elements of praise and encomium recommended in handbooks:¹⁵ Theodora has no nobility or birth, nor illustrious parents, good education, friendships or reputation, nor any moral virtue, exactly the opposite of features worth praising according to Aelius Theon (*Prog.* 110) and Aphthonius (*Prog.* 9.28). Moreover, although she might be admired for having become virtuously bright, in spite of her obscure origin – as among others Theon (*Prog.* 112) proposed, precisely like the hetaera Leontion, who became an Epicurean philosopher in the III century BC –, it seems obvious that this is not the correct reading of the text we are dealing with. Procopius, on the contrary, is willing to prevent Theodora from being read according to this traditional paradigm, but this is only possible, of course, because he knows his way around the exact margins of this ancient rhetorical tradition. The traits of Theodora correspond, in fact, in general terms, to the topics of traditional Greek misogyny: besides her sexual voracity and the terrible seductiveness she exerted over everyone, beginning with the emperor himself, her excessive affection for embellishing her body is underlined (*SH* 15.6–7). Procopius also highlights her gluttony with food and beverages (*SH* 15.8), and her excesses regarding sleeping hours, by night as much as by day (*SH*

14 Particularly, J. FAIRWEATHER, Fiction in the biographies of ancient writers. *Ancient Society* 5 (1974), 231–275, and IDEM, Traditional narratives, influence and truth in the lives of the Greek poets. *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar* 4 (1983), 315–369; M. R. LEFKOWITZ, The lives of the Greek poets. Baltimore 1981, and IDEM, Biographical mythology, in U. Dill / Ch. Walde (eds.), *Antike Mythen: Medien, Transformationen und Konstruktionen* (Studien in Honorem Fritz Graf). Berlin 2009, 516–531; M. KIVILO, Early Greek poets' lives. The shaping of the tradition. Leiden/Boston 2010; S. GRAU, Tipificación en la biografía griega antigua de filósofos: la construcción de una imagen preconcebida. *Espíritu* 140 (2010), 435–492; K. DE TEMMERMAN/K. DEMOEN (eds.), *Writing biography in Greece and Rome. Narrative technique and fictionalization*. Cambridge 2016.

15 L. BRUBAKER, Sex, lies and textuality: the *Secret History* of Prokopios and the rhetoric of gender in sixth-century Byzantium, in L. Brubaker / M. H. Smith (eds.), *Gender in the early medieval world. East and West, 300–900*. Cambridge 2004, 86–87, who focuses on the description of the imperial encomium made by Menander Rhetor.

15.8–9), without overlooking her unbearable grumpiness and her incapacity to forgive any affront, as innocent as it might be (*SH* 15.3–4).

Also, the loanwords from ancient comedy when it comes to describe Theodora's sexual depravity in the ninth chapter have been studied:¹⁶ it shows not only Procopius' Atticist purism,¹⁷ but here his adherence to prescriptions of good taste recommended to good speakers, after Aelius Theon who advises respect for the boundaries of decency (*Prog.* 71.27–31):

περιέχεσθαι δεῖ οὐδὲν ἤττον καὶ τῆς εὐπρεπείας, ὥστε μὴ ἐκ τοῦ εὐθέος γυμῶσαι τὰ αἰσχρά, περισταλμένως δὲ ἀπαγγέλλειν, ὡς Αἰσχίνης εἰς ἀρήρητοποίησαν τὸν Δημοσθένην διαβάλλων φησὶν αὐτὸν μὴ καθαρεύειν τὸ σῶμα, μῆδ' ὄθεν τὴν φωνὴν προῖεται.

One should no less aim at decorum and not directly lay bare shameful things but cover them over discreetly, as Aeschines, while attacking Demosthenes for an unmentionable vice, says that his body is not clean, not even the part from which his voice comes. (trans. KENNEDY)

In the same vein, the priest of Artemis in Achilles Tatius' novel *Leucippe and Clitophon* (8.9), as well as the accuser in Lucian's *Pseudologist* (25–26) formulate the same accusations of sexual depravity through puns, with the wit and sharpness suitable to a refined person (ἀστεῖως):

Παρελθὼν δὲ ὁ ἱερεὺς (ἦν δὲ εἰπεῖν οὐκ ἀδύνατος, μάλιστα δὲ τὴν Ἀριστοφάνους ἐζηλωκῶς κωμωδίαν) ἤρξατο αὐτὸς λέγειν πάνυ ἀστεῖως καὶ κωμωδικῶς εἰς πορνείαν αὐτοῦ καταπτώμενος.

The priest then came forward. He was no poor hand at speaking, and as good at quip and gibe as the plays of Aristophanes, and he began his speech with much humour, tonching in a jesting vein on Thersander's own lecherous depravity. (trans. GASELLE, slightly modified)

However, the ἀστεῖως of the introduction of the priest's speech, that is coordinated with the κωμωδικῶς and appears quite close to the reference to Aristophanes, has been ground for controversy, since the good taste associated to

¹⁶ Especially, F. BORNMANN, Su alcuni passi di Procopio. *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 20 (1978), 27–37. This choice of vocabulary from ancient comedy is particularly significant for the description, throughout the first part of the *Secret History*, of the kingdom of Justinian as “the rule of women”, as A. KALDELLIS, Procopius of Caesarea. Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity, Philadelphia 2004, 142–150, emphasised.

¹⁷ Especially, RUBIN, Prokopios (as footnote 1 above), 310–324 and CAMERON, Procopius (as footnote 1 above), 37–46.

the first adverb seems almost an oxymoron with the fact that the priest takes pleasure in the imitation of Aristophanes, representative of ancient comedy, to whom, as Romain Brethes explains,¹⁸ rhetorical tradition attributes a degree of rudeness that the new comedy avoids thanks to allusion. Nonetheless, it should be recalled that, in the novel, Thersander's barrister thinks that the comical part of the priest's speech has been intertwined δι' αἰνιγμάτων, whereas the tragical part has been built with clarity, φανερώς (Ach. Tat. 10, 4). It seems then that Thersander's barrister perceives that the priest has not shown in his speech dishonest topics with rawness, as Aelius Theon advised and as Procopius does in his work at all times.

