

20 EXCITING PLAYS FOR MEDIIEVAL HISTORY CLASSES

DEAN R. BOWMAN

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*On the cover: Sailors using an astrolabe to find their latitude at sea;
adapted from an early fourteenth century French manuscript, Livre des Merveilles.*

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Justinian and Theodora: The Byzantine Golden Age

Characters

CHORUS I, II, III, IV

THEODORA, carnival actress,
future empress

MAX, aide to Justinian

JUSTINIAN, emperor of Byzantine
Empire

TRIBONIAN, legal scholar

BELISARIUS, army leader

MENAS, high Orthodox
church official

Prologue

CHORUS:

I: Rome, Rome, complete now your decay,
II: An Empire withering in the West;
III: While in the East resumes your proud sway
IV: For a thousand years under Byzantine's crest.

I: Justinian, the illiterate peasant's son,
II: Would mount Byzantium's grand throne
III: And return to her what long ago was won
IV: By the great and glorious empire of Rome.

I: A passion for unity consumed his soul,
II: So the legal system was revised;
III: Making it logical was the goal,
IV: Bringing order, so highly prized.

I: His armies regained many lost lands
II: To the North and to the West;
III: His capital, destroyed by riotous bands,
IV: Rebuilt, became his legacy seen best.



I: Behind his vision and greatness,
II: And often leading him, too:
III: His wife, Theodora, the empress,
IV: Supporter, defender, and inspiration new.

***Scene I: Market area, Constantinople,
c. A.D. 524.***

THEODORA: You wish to buy some wool? What are you eyeing so closely?

MAX: You.

THEODORA: Me? I'm not for sale.

MAX: Theodora . . . come, come now.

THEODORA: How do you know my name? What do you want?

MAX: My master wants to know you better.

THEODORA: Then he should have come himself!

MAX: Snippy, snippy. . . . Would you expect the nephew of the emperor to come down here?

THEODORA: Why not? Emperors, slaves, merchants, and midwives . . . we're all the same.

MAX: Even the daughter of a circus bear tamer . . . who later becomes a prostitute?

THEODORA: Lies! I'm just a poor, honest working woman.

MAX: Maybe . . . but I've done some investigating. . . .

THEODORA: Tell your master that cowards and liars love dealing with the past. Only the brave and noble do battle with the present.

MAX: I understand how Justinian, my master, was captivated by your great beauty. But I don't think you two are compatible.

THEODORA: And why is that? What are his interests?



- MAX:** Many—architecture, law, music, philosophy, poetry, theology. . . .
- THEODORA:** And you think I'm too simple and narrow?
- MAX:** No. It's your lifestyles that are so different.
- THEODORA:** What are you talking about?
- MAX:** Justinian is very religious, very devout. He lives like a monk . . . eating and sleeping very little. He's always working! You, I've learned, enjoy eating, sleeping, and drinking to excess. What life could you two possibly share?
- THEODORA:** A royal one.

***Scene II: Justinian's home,
Constantinople, A.D. 527.***

- THEODORA:** Mistress . . . wife . . . and now empress. What more could happen?
- JUSTINIAN:** You rule with me.
- THEODORA:** Preposterous! I have no authority.
- JUSTINIAN:** You will. Remember, I am the emperor, divinely appointed to rule this Empire, restore its lost lands, safeguard and spread the Christian faith.
- THEODORA:** How can I help you?
- JUSTINIAN:** Tell me how I can be a better emperor.
- THEODORA:** I know what it's like to be poor and needy. Protect them, and promote their welfare.
- JUSTINIAN:** Yes . . . go on. . . .
- THEODORA:** Provide work for the unemployed.
- JUSTINIAN:** Yes, in the state bakeries and gardens.
- THEODORA:** Build more special-care facilities for the orphans, the sick, the handicapped, and the aged.



- JUSTINIAN:** That's in the true Christian spirit. But the public treasury is not bottomless, and you know how people feel about increased taxes.
- THEODORA:** Then prod, push, and encourage the wealthy to endow hospitals and orphanages with their own money! Remind them of their Christian duty.
- JUSTINIAN:** Anything else?
- THEODORA:** Women! They need greater rights and protection . . . and the slaves need these things as well.

***Scene III: Imperial palace,
Constantinople, A.D. 527.***

- TRIBONIAN:** Yes, emperor. . . .
- JUSTINIAN:** Tribonian, you are considered the finest legal mind in the Empire. Therefore, you must realize what a mess our legal system has become.
- TRIBONIAN:** I do. It's a disorganized mish-mash. Some laws contradict each other, too many are out of date. . . . In fact, there are far too many laws!
- JUSTINIAN:** And this chaos only confuses judges and average citizens alike . . . breeding contempt and disrespect for all laws.
- TRIBONIAN:** I suppose you want me to codify the whole mess.
- JUSTINIAN:** Yes. Make it logical, consistent, and simple enough for all to understand.
- TRIBONIAN:** I'll need time and expert help.
- JUSTINIAN:** You have my authority.
- TRIBONIAN:** There will be much pruning. Any guidelines?
- JUSTINIAN:** The average citizen must be protected.
- TRIBONIAN:** Like the right to be safe in your own home, and the right to a speedy trial?



JUSTINIAN: Yes. And reasonable loan rates for borrowers. Builders are to be responsible for faulty construction. They must pay for any needed repairs. And . . . no one has the right to store noxious or hazardous materials where others live nearby.

