Empress Theodora’s Throne - Purple is the Noblest Shroud

Some of the most stirring and famous speeches by women in history occurred when they helped their more-famous husbands retain power in a perilous situation, [as Eleanor Roosevelt did at the 1940 Democratic National Convention](https://denisegraveline.org/2012/09/famous-speech-friday-eleanor-roosevelts.html), saving husband Franklin D. Roosevelt’s nomination for a third term as U.S. president. In this, she might have been inspired by a much earlier force of nature, the sixth-century Empress Theodora of Byzantium.

The Nika riots, which began during a hippodrome chariot race as a rivalry between two political factions in the year 532, declared a new emperor and overwhelmed sitting Emperor Justinian and his forces. Justinian and his government council were ready to flee the country when the empress spoke up in the meeting. And because she used part of her short remarks to shut down complaints that a woman should not be speaking in public, we today get a glimpse of how unusual her speech was for its day. Here it is in full:

*My lords, the present occasion is too serious to allow me to follow the convention that a woman should not speak in a man’s council.  Those whose interests are threatened by extreme danger should think only of the wisest course of action, not of conventions.*

*In my opinion, flight is not the right course, even if it should bring us to safety.  It is impossible for a person, having been born into this world, not to die; but for one who has reigned it is intolerable to be a fugitive.  May I never be deprived of this purple robe, and may I never see the day when those who meet me do not call me empress.*

*If you wish to save yourself, my lord, there is no difficulty.  We are rich; over there is the sea, and yonder are the ships.  Yet reflect for a moment whether, when you have once escaped to a place of security, you would not gladly exchange such safety for death.  As for me, I agree with the adage that the royal purple is the noblest shroud.*

Instead of fleeing, the emperor and his officers attacked the rebels, killing a reported 30,000 and saving the throne. No wonder this short speech has been retold again and again through the centuries. What can you learn from it?

*Rhetorical Situation:*

* Who is the speaker?
* What’s the occasion? When/where?
* Who is the audience? Stated vs. implied. Values?
* What is the subject?
* What is the purpose?

*Speech:*

* Who is Theodora? Who is the audience? What is the occasion?
* What strategies do you see her apply in the opening paragraph? (Take into consideration how she would open a discussion with this speaker, occasion, and audience.)
* How does Theodora convince the council?
* What is Theodora’s purpose?
* What appeals does she use?
* What devices does she use to achieve those appeals?