On the other hand, the accusation made by Procopius against the empress, according to which she uses all three holes¹⁹ has been directly extracted, as Fritz Bornmann pointed out,²⁰ from the speech *Against Neaira*, traditionally attributed to Demosthenes, although scholars tend to relate it to Apollodorus, the so-called *eleventh Attic orator*. In reality, the quote has not come to us through direct manuscript tradition, whence it might have been bowdlerised, but has been preserved precisely by a rhetorical treatise written by Hermogenes (*Id.* 2.3):

τοιούτον ἔστι καὶ τὸ ἐν τῷ Κατὰ Νεαίρας ὠβελισμένον ὑπὸ τινων τὸ 'ἀπὸ τριῶν τρυπημάτων τὴν ἐργασίαν πεποιθῆσθαι' λέγειν· λίαν γὰρ εὐτελές ἐστι, καὶ εἰ σφοδρὸν εἶναι δοκεῖ.

Similar too is the passage in the speech *Against Neaera*, which has also been questioned by some critics: "She plied her trade through three openings." This is extremely vulgar, even though it seems to be vehement. (trans. WOOTEN)

18 R. BRETHES, Le discours du prêtre chez Achille Tatius (VIII 9), in B. Pouderon/J. Peigney (eds.), *Discours et débats dans l'ancien roman: actes du colloque de Tours*. Lyon 2004, 187–189.

19 IX 18: ἡ δὲ κάκ τριῶν τρυπημάτων ἐργαζομένη ἐνεκάλει τῇ φύσει.

20 BORNMAN, Procopio (as footnote 16 above), 27–37. In fact, the resemblances with the speech *Against Neaera* are even more numerous and significant, as pointed out J. SIGNES CODONER, Introducción general, in idem, *Procopio de Cesarea, Historia secreta*. Madrid 2000, 110–111: Neaera pretended to become a citizen despite the Athenian legislation preventing prostitutes to attain such a dignity, exactly as Theodora came to be empress thanks to the legislative changes introduced by Justinian. Like Neaera, Theodora is accused of beginning her career even before attaining puberty (*In Neaeram* 23 and *SH* 9.10), takes part in symposia to practise her profession (*In Neaeram* 24 and *SH* 9.16–17) and has intercourse with freemen and, afterwards, even with their slaves (*In Neaeram* 33 and *SH* 9.16). D. SPATHARAS, *Liaisons dangereuses: Procopius, Lysias and Apollodorus*. *Classical Quarterly* 62.2 (2012), 846–858 also puts forward Lysias' *On the killing of Eratosthenes* as a literary model for Procopius' characterisation of Antonina, rightly dismissed by GREATREX, *Perceptions* (as footnote 3 above), 101 note 100.

What has not attracted scholarly attention is that this way to discredit someone through charges of extreme sexual depravity inherent to the practice of fellatio was part, with no doubt whatsoever, of a deep-rooted rhetorical topic. As we have previously seen in the example proposed by Aelius Theon, Aeschines accused Demosthenes precisely of improper use of the mouth (*De falsa legatione* 23 and 88):

Ὁ δὲ οὐδὲν ἄπρατον ἔχων μέρος τοῦ σώματος, οὐδ' ὅθεν τὴν φωνὴν προίεται, ὡς ὦν Ἀριστείδης δυσχεραίνει καὶ καταπτύει δωροδοκίας.

But the man who has not one member of his body left unsold, not even the one whence the voice is produced, posing as a second Aristides the Just, is displeased, and spits on us, as takers of bribes. (trans. ADAMS, slightly modified)

Ἄρ' οὖν, ὦ Ἀθηναῖοι, δοίητ' ἄν μοι συγγνώμην, εἰ κίναιδον αὐτὸν προσεῖπὼν καὶ μὴ καθαρεύοντα τῷ σώματι, μηδ' ὅθεν τὴν φωνὴν ἀφίησιν, ἔπειτα τὸ λοιπὸν μέρος τοῦ κατηγορήματος τοῦ περὶ Κερσοβλέπτην ἐπ' αὐτοφώρῳ δείξαμι ψευδὸς ὄν;

Will you then, fellow citizens, pardon me, if I call him a lewd rascal, unclean of body, even to the place whence his voice issues forth, and if I go on to prove that the rest of his accusation about Cersobleptes is false on the face of it? (trans. ADAMS)

Quite similar is the critique Timaeus of Tauromenion addressed to Demochares, a renowned Athenian politician at the end of the fourth century BC, that has been preserved by Polybius (12.13):

Ὅτι Τίμαιός φησι Δημοχάρην ἡταιρηκέναι μὲν τοῖς ἄνω μέρεσι τοῦ σώματος, οὐκ εἶναι δ' ἄξιον τὸ ἱερὸν πῦρ φυσαῖν, ὑπερβεβηκέναι δὲ τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασι τὰ Βότρυος ὑπομνήματα καὶ τὰ Φιλαίνιδος καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀναισχυντογράφων·

Timaeus tells us²¹ that Demochares prostituted himself with the upper parts of his body in such a way that he was not a fit person to blow the sacrificial flame, and that in his practices he had been more shameless than the works of Botrys, Philaenis, and other obscene writers. (trans. PATON, modified)

In order to censure the nastiness of the accused, alongside their lack of a proper education, the improper use of the mouth for sexual purposes is alluded to in the works of Lucian, Achilles Tatius and Procopius. In Lucian's speech, it is clearly stated that the pseudologist uses his mouth for those activities for which one employs the hand (25), but the hole as well (27). Procopius leaves no room for doubt when he explains, as it has just been mentioned, that Theodora used all three holes (*SH* 9.18). In reality, he intensifies the accusation – following the usual pat-

21 FGH 566F35b.

terms of rhetorical amplification – when he specifies that the empress even wished to have another hole, between the breasts, to make room for another coital variety (*SH* 9.18):

ἡ δὲ κάκ τριῶν τρυπημάτων ἐργαζομένη ἐνεκάλει τῇ φύσει, δυσφοροῦμένη ὅτι δὴ μὴ καὶ τοὺς τιτθοὺς αὐτῇ εὐρύτερον ἢ νῦν εἰσι τρυπήῃ, ὅπως καὶ ἄλλην ἐνταῦθα μίξιν ἐπιτεχνᾶσθαι δυνατὴ εἴη.

