

UCLA Journal of Religion

Volume no. 5 (2021)

“Wallada and Hafsa: Gender and Mobility through Medieval Andalusian Poetry.”

Kenley Borgerson
University of Puget Sound

ABSTRACT

Through close readings of the poetry of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi and Hafsa bint al-Hajj al-Rukuniyya this paper investigates the ways in which gender and mobility were conceptualized among the wealthy women of medieval al-Andalus through a historical lense. Wallada was born between 994 CE and 1001 CE as the only child of a caliph. She was noted for holding salons as a mutazarifa, and being a mentor to other female artists of her time. Hafsa was born in 1135 CE to a wealthy, but otherwise unknown, parentage. She was a well-known poetess during her lifetime and, similar to Wallada, later became a teacher. While their work has been dismissed as exceptional, this paper contends that the continuity and similarity in their poetry speaks not to singular experience, but a shared culture that lasted at least a century. Additionally, their light-hearted treatment of gender roles is enlightening for the modern reader.

Keywords: Medieval al-Andalus, Islamic Poetry, Feminist Analysis, Iberian Peninsula, Women Poets, Gender Roles.

UCLA Journal of Religion

Volume no. 5 (2021)

“Wallada and Hafsa: Gender and Mobility through Medieval Andalusian Poetry.”

Kenley Borgerson¹
University of Puget Sound

INTRODUCTION

*I am, by Allah, fit for high positions And am going my way, with pride!*²

The above line was written and worn by the poet and Umayyad Princess Wallada bint al-Mustakfi as part of gold inscriptions upon her robe.³ She was born in the early 11th century to one of the last Córdoba caliphs.⁴ She was a predecessor to the Grandadan poet and noblewoman Hafsa bint al-Hajj al-Rukuniyya who was born in the next century.⁵ Both were upper class and highly regarded women poets of the high middle ages who recorded their thoughts and emotions, often inspired by their lovers, in poetic verse. Their lifestyles required them to understand the politics of their time so they could successfully balance conformity and subversion in the private and public spheres of life, and most importantly, in their art where boundaries were blurred.

Through close readings of the poetry of Wallada and Hafsa this paper investigates the ways in

¹ Kenley Borgerson, University of Puget Sound Class of 2022, is double majoring in Religion, Spirituality & Society and Environmental Policy & Decision Making with a minor in Science, Technology & Society. She is interested in exploring the different approaches to the environment that her studies lend her.

² Marla Segol, "Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, no. 1 (2009), <https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol45/iss1/12/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Arie Schippers, "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling," in *Verse and the Fair Sex: Studies in Arabic Poetry and in the Representation of Woman in Arabic Literature*, ed. Frederick de Jong (Utrecht: M. Th. Houtsma Stichting, 1993), pp. 139-152.

⁵ Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour, eds., "Hafsa Bint Al-Hajj Arrakuniyya," in *Poems for the Millennium*, Volume Four, 1st ed., vol. 4 (University of California Press, 2012), pp. 97-99.

which gender and mobility were conceptualized among the wealthy women of medieval al-Andalus through a historical lens.

WALLADA AND HAFSA

Al-Andalus refers to the regions of the Iberian peninsula that were controlled by Islamic regimes by the early 8th century. After the arrival of Umayyad prince 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Mu'awiya in the late 8th century, it was an emirate of the larger Umayyad dynasty until the fall in 1031 CE.⁶ After the Spanish Umayyad caliphate collapsed, al-Andalus was fragmented into independent principalities called *ta'ifa*, some of which lasted until 1492 CE. Al-Andalus is known and, to some extent, inaccurately idolized for the theory of La Convivencia: the coexistence and relative peace among the Muslims, Jews, and Christians of medieval Spain during a time which is otherwise known for the religious conflict taking place in Northern Europe.⁷

Wallada bint al-Mustakfi was born between 994 CE and 1001 CE as the only child of caliph Muhammad III al-Mustakfi.⁸ Muhammad III of Córdoba came to power in 1024 CE after the assassination of the previous caliph Abd al-Rahman V.⁹ Muhammad III ruled for 17 months before the people of Córdoba revolted against him and he was forced to leave the city. He was later murdered at age fifty. Subsequent attempts to seize power eventually plunged the caliphate into civil war.¹⁰ After long negotiations, Muhammad III was succeeded by Hisham III who would be the last Umayyad ruler in al-Andalus and the last caliph of Córdoba.

