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Al-Andalus fictionalized for television in the Arab world: (re-)viewing the historical *musalsal* *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif*

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ABSTRACT

The present article deals with a popular 2005 Arabic historical drama television series, or *musalsal*, titled *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* (The Taifa Kings), whose events take place in eleventh-century al-Andalus during what is termed the taifa period. To deconstruct the different dramatic-historical narratives generated by this *musalsal*, this qualitative analysis of its thirty episodes explores both the sociopolitical norms and the historical sources its script draws on. The *musalsal*'s representation of taifa al-Andalus is assessed for its potential function of commentary on the modern reality of the Arab world.

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Al-Thulāthiyya al-Andalusiyya

Thanks to the important place it occupies in the Arab-Muslim imaginaire, al-Andalus—the area of the Iberian Peninsula that was once under Muslim rule—has inspired a significant number of contemporary Arabic cultural and literary products. Boosted by the rapid advancement in satellite television technology, the historical drama television series or *musalsal*, in particular, has become, over the past three decades, the mass televisual fictional medium par excellence for reconfiguring the image of al-Andalus as a historical and cultural icon in the Arab world.

The most recent of these *musalsals* is a Kuwaiti-Syrian production titled *Faḥ al-Andalus* (The Conquest of al-Andalus). With a storyline based on Islamic historical accounts of the Muslim conquest of Iberia, and officially approved by the Egyptian university-mosque of al-Azhar (the foremost authority in Sunni Islam), this thirty-three-episode serial has as its main protagonist Ṭāriq b. Ziyād (d. 720), who is believed by historians to be the first military commander to lead the Umayyad army into the Iberian Peninsula in 711. Shot in Lebanon and Turkey between 2020 and 2021, *Faḥ al-Andalus* was broadcast for the first time in Ramadan of 2022 on a few FTA (free-to-air) Arab satellite channels, as per the tradition in the Arab world of airing “Islamic” historical *musalsals* during the full month of Ramadan, often around Iftar, the time when Muslims break their fast. *Faḥ al-Andalus*, which portrays Ṭāriq as an Arab instead of a Berber, immediately sparked controversy, especially in Morocco.¹

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¹All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. El Atti, “Kuwaiti-Syrian Ramadan Show Sparks Anger in Morocco.”

However, one of the most successful—if not the most successful—Arabic-language television products about al-Andalus remains *Al-Thulāthiyya al-Andalusiyya* (The Andalus Trilogy), which is a set of three *musalsals* titled *Ṣaqr Quraysh* (The Falcon of the Quraysh, 2002), *Rabī Qurtūba* (The Spring of Córdoba, 2003), and *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* (The Taifa Kings, 2005). The first of its kind in the Arab world, this ninety-episode trilogy, with each episode lasting typically forty-five to fifty minutes, covers intermittently the geopolitical and social evolution of al-Andalus over a period that starts around 737 and ends in 1095. *Al-Thulāthiyya*, which received high acclaim from Arab audiences and critics alike, was shot in Morocco and Syria. It was produced by SAPI (Syrian Art Production International), a private Syrian production company created by an entrepreneur who is very close to the Syrian regime, then bought and broadcast by the MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center) Group,² the largest broadcasting company in the Middle East, which is owned by a member of the Saudi royal family.

Written by Palestinian-Jordanian playwright and academic Walid Saif (b. 1948) in an adapted mixture of Classical and Modern Standard Arabic to avoid linguistic anachronism, all three parts of the *Thulāthiyya* were directed by the same Syrian director, the late Hatim Ali (1962–2020), who was born in the Golan Heights and became a refugee at the age of five when Israel occupied the territory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. As will be shown in the case of the *musalsal* discussed in this article, all three scenarios of the *Thulāthiyya* draw mainly on medieval Arabic sources for the respective series of events they address, lending a certain legitimacy to the dramatic work's claim to historical veracity, however implicit it may be. Such legitimacy entails criticizability: the present analysis attempts to verify the historiographical material upon which the script of *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* is built, while always bearing in mind its semi-fictional nature.

Plans were made to produce in 2007 a fourth installment entitled *Suqūṭ Gharnāta* (The Fall of Granada), making the *Thulāthiyya* into a *Rubāʿiyya* (tetralogy). This *musalsal* tackles different key events that took place during the period spanning the last four centuries of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula. Its last episodes provide an account of the fall on 2 January 1492 of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Iberia. In the wake of this final collapse of al-Andalus, a mass expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain took place, and those who remained were forced to convert to Christianity. However, even though Saif announced that he completed the script of *Suqūṭ Gharnāta*, due to production-related issues, the project was never realized, and the *Thulāthiyya* remained as such.³

A strongly symbolic historical moment, the fall of Granada was already the subject of a 1979 thirteen-episode Egyptian television series produced by an Emirati production company titled *Laylat Suqūṭ Gharnāta* (The Night of the Fall of Granada). The Egyptian regime, led then by president Anwar Sadat, who had signed in 1978 the Camp David Accords with Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, accused the producers of the television program of making political allusions comparing Sadat to ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad XII or Boabdil (c. 1460–1533), the last Muslim ruler of Granada who surrendered the city to the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452–1516) and Isabella I of Castille (1451–1504). Consequently, the series was banned from airing in Egypt.

²Calderwood, "Proyectando al-Ándalus," 236.

³"Walid Saif Yaʿūd li-l-Tilifzyūn bi-Musalsal *Suqūṭ Gharnāta*."

The three parts of the *Thulāthiyya* are supposed to be connected; the second *musalsal* is presented as both the sequel to the first one and a prequel to the last. *Ṣaqr Quraysh*, the first season, relates the life of the first Umayyad emir of Córdoba ‘Abd al-Rahmān I (731–788). Also known as ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Dākhil (The Entrant) or Ṣaqr Quraysh (The Falcon of the Quraysh), a nickname given him by one of his most formidable enemies, the second Abbasid caliph Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775), according to what is considered by most researchers to be the earliest Arabic source on the 711 conquest and early al-Andalus but whose author remains anonymous, *Akhbār Majmū‘a fi Fath al-Andalus* (Collected Anecdotes on the Conquest of al-Andalus).⁴ The same information is found in the comprehensive *Al-Bayān al-Mughrib fi Akhbār Mulūk al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib* (The Wondrous Discourse on the History of the Kings of al-Andalus and the Maghrib) by the late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century historian Ibn ‘Idhārī Al-Marrākushī (from Marrakesh).⁵ The thirty-episode biopic *Ṣaqr Quraysh* recounts first the rise to power of the Abbasids to the detriment of the Umayyad dynasty, whom they persecuted. It then follows ‘Abd al-Rahmān’s perilous journey from Damascus to Córdoba, and finally the period of his reign in al-Andalus from 756 to 788.