Even though she put three of her orifices to work she would impatiently reproach Nature for not making the holes in her nipples bigger than they were so that she could devise additional sexual positions involving them as well. (trans. KALDELLIS)

In depraved individuals, the mouth is the symbol of shame, and it manifests itself in the face, the place where this organ is found. This is the reason why their face reflects, specifically in the mouth, their shame: “Treated deliberately like a hand rather than a tongue, insulted as if I were nothing to you, overwhelmed with so many injuries” (καὶ ἀντὶ γλώττης ὅσα καὶ χειρὶ χρῆσθαι διέγνωνκας καὶ ὡσπερ ἀλλοτρίαν ὑβρίζεις καὶ ἐπικλύζεις τοσούτοις κακοῖς, tr. A. M. Harmon), complains the tongue of Lucian’s pseudologist (25). “His shamelessness appearing openly on his countenance” (ἐπὶ τῶν προσώπων φέρων τὴν ἀναίδειαν, trans. GASELEE), says the priest of Artemis in Achilles Tatius (8.9). “Thus she abused her own body licentiously, making it seem that she had genitals not in the place where nature ordained for all other women, but in her face! All who were intimate with her were instantly known, by that very fact, to be men who did not have sex according to the laws of nature” (οὕτω δὲ ἀκολάστως ἐς τὸ σῶμα τὸ αὐτῆς ὑβρίζεν, ὥστε τὴν αἰδῶ οὐκ ἐν τῇ τῆς φύσεως χώρα κατὰ ταῦτά ταῖς ἄλλαις γυναιξίν, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ προσώπῳ ἔχειν ἐδόκει. οἱ μὲν οὖν αὐτῇ πλησιάζοντες ἐνδηλοὶ εὐθὺς ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἦσαν, ὅτι δὴ οὐ κατὰ νόμον τῆς φύσεως τὰς μίξεις ποιοῦνται, trans. KALDELLIS), asseverates Procopius about Theodora (*SH* 9.24–25), in a combination of motifs of the two preceding quotations.

The rhetorical tradition in Theodora’s characterisation does not end here: the priest of Achilles Tatius’ novel likens Thersander, whom he is accusing of the depraved activities we have just commented on, to a sort of actor belonging to the sphere of mimes or dancers, all of them accused by intellectual elites of practising prostitution.²² This accusation of belonging to a group – that of

²² For accusations of prostitution received by mime and pantomime actors, see Libanius, *Speech* 64. For a recent study on this question, see also R. WEBB, *Demons and dancers: performance in late antiquity*. Cambridge, MA 2008. For the Byzantine period, see S. LEONTSINI, *Die Prostitution im frühen Byzanz*. Vienna 1989, and J. BEAUCAMP, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4e–7e siècle)*, vol. I: *Le droit impérial*. Paris 1990, 121–132.

mime artists, dancers, etc. – despised by intellectuals and considered to be beyond any dignity is clearly formulated by Procopius, who specifies that Theodora was a mime artist (*SH* 9.11–13), and by the accuser of Lucian's *Pseudologist* (25) too. In this last speech, in fact, it is related that the character played the role of the Cyclops in a slightly altered mime scene (27):

ἐν Ἰταλίᾳ δέ, βαβαί, ἥρωϊκὸν ἐκεῖνο ἐπεκλήθης, ὁ Κύκλωψ, ἐπειδὴ ποτε καὶ πρὸς ἀρχαίαν διασκευὴν παρ' αὐτὰ τὰ τοῦ Ὀμήρου ῥαψωδῆσαι καὶ σὺ τὴν αἰσχουργίαν ἐπεθύμησας. καὶ αὐτὸς μὲν ἔκεισο μεθύων ἤδη, κισσύβιον ἔχων ἐν τῇ χειρὶ, βινητιῶν Πολύφημος, νεανίας δὲ ὑπόμισθος ὀρθὸν ἔχων τὸν μοχλὸν εὖ μάλα ἠκονημένον ἐπὶ σὲ Ὀδυσσεύς τις ἐπήει ὡς ἐκκόψων τὸν ὀφθαλμόν·

κάκεινου μὲν ἄμαρτε, παραὶ δέ οἱ ἐτράπετ' ἔγχος,

αἰχμὴ δ' ἐξελύθη παρὰ νείατον ἀνθερεῶνα.

καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲν ἄτοπον ὑπὲρ σοῦ λέγοντα ψυχρολογεῖν. σὺ δὲ ὁ Κύκλωψ, ἀναπετάσας τὸ στόμα καὶ ὡς ἐνὶ πλατύτατον κεληνώς, ἠνεΐχου τυφλούμενος ὑπ' αὐτοῦ τὴν γνάθον, μᾶλλον δὲ ὡσπερ ἡ Χάρυβδις αὐτοῖς ναύταις καὶ πηδαλίοις καὶ ἰστίοις ὄλον ζητῶν καταπιεῖν τὸν Οὐτίαν. καὶ ταῦτα ἐώρων καὶ ἄλλοι παρόντες. εἶτά σοι ἐς τὴν ὑστεραίαν μία ἦν ἀπολογία ἡ μέθη καὶ ἐς τὸν ἄκρατον ἐνεφευγες.

And in Italy – my word! you got that epic nickname of Cyclops, because once, over and above your old bag of tricks, you took a notion to do an obscene parody on Homer's poetry itself, and while you lay there, drunk already, with a bowl of ivy-wood in your hand, a lecherous Polyphemus, a young man whom you had hired came at you as Odysseus, presenting his bar, thoroughly made ready, to put out your eye:

And that he missed; his shaft was turned aside.

Its point drove through beside the jawbone's root.²³

(Of course it is not at all out of the way, in discussing you, to be silly.) Well, you as the Cyclops, opening your mouth and setting it agape as widely as you could, submitted to having your jaw put out by him, or rather, like Charybdis, you strove to engulf your Noman whole, along with his crew, his rudder, and his sails. That was seen by other people present. Then the next day your only defence was drunkenness, and you sought sanctuary in the unwatered wine. (trans. HARMON)

We cannot but relate this scene, significantly pornographic, but built upon a traditional mythological image, to the famous act of the goose played by Theodora in theatres, that also seems a pornographic version, as has been pointed out by some scholars,²⁴ of Leda's intercourse with Zeus metamorphosed into a swan (*SH* 9.20 – 21):

²³ This is a cento composed by verses of *Il.* 13.605 and 11.233, for the first verse, and 5.293, for the second one.