⁶ Josef W Meri, ed., *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

⁷ Jana Kurtz, ed., *La Convivencia: Christian, Islamic and Jewish Cultures in Medieval Iberia* (Yale University Library, February 2020), <https://guides.library.yale.edu/convivencia>.

⁸ Schippers, "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling,"

⁹ Schippers, "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling,"

¹⁰ Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour, eds., "Wallada Bint Al-Mustakfi," in *Poems for the Millennium*, 1st ed., vol. 4 (University of California Press, 2012), pp. 70-71.

As her father's only Wallada, she received a substantial inheritance, which included his properties. Utilizing this, she opened a palace and literary hall in the city where she hosted popular salons. Additionally, she was an instructor to women artists. Seventeenth century North African historian al-Marqari described Wallada as "unique in her time, endowed with gracious speech, lavishly praised and the cynosure of attention".¹¹ She was an archetype *mutazarifat*, a refined courtly woman or female practitioner of *zarf*.¹² *Zarf* was a cultural practice that Professor Sahar Amer explains as the embodiment of "an overarching sophistication in clothing, food, language, and home decoration as well as an intellectual atmosphere in which participants engaged in debates related to love, recited poetry, sang, danced, and told stories".¹³ An important source for understanding *zarf* comes from the 10th century *Kitab al-zarfwa al-zurafa, The Book of Refinement and Refined People*. In which the author, Abu Tayyib al-Washsha describes how both *mutazarifat* and *zurafas*, refined courtly men, adorned their homes and their clothing with poetic verses, often embroidered with gold thread and precious stones.¹⁴ As a *mutazarifa*, Wallada inscribed the following poem on each side of her robes:

Right side:

I am, by Allah, fit for high positions
And am going my way, with pride!

Left side:

Forsooth I allow my lover to kiss my cheek
And bestow my kisses on him who craves it.¹⁵

¹¹ Asma Afsaruddin, "Literature, Scholarship, and Piety: Negotiating Gender and Authority in the Medieval Muslim World," *Religion & Literature* 42 (2010): pp. 111-131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23049472>.

¹² Sahar Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (May 2009): pp. 215-236, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40663351>.

¹³ Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women,"

¹⁴ Klein, Yaron. "Abu Tayyib al-Washsha and the Poetics of Inscribed Objects." *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 138, no. 1 (2018): 1+. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed June 17, 2021). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A545145559/AONE?u=oregon_oweb&sid=googleScholarFullText&xid=0ea64f02.

¹⁵ Segol, "Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women,"

While Wallada was a stylish and courtly *mutazarifa*, she was also bold. However she was cushioned from the disapproval of others by her status and wealth and was thus able to live quite freely. Though credit is deserved for the fact she maneuvered to sustain her status during a time of political instability that could have easily accounted for a more uncertain future, and her success is evidence that she carefully chose her challenges. While scholars believe that all of her students were women, her salons were open to both men and women, something uncommon in the predominantly homosocial society. Moreso, Wallada chose not to veil, however there is no consensus among scholars regarding whether her hair was uncovered along with her face.¹⁶ Additionally, while she openly took lovers, she never married. She has also been called the "the Sappho of Spain" and is said to have had at least one female lover, a poetry student named Muhja who would write kind satire of Wallada.¹⁷ This title, "Sappho of Spain," may have been inspired by the fact that the label *mutazarifat* has a connotation with lesbianism, or courtly female lovers. She would not be unique in this since relationships between women are well recorded in medieval Arabic literature. For example, *al-Fihrist* (The Catalogue) is an index of every book written in Arabic by 988 CE. In it the author, Ibn al-Nadim, includes twelve books dedicated to named lesbians couples.¹⁸ However, Wallada's most well-known relationship was with the male poet Ibn Zaydūn who is the subject of many of her remaining poems.