Rabī Qurṭuba, the second season of the *Thulāthiyya*, starts with a scene depicting the death of ‘Abd al-Rahmān I, and then a voice-over segues into the new story by declaring that the first Umayyad emir of Córdoba had established in Western Europe one of the greatest kingdoms of the world, a link between East and West, a melting pot of civilizations, which reached its cultural apex under ‘Abd al-Rahmān III. This twenty-nine-part *musalsal* relates the life of *hājib* (chamberlain) Muḥammad b. Abi ‘Āmir al-Manṣūr (938–1002), the de facto ruler of al-Andalus from 978 until his death. It explores in parallel the evolution of the Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba during the last three years of the reign of ‘Abd al-Rahmān III (r. 912–961), founder of the caliphate, then throughout the rule of his son, Caliph al-Ḥakam II (r. 961–976), and finally, under that, in all but name, of al-Manṣūr. Equally central to the *musalsal*’s main storyline is the scandalous love affair al-Manṣūr had with Ṣubḥ (c. 940–c. 999), consort of al-Ḥakam and mother of the young caliph Hishām II (r. 976–1009; 1010–1013), from whom the ‘Āmirid *hājib* usurped caliphal powers, sequestered in near-captivity, and restricted from appearing in public.

At the end of *Rabī Qurṭuba* the voice-over returns one last time to tell of al-Manṣūr’s unparalleled military achievements in al-Andalus. It adds that, as he had always wished, al-Manṣūr died in battle, but the great ‘Āmirid *dawla* (state) he built, left after his death in the hands of his sons, lasted only a few years. In a politically chaotic al-Andalus, the angry ‘*amma* (common people), the dethroned Umayyads, and the anti-‘Āmirid Arab *khāṣṣa* (elite) revolted against an already crumbling central power in Córdoba, ushering in, early in the eleventh century, a new era, that of the taifas.

Mulūk al-Ṭawā’if, the last season of the *Thulāthiyya*, is about the twenty or so smaller Muslim kingdoms ruled by petty kings that emerged in different parts of al-Andalus after the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate, specifically during what is termed the first taifa period (1031–1091).⁶ The main focus of this thirty-episode *musalsal* is the taifa kingdom of Seville and the Arab Banū ‘Abbād dynasty that ruled it. Episodes 1–13 of

⁴*Akhbār Majmū‘a*, 107–8.

⁵Ibn ‘Idhārī, *Al-Bayān al-Mughrib*, II: 59–60.

⁶The word taifa, whose literal meaning is faction or party, carries a negative, almost pejorative connotation, especially if viewed in light of its original historical context.

Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif recount Seville's diplomatic and military interactions with its neighboring taifas and with the northern Christian kingdom of León-Castile under Abū 'l-Qāsim Muḥammad b. 'Abbād (r. 1023–1042), the eponymous founder of the 'Abbādid dynasty, formerly *qāḍī* or judge of the city of Seville, then his son al-Mu'taḍid (r. 1042–1069), who is portrayed as charismatic yet cruel. This part of the *musalsal* follows at the same time the beginnings of the Almoravids, a Muslim Berber dynasty that rose to power in North-west Africa.

Episodes 14–30 of *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* are dedicated inter alia to the life of Muḥammad b. 'Abbād (1040–1095), the son of al-Mu'taḍid and the third and last 'Abbādid ruler of the taifa of Seville. Out of a peculiar penchant for mingling and bonding with members of the 'amma, the 'Abbādid prince meets and falls in love with a beautiful Sevillian *jāriya* (female slave) by the name of I'timād al-Rumaykiyya (d. 1095). Instead of taking her as another concubine, he marries her, rather uncommonly and to his father's displeasure. The latter dies in 1069, and Muḥammad inherits the throne. Dissociating himself from his father's despotic ways, the new king promises to be more lenient towards his subjects. He gives himself a regnal name derived from the same root as his wife's—*al-Mu'tamid* (*the Reliant* [on God])—at the risk of exposing himself to the 'amma's mockery. In the year 1091, the Almoravids, who initially crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to protect their fellow Muslims from neighboring Christian aggressors, take Seville and exile al-Mu'tamid to Aghmat, a desolate village to the south of the Almoravid capital of Marrakesh. The last two episodes of *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* relate the harsh life of al-Mu'tamid and his family in their guarded, shabby house in exile, painting him as a sorrowful yet proud, dethroned king. In 1095, shortly after the death of I'timād, al-Mu'tamid passes away.

The present article is concerned with this last *musalsal*, which is perhaps the most popular of all three, hence its importance as an Arabic cultural product. I approach it not only as a dramatic-historical representation of taifa al-Andalus but more importantly in its dimension as a fictional media vehicle of both the concerns and values of modern Arab society, which are projected onto that romanticized moment in Islamic history. The taifa period is often described as a time of brilliant cultural progress but also of acute political division within al-Andalus. It is thus in light of the contemporary political and social conditions of the MENA region that an analysis of *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* will be carried out in the following pages.

Almost two decades after it was first broadcast, *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* is still being aired on different culturally meaningful occasions by Arab FTA television stations. It also continues to be watched on global online video-sharing platforms, where it is made officially available by its executive producer SAPI TV. The total number of accumulated views of all episodes of the *Thulāthiyya* on YouTube, where it was uploaded between 2018 and 2020, has reached several millions as of April 2022.

In a reverse adaptation process, Saif novelized the screenplays for the first and second parts of the *Thulāthiyya*. Dubbed respectively *Al-Nār wa-l-'Anqā'* (The Fire and the Phoenix) and *Mawā'id Qurṭuba* (Rendezvous in Córdoba), both titles were published in 2021, with the former appearing in two subparts: *Al-Rāyāt al-Sūd* (The Black Banners) and *Ṣaqr Quraysh*. The Palestinian-Jordanian dramaturgist is currently working on converting *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* into a novel as well.⁷

⁷Walid Saif, personal communication with the author, 9 April 2022.