²⁴ B. RUBIN, *Das Zeitalter Justinians I.* Berlin 1960, 101, believed it so. It seems, indeed, that the mime of the Byzantine period depicted love scenes with gods: see V. COTTAS, *Le théâtre à Byzance.* Paris 1931, 39.

Πολλάκις δὲ κἀν τῷ θεάτρῳ ὑπὸ θεατῆ παντὶ τῷ δήμῳ ἀπεδύσατό τε καὶ γυμνὴ διὰ μέσου ἐγένετο, ἀμφὶ τὰ αἰδοῖα καὶ τοὺς βουβῶνας διάζωμα ἔχουσα μόνον, οὐχ ὅτι μέντοι ἠσχύνετο καὶ ταῦτα τῷ δήμῳ δεικνύναι, ἀλλ' ὅτι ἐνταῦθα γυμνῶ παντάπασι παριέναι οὐδενὶ ἔξεστιν ὅτι μὴ τῷ ἀμφὶ τοὺς βουβῶνας διάζωμα ἔχοντι. οὕτω μέντοι τοῦ σχήματος ἔχουσα, ἀναπεπτωκυῖα τε ἐν τῷ ἐδάφει ὑπτία ἔκειτο. θῆτες δὲ τινες, οἷς δὴ τὸ ἔργον τότε ἐνέκειτο, κριθᾶς αὐτῇ ὑπερθεν τῶν αἰδοίων ἐρρίπτουν, ἃς δὴ οἱ χῆνες, οἷς τοῦτο παρεσκευασμένοι ἐτύγχανον, τοῖς στόμασιν ἐνθένδε κατὰ μίαν ἀνελόμενοι ἦσθιον.

Often in the theatre too, and with the entire populace as her audience, she would strip and stand naked at the very center of attention, having only a loincloth about the groin – not that she would have ashamed to flaunt those before the whole city too, but only because it was not permitted for anyone to be entirely naked in the theater, that is without a loincloth about the groin. Wearing this outfit, then, she would lie down on her back and spread herself out on the floor whereupon certain menials, who were hired to do this very job, would sprinkle barley grains all over her genitals. Then the geese, which were trained for this purpose, pecked them off one at a time with their beaks and ate them. (trans. KALDELLIS)

New biographical patterns I: a response to Justinian's policies

It is then quite evident that Procopius has unsurprisingly, regarding his education, followed traditional patterns of classical rhetoric, also common throughout the Second Sophistic, for the narrative construction of Theodora's dissipated youth and character. The remaining anecdotes have been shaped as a direct attack against Justinian's legislative endeavour, perceived as a pernicious novelty, and Theodora works, thus, as the incarnation and cause of all the evil unleashed by Justinian's reforms.²⁵ It has often been underlined that Procopius probably belonged to a resentful senatorial class and that his invective might be the expression of an opposition against the sovereign's policies, damaging to the interests of this class, whose main trait would be the possession of immense latifundia, excessively taxed, according to Procopius, by Justinian.²⁶ This seems the way

²⁵ The passages in the *Secret History* where Procopius' reluctance towards Justinian's innovations can be clearly felt are many: 6.21; 7.7; 7.31; 11.1; 13.23; 14.1; 14.10 ... It is, therefore, apparent that this was one of the main reasons for the instinctive rejection that the emperor caused among the nobility.

²⁶ See RUBIN, *Procopius* (as footnote 1 above), 259 and A. CAMERON, *Procopius* (as footnote 1 above), 227–228. Some passages with complaints about Justinian's tax policies: 18.9–10; 21.1–5, 9–15; 25.5–6. For a collection of parallels between Justinian's biographemes and *Novellae* related to inheritance, properties and economic transactions, see R. SCOTT, *Malalas*,

to thus interpret *the most of us*, among whom Procopius should be counted too, in the following passage (*SH* 12.12–14):

ἐπεὶ δὲ ταύτην, ὥσπερ μοι ἐν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν λόγοις ἐρρήθη, γενέσθαι ξυνέβη, τότε δὴ ἀθρόας σχεδόν τι εἰπεῖν ἀπάντων τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς συγκλήτου βουλῆς τὰς οὐσίας δημοσιώσαντες, τὰ μὲν ἐπιπλα πάντα καὶ τῶν χωρίων ὅσα κάλλιστα ἦν ἢπερ ἐβούλοντο διεχίρυσαν, ἀπολέξαντες δὲ τὰ φόρου πικροῦ τε καὶ βαρυτάτου ὑποτελῆ ὄντα, φιλανθρωπίας προσήματι τοῖς πάλαι κεκτημένοις ἀπέδοντο. διὸ δὴ πρὸς τε τῶν φορολόγων ἀγχόμενοι καὶ ἀποκναϊόμενοι τόκοις ὀφλημάτων ἀειρρῦτοις τισὶ δυσθανατοῦντες ἀκούσιοι διεβίωσαν. διὸ δὴ ἐμοὶ τε καὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς ἡμῶν οὐδεπώποτε ἔδοξαν οὗτοι ἄνθρωποι εἶναι, ἀλλὰ δαίμονες παλαμναῖοί τινες καὶ ὥσπερ οἱ ποιηταὶ λέγουσι βροτολογία ἦσθην ...