Wallada died in 1091 CE, the same year the Almoravid ruler Yūsuf ibn Tāshufīn invaded the southern Iberian Peninsula and largely dissolved the *ta'ifas*, successfully extending the

¹⁶ Emily Kittell-Queller, "Wallada Bint Al-Mustakfi," Emily Kittell-Queller (Weebly, September 22, 2014), <http://emilykq.weebly.com/blog/wallada-bint-al-mustakfi>.

¹⁷ Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women," note: for unknown reasons, this source used the spelling "mohja"

Stephen O Murray, "Woman-Woman Love in Islamic Societies," in *Islamic Homosexualities* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 1997), pp. 97-104, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt9qfmm4.7>.

¹⁸ Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women,"

Almoravid empire.¹⁹ However, this success only lasted about two decades before turmoil began as Castilian led onslaughts increased from the north and insecurity in the Maghreb weakened the empire.²⁰ Eventually, by 1130 CE, the Almohad dynasty overtook the Almoravids in Northern Africa and began their conquest into Spain.²¹

The Almohads were originally inspired by the comparatively strict religious and moral teachings of Ibn Tūmart, though this precedent was slowly lost on the peninsula as expensive architecture, rich artwork and mystical philosophies flourished through the 12th century.²² Under such transitioning politics, Hafsa bint al-Hajj al-Rukuniyya was born in Granada in 1135 CE to a rich Berber father, but little else is known of her childhood and adolescence.²³ She is presumed to have been well-educated, and became well-known during her lifetime as a poet and later as a teacher. While refined and wealthy like Wallada, she does not seem to be remembered for the same courtly behavior which indicates that *zarf* may not have been as relevant to the 12th century upper class as it was in Wallada's lifetime. Al-Marqari describes Hafsa as "the most celebrated poetess of Granada. Her poetry flowed smoothly and, like her prose, was of refined composition."²⁴ More of her work remains than that of almost any Andalusian female poet. A common subject of her work is her lover Abu Ja'far, a fellow poet, who she began a relationship with around 1154 CE, the same time the Almohads came to power in al-Andalus.²⁵ This is noteworthy because the Almohad prince Abu Sa'id 'Uthman would rival Ja'far for Hafsa's

¹⁹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Almoravids," Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., April 17, 2014), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almoravids>.

²⁰ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Almoravids"

²¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Almohads," Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., April 17, 2014), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almohads>.

²² The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Almohads,"

²³ Meri, *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*

²⁴ Afsaruddin, "Literature, Scholarship, and Piety: Negotiating Gender and Authority in the Medieval Muslim World,"

²⁵ Meri, *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*

affection. Ja'far was later imprisoned due to his involvement in a revolt, but it is largely believed 'Uthman's jealousy led to his execution in 1165 CE.²⁶ Towards the end of her life Hafsa stopped writing poetry and became a teacher for the children of caliph Ya'qub al-Mansur in Marrakesh where she later died in 1190 CE.

Wallada died approximately forty-four years prior to Hafsa's birth, but the similarities among them can help us paint a clearer picture of their shared experience as wealthy women of al-Andalus. Below are two poems that provide insight into the norms and conventions they navigated:

Hafsa:

Shall I visit you or shall you visit me? For my heart always bows to what you long for; My mouth is a source of clear sweet water, and the hair of my head is a leafy shade. I hoped you were thirsty and struck by the sun, when the noon hour would bring me to you; Give me answer quickly: it is not nice, o Jamil, that you keep Buthayna waiting!²⁷

Wallada:

When the evening descends, await then my visit, because I see the night is the one who keeps secrets best [is the best keeper of secrets].