A tragic denouement for a heroized taifa king

Produced two years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* seizes the occasion to draw a direct comparison between the taifa period and the current geopolitical reality of the Arab world. A Greek chorus, absent in the two previous seasons, appears throughout the *musalsal*, in different locations, singing for the most part, the rhyming refrain *Inna al-ṭughāt kānū dāʾiman sabab al-ghuzāt*, “Tyrants were always the reason for invaders [to invade].” This isolated poetic line is also the sole lyric of the season’s theme music. As to the lyrics of the theme songs for *Ṣaqr Quraysh* and *Rabīʿ Qurtuba*, they are respectively a poem said to be by ʿAbd al-Rahmān I yearning for Bilād al-Shām, an area centered on what is now modern Syria; and a *muwashshah*, a type of popular Arabic poem in strophic form developed in tenth-century al-Andalus, about the pains of love and longing.

The very opening scene of *Mulūk* features the singing chorus emerging, in 2005 as per the expository on-screen titles, from among the crowd in Marrakesh’s famous market place Djemaa el-Fnaa to warn against “the Tyrant,” chanting, “This is the story of the kingdoms of olden days but also of nowadays.” (The despot is also associated with the ominous black crow in short, eerie scenes recurring throughout the series.) The walking chorus then fades into another crowded market located in al-Andalus of 1036, setting the historical context of the events to come. Eric Calderwood, the American specialist of North African literature and film, argues that in *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* “the chorus opens a space for the public to participate in the configuration of the Andalusī myth.”⁸

Besides its functional role of delineating the context of certain events or orally narrating them for want of visual reconstruction, the core purpose of the chorus seems to be counterbalancing the positive image of the taifa king as a romantic dilettante and sometimes poet, capable of bravery or nobility, by continuously reminding the viewer of the nefarious effects of his direct actions as a ruler on al-Andalus. The efficiency of this process of narrative fine-tuning is, however, questionable. In fact, when reflecting on *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif*, certain Arab intellectuals believe that

It tackles the human aspects of its personages with a poetic flow that reflects the soul of “Saif the poet” and leaves us moved by Wallāda’s rejection of Ibn Zaydūn, al-Muʿtaḍid’s sadness over his daughter’s death, al-Muʿtamid’s departure into exile, death, longing, love, humiliation after glory. We are moved by all these human meanings even though we are aware and convinced of the mistakes made by all of those people.⁹

It is safe to say that the “seductive personality” of al-Muʿtamid, which had marked the entire taifa period,¹⁰ has had its effect on modern authors of Arabic history and fiction alike. *Mulūk* is no exception to this general fascination with the historical figure. Although made reminiscent of the modern-day Arab autocrat—the likes of Saddam Hussein jump to mind—through especially the cautionary melodic input by the chorus, the taifa king, represented by al-Muʿtamid, is victimized and redeemed by the end of the *musalsal*. The horrendous suffering and persecution the taifa king goes through towards the end of his life

⁸Calderwood, “Proyectando al-Ándalus,” 240.

⁹Kasser, “Nukhbat al-Drāmā Saif-ʿAlī.”

¹⁰Garulo, “La literatura,” 597.

overshadow his past bad decisions. Culpability is, moreover, spread among all taifa kings; they are all responsible for the disunity among them that led to the acceleration of the so-called *reconquista* and the calamitous conquest of Toledo by León-Castile in 1085, which is depicted in *Mulūk* as a traumatic event for the peoples of al-Andalus and the Maghrib. *Mulūk* does not point the finger at any one taifa king, much less to a heroized al-Muʿtamid. Viewers are, instead, invited to sympathize with him during his plight in the same way that the Sevillian ʿamma feels regretful and sorry for his brutal exile by the Berber invaders of al-Andalus into a godforsaken Aghmat. Furthermore, al-Muʿtamid is proven right in episode 28 when he learns in exile that Sevillians could not get along with the religiously strict Almoravids, a truth he surmised all along.¹¹ In episode 29, in his exile house, during a conversation with the visiting Sevillian suitor of one of his daughters, al-Muʿtamid praises difference and condemns discord, expounding suddenly what sounds like a pluralistic stance, as opposed to a monolithic Almoravid policy of rule.¹² The head of the Almoravids, Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn (r. 1061–1106), is indeed assigned in *Mulūk* the role of representing the rigid Islamist leader. He is allowed though, thanks to a certain dialogic neutrality in the *musalsal*, to justify his actions, including his harsh treatment of the deposed ʿAbbādid monarch. This crafted narrative of an ideological confrontation opposing al-Muʿtamid to Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn ultimately mirrors, whether subconsciously or not, the modern political dichotomy between the authoritarian yet secular Arab ruler and fanatical Islamism.

The taifa kingdom of Granada, ruled by the Berber Banū Zīrī whose ancestors were once favored and empowered by al-Manṣūr, grows militarily powerful enough to stand against the expansionist agenda of the Sevillian ʿAbbādid. The Zīrids descended from the Ṣanhāja, one of the largest Berber tribal confederations in Africa. The fourth and last petty king of the Zīrid taifa is ʿAbd Allāh b. Buluggīn (r. 1073–1090), who inherited the throne directly from his grandfather Bādīs b. Ḥabbūs (r. 1038–1073). Eventually, Granada is taken by the Almoravids; they dethrone and exile ʿAbd Allāh a year before al-Muʿtamid.

In the *Tibyān*, a memoir ʿAbd Allāh wrote in exile, he mentions time and again predictions made by astrologers regarding his own fortune and that of other taifa kings.¹³ Although understandably reluctant to admit it, the eleventh-century deposed monarch appears to be highly impressed by astrology, which he discusses openly.¹⁴ He does not shy away from citing the benefits of temperate wine-drinking either.¹⁵ He even quotes a few lines by Abū Nuwās, a famous classical Arabic poet whose verse is mostly centered on wine and homoeroticism.¹⁶ An argument can be advanced here that the notable liberty taken by the Granadan prisoner in writing about such religiously controversial topics reflects, in fact, a certain tolerance on the part of his Almoravid jailers, often portrayed as religious zealots.

¹¹ *Mulūk al-Tawāʾif*, ep. 28.

¹² *Mulūk al-Tawāʾif*, ep. 29.