At any rate, until the so-called Nika riots they [sc. Theodora and Justinian] were content to pick off the properties of the wealthy one by one, but after that event occurred, as was explained by me in an earlier book, they confiscated the property of just about all members of the Senate in, so to speak, one fell swoop. With one hand they reached out and seized all the furniture that they fancied and all the best lands, while with the other they discarded those properties that were burdened by harsh and oppressive taxes and gave them back to their previous owners under the guise of “generosity”. As a result, these senators were strangled by the tax collectors and worn down by the ever-flowing interest on their debts, longing for death in the miserable life that they unwillingly endured. Therefore, both to me and also to many of us these two never seemed to be human beings at all but rather murderous demons of some kind, or as the poets would say, “a baneful pair they were for all mortal men”²⁷ ... (trans. KALDELLIS)

Apart from the issue of tax rates, the critique of the administrative centralisation (*SH* 30.27–31) and the contempt of Justinian’s linguistic barbarousness (*SH* 14.2) – only a rudimentary Latin-speaker from the scarcely civilised Illyrian lands, in the eyes of a man raised in Greek culture and with an accurate training like Procopius – were presumably shared by his circle of readers, and they point at this senatorial, Eastern and learned elite too.

the *Secret History*, and Justinian’s propaganda. *DOP* 39 (1985), 102–103. For Procopius’ sympathy for big landowners, who might have felt that Justinian’s policies were favouring the interests of the Church, see P. SARRIS, Landownership and rural society in the writings of Procopius, in C. Lillington-Martin / E. Turquois (ed.), *Procopius of Caesarea: literary & historical interpretations*. Abingdon 2018, 245–248. M. KRUSE, Economic thought and ideology in Procopius of Caesarea, in *Greatrex/Janniard, Le monde de Procope* (as footnote 3 above), 40–46, identifies vicious cycles of economic and political practices inside the *Secret History*. For the criticism of Justinian’s economic policies as a tool to depict him as a tyrant, see M.-A. KARANTABIAS, The projection of imperial power in Procopius, in *Greatrex/Janniard, ibid.*, 58–60. For Procopius’ negative opinion on social mobility, see J.M. Thesz, The pathology of the Roman empire: social transformation and moral degeneration in Procopius’ *Secret History*, in *Greatrex/Janniard, ibid.*, 81–85.

27 Cf. *Hom. Il.* 5.31 and *Eur. Suppl.* 665.

Be that as it may, the fact is that certain especially innovative laws – without a doubt very controversial for the old senatorial class – can be placed side by side with many biographical anecdotes concerning Theodora.²⁸ To begin with, a new law enacted by Justinian (*Cod. Iust.* 5.4.23) granted former actresses the right to legally get married, with the bonus amnesty that if the woman gained access to some social dignity, *omnis macula* from her previous life was erased. The novelty might have proved very polemical, for Roman legislation decreed, ever since Tacitus' times, who refers to it in the *Annales* (2.85), that a senator can under no circumstances marry a *scaenica*, *scaenicae filia*, *lenonis aut harenarii filia*. Of course, the biographical reading of this legislative change is what allows Procopius to build up the entire story about Theodora's past: the enactment of such a shameful law in the eyes of the nobility was maliciously explained if the emperor enacted it with the sole goal of marrying her.²⁹ Some laws try to protect women, for example allowing children of slave women and concubines to be recognised as legitimate, at least in some cases of death without a will (*Cod. Iust.* 5.27.1; 5.5.7.2). Once again, such a polemical law obtains in Procopius' story a biographical justification: the emperor Justin would have enacted it in order to marry Euphemia, who was a slave with the name, very eloquent about her profession, of Lupicina (*SH* 6.17). Both the new law of Justinian against the procurers (*Nov.* 14) and his intention to end the business of prostitution, also attested by other sources,³⁰ quite directly relate to the passage in which Theodora assembles more than five hundred street harlots and closes them in the convent of Metanoia so that they repent – as it is already suggested by the

28 And with other criticism of Justinian's policies present throughout the entire work, like the end of an autonomous municipal taxation (*SH* 26.33 = *Nov.* 17.4; 30.8; 128.16), the repression of pagans (*SH* 27.26–33 = *Cod. Iust.* 1.5.12. 6) or the recruitment of slaves (*SH* 24.18; see R. GONZÁLEZ FERNÁNDEZ, *Las estructuras ideológicas del Código de Justiniano*. Murcia 1997, 200–212), only to give a couple of examples. For a complete list of correspondences between the topics covered by Procopius in the final section of the *SH* and the specific edicts by Justinian, see KALDELLIS, *Tyranny* (as footnote 15 above), 151–153, and specially appendix 1. For the correspondences with the biography of Theodora, nonetheless, we would like to acknowledge here our debt to Dr. Roser Homar, who gently gave us this interpretative clue.

29 See, for the legal specificities of their marriage, D. DAUBE, *The marriage of Justinian and Theodora: legal and theological reflections*. *Catholic University of America Legal Review* 16 (1967), 380–399.

30 Procopius, *Buildings* 1.9.1–10, precisely praises the imperial determination to close the brothels and host the girls in convents. Io. Malalas, *Chron.* 18.24 THURN also lauds the empress for buying the freedom of many a girl by paying huge sums of money to procurers and to the girls themselves with the condition not to exert prostitution ever again. John of Nikiu, *Chron.* 93.3, even comes to affirm that Theodora eliminated the profession itself.

name of the convent – their previous lifestyle. Some of them, however, ended up jumping off the convent’s towers (*SH* 175–6):

πόρνας ἀμέλει πλέον ἢ πεντακοσίας ἀγείρασα ἐν ἀγορᾷ μέση ἐς τριώβολον, ὅσον ἀποζῆν μισθαρνούσας, ἔς τε τὴν ἀντιπέρας ἠπειρον στείλασα ἐν τῷ καλουμένῳ <Μετανοία> μοναστηρίῳ καθείρξε τὸν βίον μεταμφιέσασθαι ἀναγκάζουσα. ὧν δὴ τινες ἐρρίπτουν αὐτὰς ἀφ’ ὑψηλοῦ νύκτωρ, ταύτη τε τῆς ἀκουσίου μεταβολῆς ἀπηλλάσσοντο.