I feel a love for you, which - if the sun would have felt a similar love, she would not rise; and the moon, he would not appear; and the stars, they would not undertake their nightly travel.²⁸

Hafsa begins with a question regarding who shall play the lover and beloved. However, the lines that follow illustrate her initiative as the lover. She describes herself in terms of a garden, a place to visit, but the assumed passivity and immobility of the garden is upturned with her desire to "bring me to you", particularly where 'bring you to me' could have fit equally well. Someone

²⁶ Schippers, "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling,"

²⁷ Schippers, "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling,"

²⁸ Schippers, "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling,"

who requires rest seeks out restoration, the Eden is not brought to them. Marla Segol, author of *Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women*, claims that Hafsa saw an absurdity in the classic association of women with this semi-domestic space, "Gardens don't mind being kept waiting, but people do, and the analogy breaks down".²⁹ This is addressed in Ja'far's poetic response, "It is usually not the garden which visits someone, but it is the gentle breeze which visits the garden."³⁰ This reply makes it explicit that her initiative, Hafsa taking the role of lover rather than beloved, is abnormal. However, in utilizing a nature metaphor she illustrates this desire, this movement, as natural. The end of the poem marks a return to the accepted heteropatriarchal norm in her request for his assent, and the allusion to Jamil and Buthayna, a classic story of a 7th century male poet and his beloved.³¹

Wallada begins her poem with an instruction for her beloved, setting up a dynamic in which she assumes the accustomed male role. Though she does not inform the recipient of where to meet, Segol suggests "in the garden, the traditional trysting-place".³² The reader is additionally unsure of who the subject is. We may speculate that this poem was not to Ibn Zaydūn. For, why would a notably public relationship be kept to the shadows? Although the English translation of Wallada's poem lacks gendered pronouns, their presence in the original Arabic may be irrelevant. In Amar's analysis of Wallada's robe inscription she posits:

Although Wallada uses here nouns and pronouns that are grammatically masculine...I would like to propose that the use of the masculine may simply be part of the literary conventions of the time and that her verses therefore need not be read exclusively as heterosexual ones. Afterall, addressing the female beloved as male was part and parcel of the Arabic literary tradition.

²⁹ Segol, "Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women,"

³⁰ Schippers, "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling,"

³¹ Raymond Farrin, *Abundance from the Desert: Classical Arabic Poetry* (Syracuse University Press, 2011), https://books.google.com/books?id=HGvfHZ9eW2gC&dq=jamil+and+Buthayna+story&source=gbs_navlinks_s.

³² Segol, "Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women,"

In the second stanza of her poem Wallada makes use of heavenly imagery. The paths taken by the surrounding planets are constant and their movement is intrinsic, and in using a "she" sun and "he" moon, she portrays her feelings as non-corporeal and transcendent of gender, closer to God than humans. In the same way the planet's innate mobility is disturbed by her love, her normative immobility is overcome.

Both of these poems in questioning the lover and beloved binary, also challenge masculine and feminine gender norms and assert that mobility is not an exclusively male trait. This playful attitude towards gender can be reflected in a later scholar of al-Andalus, Ibn Arabi. In Sa'diyya Shaikh's "Allah, Hidden Treasures, and the Divine Feminine" she utilizes an analysis of Ibn Arabi's depiction of God to undermine normative male divine language as he repeatedly employs imagery that challenges traditional patriarchal conceptions.³³ Perhaps this is partly inspired by the contributions of Andalusian female poets such as Wallada and Hafsa. This wouldn't be unexpected. As Asma Afsaruddin explains, in *Literature, Scholarship and Piety: Negotiating Gender and Authority in the Medieval Muslim World*, al-Marqari's appreciation of these poets illustrates that even in the 17th century it was understood, "that a full appreciation of the vitality of the cultural and intellectual life in Muslim Spain in the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth century could be achieved only through additional consideration of women's contributions in this sphere and of their considerable interaction with their male peers."³⁴

CONCLUSION

As Segol puts it, female poets exercise control over their bodies, sexualities and mobility through their writing. Despite this, she claims that scholars overlook poetry like Wallada's and

³³ Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Allah, Hidden Treasures, and the Divine Feminine," *The Immanent Frame* (Social Science Research Council, March 27, 2019), <http://tif.ssrc.org/2019/05/27/allah-hidden-treasures-and-the-divine-feminine/>.