¹³ *Kitāb al-Tibyān ʿan al-Hāditha al-Kāʾina bi-Dawlat Banī Zīrī fī Gharnāta* (Explanation of the Situation that Prevailed under the Zīrid Dynasty in Granada), or simply *Al-Tibyān*, is considered one of the earliest political autobiographies in the Muslim world. Its sole extant manuscript copy was discovered in the 1930s in the library of the Qarawiyyīn Mosque in Fez, Morocco, by the French historian specialized in al-Andalus Évariste Lévi-Provençal. See *Mudhakkirāt al-Amīr ʿAbd Allāh*.

¹⁴ Ibn Buluggīn, *Tibyān*, 179–80; 184–6.

¹⁵ Ibn Buluggīn, *Tibyān*, 181.

¹⁶ Ibn Buluggīn, *Tibyān*, 182.

According to the Andalusī scholar Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Mallāhī al-Ghāfiqī (d. 1222), often quoted by the famous fourteenth-century Granadan vizier and historian Lisān al-Dīn b. al-Khaṭīb (d. 1374) in his encyclopedic book *Al-Iḥāta fī Akhbār Gharnāta* (The Complete Understanding about the History of Granada), 'Abd Allāh was exiled to Marrakesh by the Almoravids at the age of thirty-five.¹⁷ They unshackled him and treated him well. All his requests were met, and he was allotted a stipend. He even amassed considerable wealth and died rich; he left a large estate to be divided among the children he begot during exile. Al-Ghāfiqī attributes the Almoravid leniency towards the dethroned Zīrid king to his obedience and mild manners.¹⁸ Indeed, in the *Tibyān* 'Abd Allāh expresses his gratitude to Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn, referring to him often as *Amīr al-Muslimīn* (Prince of the Muslims) and praying God to “grant the Almoravids glory.”¹⁹ One of course could not fully discard the possibility that the favoritism shown by the Berber powers that be towards the dethroned Zīrid ruler might have been simply owing to his ethnicity.

Regarding the foundation of Marrakesh by the Almoravids, Évariste Lévi-Provençal, in a posthumously published paper written shortly before his passing away, provides an account that “de-victimizes” both 'Abd Allāh and al-Mu'tamid, completely contradicting *Mulūk*'s overdramatized version of the latter's exile in Aghmat:

the two Andalusī princes exiled by Yūsuf b. Tāshufīn from Spain to Morocco, the Zīrid 'Abd Allāh of Granada and the 'Abbādid al-Mu'tamid of Seville, were not transferred to Marrakesh but to Aghmat, where living conditions were at the time easier and sojourn less austere. The cruelty shown them by the Almoravid sultan and the extreme destitution in which al-Mu'tamid, in particular, would have spent the last years of his life, are the stuff of legend.²⁰

Lévi-Provençal actually confirms the description of Aghmat found in *Al-Mughrib fī Dhikr Bilād Ifriqiya wa-l-Maghrib* (The Extraordinary Book on the Description of Ifriqiya and the Maghrib) by a contemporary Andalusī scholar named Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī (d. 1094). Aghmat, according to him, is “a large area inhabited by the Maṣmūda tribes [which form, along with the Zanāta and the previously mentioned Ṣanhāja, the three largest Berber tribal confederations in the Maghrib]. They live in palaces and houses amid trees. Prices there are low and bounties abound.”²¹ The geographical and literary encyclopedia *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (Dictionary of Countries) by another Muslim geographer born in 1179, the Mashriqī Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, probably quoting in turn a Maghribi source, echoes this depiction of the first Almoravid capital: “there exists in Morocco, allegedly, no land more abundant in all kinds of bounties and far-stretching, nor more prosperous and fertile, than it.”²²

The image Lévi-Provençal paints of the special treatment these two dethroned Andalusī petty kings received from the Almoravids until their death brings to mind, albeit obliquely, that of the safe, if not royal haven granted, more than nine centuries later, by the king of Saudi Arabia Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to the autocratic president of Tunisia Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, ousted in the wake of the Arab Spring. Ben Ali lived

¹⁷Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Iḥāta*, III: 381.

¹⁸Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Iḥāta*, III: 381.

¹⁹Ibn Buluggin, *Tibyān*, 121.

²⁰Lévi-Provençal, “La fondation de Marrakech,” 119.

²¹Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī, *Al-Mughrib*, 232.

²²Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, I: 225.

in Jeddah until he died in 2019. This same city was refuge to the late Ugandan dictator Idi Amin until his death in 2003.²³

In the closing scene of *Mulūk*, the chorus, the last appearing group of actors, sings a section of a famous poem attributed to al-Mu‘tamid while witnessing his funeral in Aghmat. A penetrating self-elegy with strong eulogistic elements, this poem foresees the exiled monarch’s imminent death. Addressing his own tomb in its lines, a subdued al-Mu‘tamid praises his regal qualities and bitterly laments his destiny. Once the funeral procession disappears behind a hill, the singing group starts to walk past villagers and tourists from the year 2005 to finally enter the ‘Abbādid king’s allegedly real mausoleum in Aghmat. Erected in 1970 by the Moroccan government, the Almoravid-style domed monument contains the graves of al-Mu‘tamid, I‘timād and their young son. We are shown al-Mu‘tamid’s full poem engraved on his tombstone. Below it, a sentence reads, “verses spoken by al-Mu‘tamid on his deathbed. He requested that they be engraved upon his tomb.” The poem in question is vaguely titled *Qabr al-Gharīb*, “Tomb of the Stranger,” a phrase that opens its first line. After paying brief homage at the graves while singing one last cautionary song exhorting the ruler to seek power in the satisfaction of his subjects, the chorus solemnly leaves the mausoleum, and the credits start scrolling.

Mulūk’s script proves to be firmly grounded in the medieval Arabic record it draws on for its portrayal of taifa al-Andalus, revealing rather remarkable research efforts made by Saif. However, while it depicts through current geopolitical circumstances the taifa king as an early prototype of the modern Arab autocrat, the *musalsal* opts for the safest historical exit for the story; at least for dramatic purposes, it absolves and redeems the ruler. Such a conformist finale, which—granted—is historically legitimate, is favored to the detriment of a more nuanced conclusion that history, by its nature and purposefulness, allows to its interpreter. An alternative denouement that devictimizes, and thus deheroizes the powerful (read “authoritarian”) Arab ruler, would have provided the opportunity to bravely deconstruct the apologetic narrative surrounding him, which he himself fosters through his power. But when it effectively comes time to take a stance towards despotism, *Mulūk* backs down.