For instance, she [sc. Theodora] rounded up more than five hundred whores who sold themselves in the middle of the marketplace, the “three obol girls” (though one can barely live off this). She sent them to the opposite shore and locked them up in the monastery named Repentance, forcing them to put on and wear a different life and habit. But, during the night, some of them would throw themselves off the walls, escaping their involuntary conversion in that way. (trans. KALDELLIS)

Particularly worrying for the more conservative was the proclamation of the equality between men and women before the law as it was so in the eyes of God (*Nov.* 5.2; 18.4), so that men and women should be punished in the same manner (*Nov.* 127.4). This was expressed by the defence of women’s rights in the cases of adultery or divorce and in the suppression of the dowry as an essential requisite for marriage.³¹ For Procopius, this was no more, no less than a terrible subversion of the customs which led women to unpunished depravity and husbands to suffer their insolence in a shameful silence (*SH* 17.24–26):

Τότε καὶ ταῖς γυναῖξι σχεδόν τι ἀπάσαις τὸν τρόπον διεφθάρθαι ξυνέβη. ἐξήμαρτον γὰρ ἐς τοὺς ἄνδρας ἐξουσία τῇ πάσῃ, οὐ φέροντος αὐταῖς κίνδυνόν τινα ἢ βλάβην τοῦ ἔργου, ἐπεὶ καὶ ὅσαι μοιχείας ἀλοῖεν, αὐτὰι κακῶν ἀπαθεῖς ἔμενον, παρὰ δὲ τὴν βασιλίδα αὐτίκα ἰοῦσαι ἀντίτροφοί τε γενόμεναι καὶ δίκην οὐ γενομένων ἐγκλημάτων ἀντιλαχοῦσαι τοὺς ἄνδρας ὑπήγον. περιῆν τε αὐτοῖς ἀνεξελέγκτοις οὔσι τὴν μὲν προῖκα ἐν διπλασίῳ ἀποτινύνναι, μεμαστιγμένους δὲ ἐκ τοῦ ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἐς τὸ δεσμωτήριον ἀπαχθῆναι, καὶ αὖ πάλιν τὰς μοιχευτρίας ἐπιδεῖν κεκομψευμένας τε καὶ πρὸς τῶν μοιχῶν ἀδεέστερον λαγνευόμενας. τῶν δὲ μοιχῶν πολλοὶ ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἔργου καὶ τιμῆς ἔτυχον. διόπερ οἱ πλεῖστοι τὸ λοιπὸν πάσχοντες πρὸς τῶν γυναικῶν ἀνόσια ἔργα ἀσμενέστατα ἀμαστίγωτοι σιωπῇ ἔμενον, τὴν παρρησίαν αὐταῖς τῷ μὴ πεφωρᾶσθαι δοκεῖν ἐνδιδόντες.

It was during this time that the morals of almost all women too were corrupted. For they were given full license to cheat on their husbands and no risk or harm could come to them because of their behavior. Even those convicted of adultery remained unpunished, because they would go straight to the empress and turn the tables by hauling their husbands into court through a countersuit, despite the fact that the men had been charged with no crime. All the men could do, even though they had not been convicted of anything, was to pay back to their wives the dowries that they had received, only twofold, to be whipped and

³¹ See, mainly, *Cod. Iust.* 5.3.20; 12.29.30; 13; *Nov.* 22.3; 22.18; 61.1.2; 89.12.5; 97; 119.1; 127.2.

then, for most of them, led off to prison. After this, they had to look on again as these adultresses preened and lusted after their seducers, only more flagrantly this time. Many of these seducers even received ranks and honors for performing this service. From then on most men were only too happy to endure without protest the unholy deeds of their wives the freedom to do whatever they wished by pretending not to know what was going on. (trans. KALDELLIS)

In fact, the code of Justinian only allowed women to divorce their husbands in case of arbitrary abuses or if they caught them in flagrant adultery (*Nov.* 117.14 and 117.9.5), but the truth is that women were asked to provide clear evidence (*Nov.* 117.15).

Irrespective of the historical accuracy of these anecdotes and biographical vicissitudes, Theodora obviously incarnates in her person, throughout Procopius' account, the pernicious disruption of traditional customs represented by the new legal code of Justinian in the eyes of the nobility. A woman *comme il faut* had to be, in that moment and cultural context, as in so many others, chaste, virtuous, submissive and dependent on her husband or on any other male of her environment, with no voice or will on any issue.³² Procopius himself describes how the ideal wife of an emperor should have been if he had not broken all rules just to marry Theodora (*SH* 10.2):

οὐδὲ γὰρ τῷ γήμαντι ὑβρεῶς τις οἴησις γέγονεν, εἴ οἱ παρὸν ἐκ πάσης ἀπολεξαμένη τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς γαμετὴν γυναῖκα ποιήσασθαι τὴν πασῶν γυναικῶν μάλιστα εὔτε γεγονυῖαν καὶ τροφῆς κρυφαίου μεταλαχοῦσαν, τοῦ τε αἰδεῖσθαι οὐκ ἀμελέτητον γεγενημένην, καὶ σωφροσύνη ξυμφικισμένην, πρὸς δὲ τῷ κάλλει ὑπερφυᾶ καὶ παρθένον τινὰ καὶ τὸ δὴ λεγόμενον ὀρθότιτθον οὖσαν.

The thought never occurred to her husband that his choice was an outrage, given that it was possible for him to have selected a spouse from the whole of the Roman Empire, to have married a woman who was the most well-born among all women and had been raised outside the public gaze, who had learned the ways of modesty and lived discreetly; moreover, she could have been exceedingly beautiful and still a virgin and even, as they say, with perky breasts. (trans. KALDELLIS)

Contrary to these conventions, Theodora is presented as an independent woman, active in both the private and public sphere, with a career full of sexual debauchery beyond any reasonable limit, and, above all, dominant in each and every area of life: already as a prostitute, it was she who seduced her lovers and sexually exhausted them (*SH* 9.15).³³ Afterwards, as an empress, nobody could persuade her to do things differently as to what she had already established (*SH*

³² For example, BEAUCAMP, Statut (as footnote 21 above), *passim*.

³³ BALDWIN, Sexual rhetoric (as footnote 11 above), 150–152.

15.2), and many are the passages where Justinian's submission is emphasised, like Belisarius' to Antonina, influenced precisely by the empress.³⁴ In this sense, some assertions in Justinian's legal texts might have been significantly outrageous, when the sovereign affirms that his spouse shared his decisions, as in *Nov.* 8, 1, concerning reforms in provincial administration.