TRIBONIAN: Anything about punishment?

JUSTINIAN: It must always take into account the age and circumstances of the offender.

TRIBONIAN: How about a violent crime, like rape?

JUSTINIAN: The death penalty.

TRIBONIAN: Even if the victim is a slave woman?

JUSTINIAN: Most certainly! All women must be protected.

TRIBONIAN: What about adultery?

JUSTINIAN: Do you know what caused Rome to decay and finally rot? Not invading barbarians! It was sexual immorality and moral chaos. They became animals! The family structure that held the nation together broke down.

TRIBONIAN: The death penalty for adultery, then?

JUSTINIAN: The safeguarding of order throughout the Empire begins in the marriage. I hate chaos, because it's like an incurable disease. Adultery is a form of chaos, and marriage must not be contaminated by it!

CHORUS:

I: Logically organized and codified,
II: Justinian's system became
III: A beacon of justice far and wide,
IV: And a legacy greater than his fame.

I: But Byzantine law stirred no passions;
II: Like horses racing in the hippodrome new,
III: The crowds split into colored factions:
IV: The commoners green and the wealthy blue.



I: Each side would cheer its favorite rider,
II: Wearing of course its colors true,
III: But often the action spread far wider
IV: Than the sport each came to view.

I: For on the mount of every horse
II: Rode the politics of its backers,
III: And the victors could set the course
IV: Of some important civic matters.

I: So Greens and Blues fought and died
II: In the stadium and the street,
III: Their political power all but nullified
IV: Until the day their goals did meet.

Scene IV: Imperial palace, A.D. 532.

MAX: Emperor, the revolt is growing dangerously!

JUSTINIAN: I'm sure the different colored factions will soon tire each other out, and it will end.

MAX: No, no, you are mistaken! The Blues and Greens have joined forces! They are rampaging all over the city yelling "*Nika! Nika!*"

JUSTINIAN: They're yelling "Victory!"? Do they really think they've won?

MAX: They control the streets, burning at random.

JUSTINIAN: Theodora, we must escape to our country villa!

THEODORA: No! Don't cower from them! You are the emperor!

JUSTINIAN: The government? The bureaucracy? Are they still loyal to me?

MAX: Senator Hypatius has been persuaded to assume the throne.

JUSTINIAN: But I thought Hypatius was—



THEODORA: Don't think. Act! Call for Belisarius. And stay here, on your throne, like an emperor!

Scene V: Hours later.

BELISARIUS: The revolt is ended. Your imperial control is now absolute.

JUSTINIAN: It started in the hippodrome, right? All those screaming people watching the races and thinking they could scream at me! What happened?

BELISARIUS: We entered the hippodrome, and in a few hours left over thirty thousand of the traitors dead.

THEODORA: The rest of the city?

BELISARIUS: Calm now . . . but most of it has burned down, even the Church of St. Sophia.

JUSTINIAN: No matter what the cost, this city will be rebuilt. Constantinople will be more beautiful and grand than before. And the crown jewel will be a new St. Sophia.

BELISARIUS: My orders, Emperor?

JUSTINIAN: Reclaim the Empire's lost lands in North Africa, Italy, and Spain. Throw back the barbarians!

***Scene VI: Outside the new St. Sophia Church
(Hagia Sophia), Constantinople,
December 26, A.D. 537.***

THEODORA: Justinian, my dear, your crowning achievement awaits its dedication. You must feel on top of the world.

JUSTINIAN: Well . . . yes.

THEODORA: Why do you seem a bit downcast?

JUSTINIAN: The people hate me.

THEODORA: But you have done so much for them! Is there any city on earth more grand than ours? *You* are its architect and builder.



- JUSTINIAN:** But the cost. . . .
- THEODORA:** Imperial armies have restored many lands to the Empire.
- JUSTINIAN:** But the cost, Theodora! I emptied the treasury and raised taxes.
- THEODORA:** So what! Everyone complains about taxes. Look, my dear, look beyond the petty gripes of the people to the soaring dome of the Hagia Sophia. You built it! Doesn't that lift your spirits?
- JUSTINIAN:** Yes. . . no activity has given me greater joy than the hours spent working on the church.
- (Group enters church for dedication.)*
- MENAS:** The dome! It looks as if it reaches the very heavens! Glory to the Almighty!
- MAX:** How did the architects do it? The dome seems to float like a fixed cloud. What supports it?
- MENAS:** Never have I seen such beautiful and inspiring mosaics! The colors are dazzling!
- MAX:** *(counting)* Thirty-eight, thirty-nine. . . *forty* silver chandeliers!
- MENAS:** All this was done in less than six years? A miracle!
- THEODORA:** King Solomon had his great temple in Jerusalem, but you, my husband—
- JUSTINIAN:** Yes. . . truly, I have outdone even him.



Epilogue: The Byzantine Empire

CHORUS:

- I:** Preserver of Greek and Roman light,
II: Brave dike against barbarism's fierce tide,
III: Bastion of Orthodox Christian might,
IV: Bringer of Russia to Europe's side.
- I:** But the rising flood of Islam
II: Did lap, then crash, Constantinople's door,
III: Leaving a heart to draw upon
IV: Only the blood of her religious core.
- I:** Far from the Renaissance, and Reformation, too,
II: Your culture was caught in a static grip;
III: Fearful of change, and most things new,
IV: Your children await, the mind-chains to slip.