A poetic Andalusí love story tainted by Orientalism

Reflecting the idea that the taifa period was a “second golden age” of Arabic belles-lettres and poetry, verse is very present in *Mulūk*. The viewer is presented in particular with a selection of poems by Ibn Zaydūn (1003–1071), the illustrious Arab Cordoban vizier and poet whose work is considered central to the development of Andalusí, and by extension Arabic, neoclassical poetry. These poems are either recited by the poet himself on different occasions or sung by the chorus in the background.

Besides being a brilliant poet, *Mulūk*’s Ibn Zaydūn is a canny politician and influential member of the Jahwarid *jamā‘a*, a council made up of Córdoba’s most influential community leaders and politicians, at the behest of whom the petty king Abū ‘l-Ḥazm b. Jahwar (c. 1000–1043) governs the taifa. Ibn Zaydūn is furthermore

²³And it is perhaps worth noting that it is in the neighboring UAE that Spain’s former king Juan Carlos has been living since 2020 in self-imposed exile, following corruption allegations against him.

made responsible for convincing Abū 'l-Ḥazm to pledge allegiance to an 'Abbādid-appointed false caliph in order to meet the demands of the Cordoban 'amma. This pseudo-caliph is a lookalike of Hishām II, whom al-Mu'tadid finds among Seville's poor 'amma and forces to pretend to be Hishām II resurfacing after having spent the last two decades of his life in hiding. Abū 'l-Qāsim b. 'Abbād is consequently declared *ḥājib* of the false caliph, a position that would allow him, once al-Andalus unified, to become its de facto ruler, following the tradition established half a century earlier by al-Manṣūr.

In episodes 2–6, considerable screen time is allotted to Ibn Zaydūn's stormy romance with the princess poet Wallāda bint al-Mustakfi (c. 1010–1091), daughter of the eighth and penultimate Umayyad caliph of Córdoba Muḥammad III al-Mustakfi (r. 1024–1025). Original historical information about Wallāda is found in *Al-Dhakhīra fī Maḥāsīn Ahl al-Jazīra* (The Cache of Merits of the People of the Peninsula) by the poet and historian Ibn Bassām al-Shantarīnī (from Santarém) (d. 1147) and in *Al-Ṣila fī Tārīkh A'immat al-Andalus* (The Continuation of the History of the Sages of al-Andalus) by another twelfth-century Andalusī litterateur named Ibn Bashkuwāl (1101–1183).²⁴ *Dhakhīra* and *Ṣila* constitute the most trustworthy extant early sources on the biography of Wallāda. The data they contain is, however, both scarce and contradictory: in the same paragraph where Ibn Bassām criticizes her lack of moral restraint and prays God to forgive her, he himself praises Wallāda's "feminine modesty," to which he refers using the metaphorical phrase "[her] immaculate clothing" (*ṭaharat athwāb*).²⁵ Another valuable early source on the prominent literary figures and poets of eleventh-century al-Andalus with excerpts from their poetry is *Qalā'id al-'Iqyān wa Maḥāsīn al-A'yān* (Necklaces of Pure Gold and Merits of the Eminent People), a compilation written by the contemporary Andalusī anthologist al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān (d. 1134) in complex rhymed prose, using far-fetched metaphorical expressions. The end result is unfortunately a text quite difficult to comprehend by the modern Arabophone. In relation to the biographical data on Wallāda found in the *Qalā'id*, though, the Palestinian scholar Ihsan Abbas thinks that

Ibn Khāqān weaved stories in rhyming prose based on some of Ibn Zaydūn's poems without taking into consideration the element of time and verifying whether his accounts were grounded in reality or not. He thus opened the way for those who came after him to presume that every romantic poem in Ibn Zaydūn's collection of poems was meant for Wallāda.²⁶

The historicity-related problems faced by modern historians who undertake the task of re-constructing Wallāda's biography, including her love story with Ibn Zaydūn, based on a number of medieval and early modern Arabic texts, have been discussed at length by scholars both from the Arab world and the West.²⁷ In 1971, Wilhelm Hoenerbach propounded what he deemed a necessary recontextualization of the biography of the eleventh-century princess poet. In his opinion, she must be viewed only in light of the literary trend of that era. And thus, "it is best for us to see in Wallāda, not a courtesan

²⁴Ibn Bassām, *Dhakhīra*, I/1: 429–32; Ibn Bashkuwāl, *Ṣila*, III: 996.

²⁵Ibn Bassām, *Dhakhīra*, I/1: 429.

²⁶Abbas, "Wallāda bint al-Mustakfi," 199.

²⁷E.g., Abbas, "Wallāda," 192–217; Garulo, "La biografía de Wallāda," 97–116.

who broke the barriers of social morality, but rather an artist firmly anchored in the heart of her time and culture.”²⁸ According to Teresa Garulo Muñoz,

Wallāda seems to be converted, in the West, into a feminine archetype in whose name the past of women in al-Andalus is mythologized and mystified so as to be recreated according to the desires and fantasies of the groups who took possession of her personality: Orientalist fantasies that discover a freer sexuality in the women of the Orient, locked in harems, or, more recently, feminist fantasies, which interpret Wallāda’s lines of explicit sexual content as a symptom of her liberation and emancipation from the male world; to which must be added the theories, loaded with prejudices, on which they are based: the freedom of women in al-Andalus, concretized in the biography of the princess Wallāda, as an effect of the influence of Christianity or of the Christian population of the Iberian Peninsula. The cultural or social context is blurred and the literary genres are no longer the framework in which poetic creation is situated.²⁹

Wallāda is portrayed in *Mulūk* as an independent, outspoken—and thus controversial—Umayyad princess who adopts a rather modern feminist discourse on a number of social and political matters. In no way though does the *musalsal* insinuate that she maintained a lesbian relationship, as imagined by a number of European Orientalists,³⁰ with Muhja bint al-Tayyānī (hispanized Muhya, d. 1097), a relatively renowned eleventh-century Andalusī poet, originally a commoner whom the Umayyad princess instructed and took in as her protégée. Nor does *Mulūk* make any clear allusions to a homosexual relationship between al-Mu‘tamid and his chief vizier and right-hand man Ibn ‘Ammār (1031–1086), an itinerant poet that the ‘Abbādid prince had met in Silves when he was its titular governor and brought to al-Mu‘taḍid’s palace. Al-Mu‘tamid, who shares a passionate love for poetry with Ibn ‘Ammār, later kills him with his own hands for political reasons. Their relationship is portrayed in *Mulūk* as what can only be described as a historical “bromance.”