Procopius uses, therefore, the usual narrative procedure in ancient biographies of poets and philosophers: Solon's life, for example, is constructed in order to narratively contextualise his poems that have come to us, sometimes even to help clarify the sense of some particularly obscure passages;³⁵ Empedocles' life, in a similar fashion, has been structured in chapter and verse pursuing the sense of the fragments of his work.³⁶ In fact, the majority of ancient biographies follow this same narrative categorisation,³⁷ which would afterwards become usual in medieval hagiographies too.³⁸ In the case of Procopius, however, the justification of Justinian's reform is explained not through Justinian himself, the actual promoter of the vast legal reform, but mostly through his wife.

New biographical patterns II: subversion of hagiographic motifs

And yet, Procopius finds another subtler way to slander Justinian and Theodora, which was not a heritage of classical biography: the subversion of attributes and actions that would usually confer holiness to saints in the hagiographic genre. Although Procopius does not deny the existence of such *good works* accomplished by the imperial couple, his interpretation of them deprives the rulers

34 Particularly, P. ALLEN, Contemporary portrayals of the Byzantine empress Theodora (527–548AD), in B. Garlick/S. Dixon/P. Allen (eds.) *Stereotypes of women in power: historical perspectives and revisionist views*. New York 1992, 93–104.

35 In this sense, particularly important are the studies of LEFKOWITZ, *Lives* (as footnote 14 above), *passim*, and KIVILO, *Lives* (as footnote 11 above), *passim*.

36 A. CHITWOOD, The death of Empedocles. *American Journal of Philology* 107 (1986), 175–191, and, for the same process also in Heraclitus and Empedocles, A. CHITWOOD, *Death by philosophy. The biographical tradition in the life and death of the archaic philosophers Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus*. Michigan 2004.

37 LEFKOWITZ, *Biographical Mythology* (as footnote 14 above); GRAU, *Tipificación* (as footnote 14 above), 435–492.

38 S. GRAU/Á. NARRO, *Vidas de filósofos y hechos apócrifos de los apóstoles: algunos contactos y elementos comunes*. *Estudios clásicos* 143 (2013), 65–92.

of any goodness and points directly to the opposite of sanctity, a diabolical nature. With regard to these new biographical patterns, we would like to address now the question of Theodora's relation to prostitution before becoming empress. John of Nikiu, the Coptic bishop writing at the end of the seventh century, reports (*Chron.* 90.87) that Theodora considered Timothy, patriarch of Alexandria, her spiritual father. One might think that her stay in Alexandria in the company of Timothy could have influenced Theodora's personal and spiritual evolution to leave behind her life bound to the theatres and, perhaps, to the prostitution related to them, in order to become, in the future, a saint empress. As a matter of fact, not even Procopius with his hostility is capable to assign her infidelity towards her husband. Thus, Theodora's vital peripety might fit well in the conventions of the hagiographic subgenre of conversions of prostitutes or of the holy harlots, as it has come to be known in recent scholarship.³⁹ The outline of these hagiographical stories is usually the same, though with notable narrative variations: a girl, after a more or less long life full of lust and sexual depravity – sometimes related to the scene, as it is the case with saint Pelagia – converts through the intervention of a God's minister – or through God without intermediaries, as saint Mary of Egypt – and radically changes her lifestyle, through penitence, in order to achieve sanctity. Procopius, therefore, would have tried, with his biography of Theodora, to set up an inversion of the hagiographies of saint prostitutes that circulated in Byzantium precisely in the fifth and sixth centuries, with a great success among the readers. It is thus quite telling that John of Ephesus, a writer sympathetic with Theodora, states that “she came from the brothel” (*Lives of Thomas and Stephen*, PO 17.189 [189]), a πορνείον,⁴⁰ in a hagiography of two deacons, Stephen and Thomas, where Theodora, as a secondary character, helped both saints through her influence over her husband and allowed them to pursue their ascetic and holy career. Other echoes of Theodora's early career as a whore outside the *Anékdota* are found

39 About this hagiographic subgenre, see, mainly, B. WARD, *Harlots of the desert. A study of repentance in early monastic sources*. Kalamazoo 1987; R. MAZO KARRAS, *Holy harlots: prostitute saints in medieval legend*. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990), 3–32; L.L. COON, *Sacred fictions. Holy women and hagiography in late antiquity*. Philadelphia 1997, 71–94.

40 J.B. BURY, *History of the later Roman empire from the death of Theodosius to the death of Justinian II*. New York 1958, 28 note 5, denies any relation of Theodora with prostitution, and either rejects the expression as an interpolation or interprets πορνείον as a reference to Πόρνη, a street in Constantinople near the theatre (*Nov.* 105, 1). In the same vein, D. POTTER, *Theodora. Actress, empress, saint*, Oxford 2015, 39 states that the word “may actually be referring to her past as an actress”, although in page 46 he presents a teenager Theodora who had to supplement her income “with money she could make by taking lovers”. It seems better to understand πορνείον at face value as brothel, which is simpler and more adequate to the narrative.

in the seventh-century *Chronicle of Fredegar* (Fredegarius II.62, ed. B. KRUSCH. *MHJ, Scr. Rer. Merov.* 2, Berlin 1888, p. 85), where Justinian and Belisarius marry two sisters from a *lupanar* – although the empress is named Antonia instead of Theodora –, as well as in the name of Theodora's sister, Comito, typically used for prostitutes,⁴¹ in Malalas (*Chron.* 18.10 THURN).⁴² Her conversion from a prostitute into a helper of servants of God through her distant, but caring support might be read as an example of the hagiographic subgenre of the holy harlots and supports the idea that Procopius was inverting biographical patterns found in contemporary hagiographies.