³⁴ Afsaruddin, "Literature, Scholarship, and Piety: Negotiating Gender and Authority in the Medieval Muslim World,"

Hafsa's due to what is seen as an exceptional nature and thus a lack of applicability to the imagined female majority.³⁵ However the continuity and similarity in their poetry speaks not to singular experience, but a shared culture that lasted at least a century. While the experience of the wealthy women of medieval al-Andalus may be a minority in more ways than one, it should not be regarded as dispensable information for their contributions to history are remarkable and go far past the geographical borders of the Iberian peninsula. Additionally, they often interacted with women of other classes in their poetry; Muhja was the daughter of a fig merchant.³⁶

Wallada's and Hafsa's light-hearted treatment of gender roles can be enlightening for the modern reader by illustrating that gender and sexuality's complicated relationship and their transitory and liminal nature existed as much in the medieval age as it does today. Their poems successfully undermine absolute narratives of history and in doing so, they effectively move us from modern constructions into a past that is no longer distant, but one that is familiar in its messiness.

Through analyzing the poetry of Wallada bint al-Mustakfi and Hafsa bint al-Hajj al-Rukuniyya we have come to an understanding of not only the conceptions of gender and mobility among the wealthy women of medieval al-Andalus, but their relevance today.

³⁵ Segol, "Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women,"

³⁶ Mahmud, Sobh. "Wallada Bent Al-Mustakfi. Muhya Bent Al-Tayyani." Essay. In *Historia De La Literatura Árabe Clásica*, 952–57. Madrid, 2002.

Bibliography

- Afsaruddin, Asma. "Literature, Scholarship, and Piety: Negotiating Gender and Authority in the Medieval Muslim World." *Religion & Literature* 42 (2010): 111–31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23049472>.
- al-Udhari, Abdullah. "Hafsa Bint Al-Hajj Arrakuniyya." Essay. In *Poems for the Millennium*, edited by Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour, 1st ed., 4:97–99. University of California Press, 2012.
- al-Udhari, Abdullah. "Wallada Bint Al-Mustakfi." Essay. In *Poems for the Millennium*, edited by Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour, 1st ed., 4:70–71. University of California Press, 2012.
- Amer, Sahar. "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18 (May 2009): 215–36. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40663351>.
- Farrin, Raymond. *Abundance from the Desert: Classical Arabic Poetry*. Google Books. Syracuse University Press, 2011. https://books.google.com/books?id=HGvfHZ9eW2gC&dq=jamil+and+Buthayna+story&source=gbs_navlinks_s
- Kittell-Queller, Emily. "Wallada Bint Al-Mustakfi." Emily Kittell-Queller. Weebly, September 22, 2014. <http://emilykq.weebly.com/blog/wallada-bint-al-mustakfi>.
- Kurtz, Jana, ed. *La Convivencia: Christian, Islamic and Jewish Cultures in Medieval Iberia*. Yale University Library, February 2020. <https://guides.library.yale.edu/convivencia>.
- Mahmud, Sobh. "Wallada Bent Al-Mustakfi. Muhya Bent Al-Tayyani." *Historia De La Literatura Árabe Clásica*, 952–57. Madrid, 2002.
- Meri, Josef W, ed. *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.
- Murray, Stephen O. "Woman-Woman Love in Islamic Societies." Essay. In *Islamic Homosexualities*, 97–104. New York, NY: NYU Press, 1997. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt9qfmm4.7>.
- Schippers, Arie. "The Role of Women in Medieval Andalusian Story-Telling." Essay. In *Verse and the Fair Sex: Studies in Arabic Poetry and in the Erepresentation of Woman in Arabic Literature*, edited by Frederick de Jong, 139–52. Utrecht: M. Th. Houtsma Stichting, 1993.
- Segol, Marla. "Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women." *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, no. 1 (2009). <https://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol45/iss1/12/>.
- Shaikh, Sa'diyya. "Allah, Hidden Treasures, and the Divine Feminine." The Immanent Frame. Social Science Research Council, March 27, 2019. <http://tif.ssrc.org/2019/05/27/allah-hidden-treasures-and-the-divine-feminine/>.

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Almoravids." Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., April 17, 2014. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almoravids>.

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Almohads." Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., April 17, 2014. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Almohads>.