The odd inference regarding Wallāda’s “(homo)sexual orientation” was first drawn in *Analectes sur l’histoire et la littérature des Arabes d’Espagne*, an 1855–1861 collaborative critical edition by four male Arabists of different European nationalities directed by the prominent Dutch Orientalist of French origin Reinhart Dozy (1820–1883). They published a considerable portion of the monumental *Naḥḥ al-Ṭīb min Ghuṣn al-Andalus al-Raṭīb wa Dhikr Wazīrihā Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb* (The Whiff of Fragrance from the Tender Branch of al-Andalus and the Story of Its Vizier Lisan al-Din ibn al-Khaṭīb), a compendium of literary, historical, and biographical material about al-Andalus written by the Maghribī man of letters and historian Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Maqqarī (1578–1632).³¹

In the 1950s, citing *Analectes*, the French Orientalist Henri Pérès (1890–1983) asserted quite categorically that Wallāda’s verse confirms her lesbianism.³² He maintained furthermore that the Cordoban aristocrat disdained the veil, liberated herself from many prejudices, and took advantage of her father’s death to lead the freest life.³³ He even goes so far as to describe her as an Amazon and a tomboy of sorts, using the French

²⁸Hoenerbach, “Notas para una caracterización de Wallāda,” 473.

²⁹Garulo Muñoz, “La biografía de Wallāda,” 98.

³⁰E.g., Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, 428; Arjona Castro, *La sexualidad en la España musulmana*, 21.

³¹Dozy et al., *Analectes*, II: 633.

³²Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, 428.

³³Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, 399.

noun *garçonne*, which is the feminine form of *garçon*, boy, and designates any young girl with a masculine look.³⁴ He argues that, unlike the Oriental Muslim woman, the Andalusian woman, represented by Wallāda, enjoyed an exceptional sexual agency and therefore freedom. According to Pérès, this unique emancipation was the result of Islam—which he labels as rigid and somewhat discriminatory against women—coming into contact, in the Iberian Peninsula, with the liberal social customs derived from Christianity.³⁵

Dressed in alluring garments throughout *Mulūk*, Wallāda is given the chance to recite some of her daring verse, including a famous risqué couplet she has embroidered on her robe. This poem is reluctantly reported by the reserved and prudish Ibn Bassām, who furthermore seems to question its authenticity.³⁶ Angered by a sarcastic and disparaging poem by Ibn Zaydūn disrespecting her and belittling another of her suitors named Ibn ʿAbdūs, a frequent visitor of the literary salon she runs, Wallāda breaks off her liaison with Ibn Zaydūn.³⁷ Shortly after, the proud vizier-poet is imprisoned by Abū ʿl-Ḥazm for casting doubt on his abilities as a ruler and for boasting in public that he was the mastermind behind the Jahwarid taking of Córdoba during the *fitna*, the civil strife that gave rise to the formation of the taifas. This period is also termed, out of anti-Berber and pro-Umayyad sentiment, *al-fitna al-barbariyya* (the Berber civil strife) by certain Andalusian chroniclers, such as Ibn Ḥayyān al-Qurṭubī (d. 1076).³⁸ The same term is reused by Ibn Bassām.³⁹

Still very much in love with Ibn Zaydūn, *Mulūk*'s Wallāda is worried for his well-being and ponders whether she should attempt to secretly help him escape prison. He eventually flees Córdoba and seeks refuge in Seville, where he goes on to serve as vizier for al-Muʿtaḍid then al-Muʿtamid. As with Şubḥ, the heroine of the second part of his *Thulāthiyya*, Saif attempts to liberate Wallāda from the commonplace literary image confining her to the role of the passive beloved; to become more than just Ibn Zaydūn's muse, she reciprocates his passionate love through verse and action. Although estranged from him, the *musalsal* makes her out to have had something to do with freeing him from prison. Such an imagined act renders her both powerful and true to her feelings. It also serves to fill another historical gap in the pathos-imbued narrative around Ibn Zaydūn's stay in prison and his escaping it. The reasons for his arrest vary among authors; whereas some believe that he was incarcerated on charges of plotting against Abū ʿl-Ḥazm,⁴⁰ perhaps in an attempt to fulfill personal political aspirations—an unheroic yet more logically damning act *Mulūk* absolves him from committing—, others hypothesize, maybe too romantically, that going to prison was the price he had to pay for his love for an Umayyad princess.⁴¹

No less conjectural but perhaps more soberly thought-out than *Mulūk*'s is the widely admitted thesis that Ibn Zaydūn broke out of jail with the help of none other

³⁴Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, 428–9.

³⁵Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, 399.

³⁶Ibn Bassām, *Dhakhira*, I/1: 429–30

³⁷In this poem, Ibn Zaydūn, *Divān Ibn Zaydūn*, 196, compares the Umayyad princess to leftovers, food he was done with and left for Ibn ʿAbdūs, whom he likens to a rat.

³⁸Ibn Ḥayyān al-Qurṭubī was a contemporary chronicler from Córdoba whose *Al-Matīn*, one of his two major works, is a large history that crucially comprises an account of the taifa period up until about the mid eleventh century. The *Matīn* survived only through excerpts contained mostly in later similarly voluminous history the *Dhakhira*.

³⁹Ibn Bassām, *Dhakhira*, I/1: 282; I/2: 576, 578.

⁴⁰Álvarez, "Ibn Zaydūn," 384.

⁴¹Talhami, *Historical Dictionary of Women*, 235.

than Abū 'l-Ḥazm's own son, Abū 'l-Walīd Muḥammad b. Jahwar (r. 1043–1064), who was a good friend of his. The Jahwarid crown prince would have even appointed him ambassador once enthroned. Ibn Zaydūn's reintegration into the Jahwarid government took place, therefore, long before his self-exile in Seville, which was motivated by reasons other than those proposed by *Mulūk*: apparently, while on a diplomatic mission to the taifa of Málaga, he was offered by its petty king the position of vizier, which he accepted, angering Abū 'l-Walīd. Fearing his friend and patron's severe punishment, he ran away from Málaga and spent some time in Valencia then Badajoz, before seeking refuge with the 'Abbāids in Seville.⁴²

Legitimate questions also arise as to the real motive behind Wallāda's final rejection of Ibn Zaydūn. It is often ascribed to his indecent amorous affair with one of her maidservants, a dark-skinned *jāriya*, as held by Orientalists.⁴³ In any case, *Mulūk*'s Ibn Zaydūn is an earnest and faithful lover, no doubt above infidelity. His only flaw is that he is excessively jealous, at times even possessive, often a tolerable if not laudable trait of masculinity. According to other historians, it might have been the Cordoban vizier's involvement in "early anti-caliphal activities" that led Wallāda to end their love affair.⁴⁴ This hypothesis raises an additional question: if she was bothered by Ibn Zaydūn's conniving to bring down the Umayyads during the *fitna*, why would Wallāda engage in a romantic relationship with him in the first place?