In fact, this kind of biographical subversion of the conventional patterns of praise to turn them into invective works in this respect differs to what was usual in ancient Greece. Although in some cases the critique follows traditional ways, as in the repeated accusations against Justinian because of his greed (for his φιλαργυρία, to put it with ancient terms),⁴³ the fact is that the mechanism used more frequently and efficiently in this work is the inversion of the traits of sanctity that could eulogise the protagonists. Justinian's asceticism – to give the most apparent example, which materialises in frugality and extraordinary vigils (*SH* 8.12; 12.27; 13.28–33; 15.11) – is an essential characteristic of a saint; Procopius, however, makes sure that nobody is able to make the usual inference. Far from visibly showing a life of sanctity and devotion to God, as it would be the case in hagiographic sources, his asceticism becomes a sign of false εὐσέβεια, of feigned piety, and constitutes, in Procopius' eyes, a proof of Justinian's demonic nature (*SH* 12.27):

Πῶς δὲ οὐκ ἔμελλεν ὄδε ὁ ἀνὴρ δαίμων τις ἀλιτήριος εἶναι, ὅς γε ποτοῦ ἢ σιτίων ἢ ὕπνου εἰς κόρον οὐδέποτε ἤλθεν, ἀλλ' ἀμηγέπη τῶν παρατεθέντων ἀπογευσάμενος ἄωρι νύκτωρ περιήρχετο τὰ βασιλεια, καίπερ ἐς τὰ ἀφροδίσια δαιμονίως ἐσπουδακώς;

How, indeed, could this man not have been a loathsome demon when he never drank, ate, or slept enough to satisfy the needs of a human being? He would but occasionally taste a bit of what was set before him and then stalk the palace halls at odd hours of the night.

41 LEONTSINI, Prostitution (as footnote 21 above), 47 f.

42 C. FOSS, The empress Theodora. *Byzantion* 72 (2002), 143, 160.

43 Simonides, for example, often appears in biographies in such terms (see J.M. BELL, Simonides in the anecdotal tradition. *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 28, 1978, 29–86), but also philosophers like Aeschines, Xenophanes, Speusippus, Lacydes, Menippus and Zeno of Citium are characterised as misers in the biographical tradition (see S. GRAU, La imatge del filòsof i de l'activitat filosòfica a la Grècia antiga. Anàlisi dels tòpics biogràfics presents en les *Vides i doctrines dels filòsofs més il·lustres* de Diògenes Laerci. Barcelona 2009, 281–285).

And yet, despite all of this, he was infernally addicted to the pleasures of sex. (trans. KALDELLIS)

Moreover, apart from the inverted asceticism, throughout the *Secret History* there is a narrative around Justinian that inevitably related him, in the eyes of his contemporaries, to the figure of the Antichrist and that contributes to present the reforming endeavour of the emperor as a sign of the irreversible decadence of the empire. Indeed, the Christians of the fifth and sixth centuries, following the parameters of Byzantine apocalyptic, focused on the succession of empires,⁴⁴ and expected an Antichrist that would be a pretendedly pious emperor who would apparently correct the bad customs until his nature was discovered, thanks to a conjunction of catastrophes, such as plagues, famines, droughts and wars against foreign nations – all of them present in the *Secret History*.⁴⁵ The fact that Justinian's public image was, indeed, that of an extremely pious ruler, adorned with all the virtues the Byzantine tradition attributed to a good sovereign,⁴⁶ offered Procopius – or perhaps only left him with – subversion as the (sole) way to build his invective, either by equating him to the Antichrist or by vituperating him through his imperial spouse, literarily frustrated in her path to sanctity.

We can conclude, therefore, that Procopius uses in his work all these biographical patterns on which we have briefly commented, classical and contemporary, to build up empress Theodora's character in the *Secret History*. Some patterns derive directly from the ancient classical biography; there are others which, similar to the classical tradition, biographically explain and account for texts – Justinian's legal reforms, in this case –; and, finally, those that, being absent from

44 D. OLSTER, Byzantine apocalypses, in J. J. Collins/B. McGinn/S. J. Stein (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. Vol II: Apocalypticism in western history and culture. New York 1999, 51.

45 See SCOTT, Malalas (as footnote 25 above), 108, and IDEM, Justinian's New Age (as footnote 1 above), 11–12. The fact that Justinian is not labelled as Ἀντίχριστος, but only as δαίμων, might be justified if one takes into account that the latter is a classical word and the former not (ibid., 12); nonetheless, one ought not overlook that Procopius did *not* pretend to write an apocalypse!

46 This perception can be, for example, fully appreciated with Agapetus' *speculum principum*, the *Ἐκθροίς*, where the initial letters of its chapters form the following acrostic dedication to Justinian: “τῷ θειοτάτῳ καὶ εὐσεβεστάτῳ βασιλεῖ ἡμῶν Ἰουστινιανῷ Ἀγαπητὸς ὁ ἐλάχιστος διάκονος” (“to our most divine and pious emperor, Justinian, from Agapetus, the most insignificant of your servants”).

the previous biographical tradition, invert the meaning of good attitudes or actions typical to hagiographies.

It seems a proven fact that Byzantine classicising authors, particularly historians, constructed their writings in a way that their learned readers could identify their classical models and the precise allusions to the canonical authors that were part of the education of the intellectual elites of the empire.⁴⁷ This evidence, indeed, should make us consider that the *Secret History* was definitely intended to be published, in whatever manner it might have been, and that its title must rather refer to what the term ἀνέκδοτα usually meant in antiquity, when a work could be limited to a sole private copy. This might be seen as the equivalent to being left *unpublished*, because the author did not consider it appropriate for the larger public – sometimes perhaps because it contained indiscreet or risqué stories, which is how the term *anecdote* has come to its present meaning for us.⁴⁸ In any case, the readers of the *Secret History* had to be necessarily familiar with the novelties of Justinian's legislation in order to be able to properly relish the attacks on Theodora and on certain turns of imperial politics. The knowledge that its readership had about contemporary hagiographies, markedly popular in tone, is naturally obvious, but it is also telling: Procopius constructs a kind of anti-hagiography of 'saint Theodora', who is not a harlot turned into a saint, as she would be presented in a conventional hagiography, but an inverted saint who represents the Antichrist, similar to her demonic husband Justinian. These mixed strategies deployed by Procopius in Theodora's portrait make his biography of the empress one of the most classicising and carefully elaborated parts of his entire literary production, being, at the same time, effective and corresponding to the expectations of his own age, thanks to the versatility of its biographical patterns.

47 Mainly, H. HUNGER, On the imitation (μίμησις) of antiquity in Byzantine literature. *DOP* 23/24 (1969–1970), 17–38.

48 T. DORANDI, Nell'officina dei classici. Come lavoravano gli autori antichi. Roma 2007, 83–84.