Essentially resulting from an insufficiency of documentary resources on taifa al-Andalus, the historical uncertainty surrounding the historical figure of Wallāda in particular allowed Saif to rework the love story with more ease. In actuality, the whole romance is created out of a patchwork of poems of different genres left mainly by Ibn Zaydūn, whose extant corpus surpasses by far that of his muse, a disparity that is unfortunately capable in and of itself of leading to a gender-imbalanced narrative. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century masculine, or better yet, masculinist Orientalist interpretation of both eleventh-century poetic corpuses, in its inherent function of eroticizing the Oriental "other," further heightened the gendered narrative, which was later assimilated by certain Arab intellectuals in their reinvention of their *own* Wallāda and Ibn Zaydūn.

In the astute study by Christina Civantos of how the historical figure of Wallāda is interpreted in the Arab world through literary and visual products, the Cuban-American scholar maintains that, "In spite of her assertion of agency, ultimately in *Muluk al-Ṭawa'if* Wallāda is relegated to the role of the silent beloved. [...] she functions as an ornament, a beautiful object that sets the scene of an opulent, cultured, and enticing al-Andalus."⁴⁵ Indeed, as in the case in *Rabī' Qurṭuba* of the romance of al-Manṣūr and Ṣubḥ, Ibn Zaydūn is assigned in *Mulūk* a pivotal role around which revolves that of Wallāda; starting from episode 6, she is put on standby, to reappear one last time, for a brief moment, in episode 15, when an old Ibn Zaydūn who has worked for two decades as vizier for the 'Abbāids returns in 1071 to a conquered Córdoba. Setting foot again in his hometown after a long time, alongside triumphant al-Mu'tamid and Ibn 'Ammār, the aged poet immediately travels to his old love's house and asks to see

⁴²Cour, *Un poète arabe d'Andalousie*, 94–7.

⁴³E.g., Cour, *Un poète arabe d'Andalousie*, 28; Pérès, *La poésie andalouse*, 429; Arjona Castro, *La sexualidad*, 20.

⁴⁴See Jayyusi, "Andalusi Poetry," 348.

⁴⁵Civantos, *The Afterlife of al-Andalus*, 243–4.

her. Although at first excited to learn of his arrival, Wallāda decides, upon looking at her reflection in the mirror and realizing she is no longer beautiful or young, to cancel the rendezvous. The suddenly disillusioned muse expresses her willingness to preserve intact the image of her that inspired Ibn Zaydūn's passionate verse and feelings.

The missed opportunity for a controversial scholar as a potential protagonist

According to Civantos, “in this TV series and other works she [Wallāda] is portrayed as a complete exception with no female peers. Although the historical record shows that there were other women poets at the time, including at her salon (e.g., Muḥya), the author of this script erases them.”⁴⁶ It is likely that this limited choice was made by Ali and Saif for practical reasons; with the tumultuous political and military events of the taifa period requiring too many episodes to be untangled, using only the characters of Ibn Zaydūn and Wallāda, among other prominent literary figures, as representatives of the prosperous cultural life of taifa al-Andalus makes a certain pragmatic sense. More importantly, their stormy love story, with its ceaseless longing and unhappy ending, makes for drama that is craved by the audiences of the *musalsal*.

Eventually, poetic production and *male* poets in general occupy the foreground in *Mulūk* to the detriment of important scientific and scholarly actors whose works impacted to varying degrees the intellectual landscape of eleventh-century al-Andalus. This biased predilection on the part of the creators of the historical drama, whose main protagonists are ‘Abbādid poets and patrons, reflects Saif's obvious fondness for Ibn Zaydūn's verse in particular and for classical Arabic poetry in general.

In fact, the only taifa scholar the series touches upon is Abū ‘l-Futūḥ al-Jurjānī (961–1039), a Granada-based Arabic grammarian originally from Karkan, in what is now the Iranian province of Hamadan. Al-Jurjānī plots with Bādīs's cousin to topple him but winds up killed by the Zīrid monarch. In the biographical note he dedicates to the life of Thābit b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī in his *Iḥāta*, Ibn al-Khaṭīb reports how, accused of orchestrating a coup against Bādīs, the Persian intellectual fled to Seville but after a while returned to Granada, where he was humiliated then ruthlessly murdered by the Zīrid taifa king.⁴⁷ ‘Abd Allāh, however, carefully avoids mentioning this story in his *Tibyān*, for obvious reasons.

In episode 4, Bādīs complains to the old grammarian about the annoying fastidiousness of the Arabic purists of their time as if to embarrass him. The uncouth monarch teases him about his work, insinuating that grammar, and thus knowledge in general, is useless in comparison with military power.⁴⁸ In its version of al-Jurjānī's story, ultimately based entirely on Ibn al-Khaṭīb's account, *Mulūk* alludes to the oft-antagonistic attitude of the modern Arab dictator vis-à-vis knowledge because it threatens his legitimacy.

One leading Muslim taifa thinker strikingly passed over by *Mulūk* is Ibn Ḥazm (994–1064), who is regarded by some modern historians “as one of the most brilliant minds

⁴⁶Civantos, *The Afterlife of al-Andalus*, 244.

⁴⁷Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Iḥāta*, I: 454–8.

⁴⁸*Mulūk*, ep. 4.

produced by al-Andalus.”⁴⁹ He is the renovator and proponent of a new Islamic school of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and allegedly one of the fathers of comparative religion. Ibn Ḥazm is known in the Arab world especially for his *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma* (The Ring of the Dove). In this book, which he wrote around 1023, the Cordoban philosopher engages in a reflection on the very essence of love, recounting anecdotes about love and lovers, including personal ones.

In 1998 a *musalsal* about his life appeared, titled *Al-Imām Aḥmed Ibn Ḥazm*. This humble thirty-six-episode historical drama television series was produced by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union, the public broadcasting service of Egypt, which is operated by the Egyptian government. It focuses on Ibn Ḥazm’s intellectual battles with the powerful statesmen and religious thinkers of his time and dramatizes to a certain degree his love story with a *jāriya* who later became his wife. This *musalsal* seems, however, to have left no particularly lasting impression on its Arab audiences.

Ibn Ḥazm would have probably been a superb candidate to figure prominently in *Mulūk*. He “used to mix *fiqh* and *kalām*,”⁵⁰ the Islamic dialectic method whose purpose is to demonstrate above all the existence of God, and resorted for his tentative reform of Andalusī Islam to *Zāhirism*, a literalist theological-juridical school of Eastern origin founded by the ninth-century Abbasid-era jurist and historiographer Dāwūd al-Zāhirī (d. 883 or 884). The Cordoban *Zāhiri* reformer, who seems to have posed a threat chiefly to the spread in al-Andalus of Ash‘arism,⁵¹ the largest and most implicitly influential theological school in Sunni Islam, is said to have been “frequently engaged in personal, verbal controversy with Ash‘arites, Mu‘tazilites, Christians, Jews, and freethinkers.”⁵² A century after his death, the principles of *Zāhirism* were adopted as a kind of state doctrine by the Almohads, a Berber dynasty that overthrew and succeeded, in the mid-twelfth century, the Almoravid empire in North Africa and al-Andalus. Ibn Ḥazm’s ideas might then have had an indirect influence on this radical movement.⁵³ As regards its ideological dimension, it is likely that Ibn Ḥazm’s reformative project was an attempt to restore order to the crumbling Umayyad *dawla* so as to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the Fatimids of Cairo and the Abbasids of Baghdad.⁵⁴

Ibn Ḥazm reached adulthood during the politically turbulent epoch of the *fitna*, witnessed the ultimate collapse of the caliphate of Córdoba, and lived through two thirds of the first taifa period. His personal life, like that of Ibn Zaydūn, was greatly affected by the political chaos surrounding him. Persecuted for his radical ideas, which he defended vehemently, the *Zāhiri* philosopher spent a great deal of his life in exile, wandering from one taifa to another until his death. Reportedly, al-Mu‘taḍid even burned his books in public.⁵⁵ It is generally believed that he was a fierce supporter of the lost Umayyad cause, as he saw in the end of the unified system of the caliphate the beginning of the military and political decline of al-Andalus. He did not limit his criticism to the corrupt political status quo, but extended it to many of his society’s flaws. In his viewpoint, religious authority should only emanate from God and the Prophet. He therefore

⁴⁹Adang et al., *Ibn Ḥazm of Cordoba*, xii.

⁵⁰Mervin, *Histoire de l’Islam*, 117.

⁵¹Mervin, *Histoire de l’Islam*, 117.

⁵²Goldziher, *The Zāhirīs*, 110.

⁵³Goldziher, *The Zāhirīs*, 156–60.

⁵⁴Himmich, *Ijtihād*, 107.

⁵⁵Wasserstein, “Ibn Ḥazm and al-Andalus,” 75.

rejected the sacralization of religious leaders and criticized the followers of the four major Sunni *madhāhib*, or schools of theological and legal thought in Islam, for idolizing their early eponymous founders.

It is undeniable that *Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif* played a valuable role in popularizing the history of taifa al-Andalus in the contemporary Arab world. However, by totally overlooking Ibn Ḥazm, it misses the chance to bring into the foreground an important historical figure whose life captures par excellence the zeitgeist of taifa al-Andalus, if not of al-Andalus *tout court*. It also omits a potential protagonist whose sharp critical thinking, reflected in his forty or so surviving works, is capable, if successfully popularized on the screen, of inspiring the avid Arab audiences of Islamic historical *musalsals* to engage in the healthy exercise of questioning established political and social truths that lie at the heart of their own modern realities.

Conclusion

Mulūk al-Ṭawāʾif, as part of the widely watched, unique historical drama trilogy *Al-Thulathayya al-Andalusiyya*, is an influential Arabic-language televisual product centered on taifa al-Andalus. Based on Muslim historiographical sources, its outstanding script relates key political and military events of the eleventh century, with the taifa kingdom of Seville and its ʿAbbādid rulers placed in the foreground.

The third and last ruler of Seville in this Arab monarchical line, al-Muʿtamid b. ʿAbbād, who is the main protagonist of the *musalsal*, is presented as a lax leader and a romantic dilettante poet. Towards the end of his life, he is mercilessly persecuted by the Almoravids, the Maghribi Berber invaders of al-Andalus. The Almoravids are portrayed in such a stereotypical fashion that they become inescapably evocative of modern Islamist fanaticism, throwing into sharp relief the image of the taifa king as a proponent of political tolerance. Such a positive image is inevitably extrapolated to the petty king's present-day analog, the modern Arab autocrat, whom *Mulūk* paradoxically warns throughout its thirty episodes to beware of the terrible consequences of tyranny.

Essential to *Mulūk*'s portrayal of social and cultural eleventh-century Andalusian life, the tempestuous love story of Wallāda and Ibn Zaydūn occupies significant space in the *musalsal*. The televisual depiction of the romantic relationship between the poet-lovers, an offshoot of the main historical-literary narrative surrounding their characters in the Arab world, is underlain by traditional sexist notions; effectively passivized, Wallāda is assigned a supporting role, while a tormented, ultimately heroic Ibn Zaydūn is uncritically set on a pedestal. An enduring legacy of nineteenth-century male European Orientalism, the Western objectification of Wallāda has inspired, if only in part and indirectly, her masculinist-driven portrait in modern Arabic fiction and history alike.

Mulūk's cherry-picking of the historical events occurring in taifa al-Andalus may be fairly justified for pragmatic reasons. However, in terms of its choice of historical figures, its exclusion of Ibn Ḥazm leaves this crucial period in the evolution of Muslim Iberia without one of its most important representatives; his inclusion would have allowed substantial insight into both political and social facets of taifa al-Andalus.

The relative historical shortcomings of *Mulūk* as a dramatized account of taifa al-Andalus based on medieval Arabic texts do not so much undermine its implicit claim

to historical faithfulness as they reflect its falling short of meeting the full social and political responsibility incumbent upon such a major cultural product towards its consumers, the peoples of the MENA region. By the same token, it is reasonable to question the *musalsal*'s integrity as an indirect yet intentional authorial commentary on the current socio-political conditions of these same peoples against the historical backdrop of eleventh-century al-Andalus.

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