

Summary of My NEH Institute Project  
“Negotiating Identities: Expression and Representation in the Christian-Jewish-Muslim  
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The NEH Institute in Barcelona provided me with the great opportunity to complete a long-term project by fleshing out and deepening the introduction to a new book manuscript dedicated to European women writers during the Middle Ages, and by composing one final chapter. The larger topic of the Institute focused on the interreligious relationships in the Mediterranean world, perceived through the lens of negotiating identities. This also applies in many ways to the issue of women’s identity and women’s writing. In other words, the religious dialogue which certainly took place in the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, needs to be approached not only as such, in theological terms, but also as a matter of great concern for gender. We tend to ignore this when we investigate religious persecutions or forms of religious toleration in the premodern world. Women were often at the forefront of cultural contacts and confrontation, being more heavily involved in the daily conditions, responsible for the raising of children and taking care of the household. This does not mean that we could judge women in the Middle Ages through such simplistic terms only, since their social status mattered very much as well. Noble ladies, for instance, had a very different life than urban women or farmer’s wives. Nuns formed a separate group, and so did prostitutes, and then we also have to take into account those women who wrote or were active as artists.

We cannot easily move from a critical study of women’s writing to the interreligious dialogue, but the set framework of investigation invites the exploration of new perspectives predicated on the situation of women in everyday life settings. While before I had studied major female authors in England, Germany, France, and Hungary, working in Barcelona libraries allowed me to investigate the autobiographical writing by the Sevilla lady Leonor López de Córdoba, active in the latter half of the fourteenth century. At first I established the wider

framework of Spanish women writers during the Middle Ages, which also pushed me to question to what extent we know of Hebrew and Arabic women poets. The evidence to date regarding those poets is, unfortunately, very thin and fleeting, although we still can safely assume that some female writers created their works in those languages. Names such as Hassana ar-Tamimiyya (10th century, Andalusia), Hafsa bint Hamdun al-Hiariyya (10th century), Maryam bint Abi Ya'qub al-Faysuli al-Ansari (11th century), Hafsa bint al-Hayy ar-Rakuniyya (1135-1191), and Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (11th century), but then also the Syrian women poet who visited Al-Andalus at the end of the thirteenth century, Sāra al-Halabiyya, currently begin to surface and enter the new literary histories, finally more open to many different significant voices among both genders and among the various languages.

Leonor, however, wrote her *Memorias* in Spanish, and she barely mentions the representatives of other religions. But she lived in Andalusia, she had to struggle hard to survive major political turmoil, and grave hardship for her family. Leonor López de Córdoba belongs to a group of medieval Spanish women writers whom we are beginning to get to know better only for some time now. This group also includes sor Constanza de Castilla, sor Teresa de Cartagena, sor Juana de la Cruz, sor María de Santo Domingo, and Florencia Pinar. Then we know some verses from women such as Mayor Arias and Tecla Borja, here excluding many works transmitted to us anonymously that could have been composed by women. Leonor seems to have been the earliest Castilian writer from the Iberian Peninsula, as far as current literary-historical research can tell—there were Arabic and Hebrew women poets before her, as noted above—and then we have to move rapidly into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in order to identify other female writers from that world. This makes the testimony of Leonor extraordinarily important and meaningful for the history of medieval Spanish literature, and for the history of secular, vernacular medieval European literature at large.

Leonor López de Córdoba was born in Calatayud in December of 1362 or January of 1363 into a mighty family that supported King Pedro I el Cruel or Justiciero (Peter the Cruel). Her parents were Martín López de Córdoba, master of the royal chamber, and his wife, Sancha Carillo, grand-daughter of King Alfonso XI and niece of King Pedro I. She married, at the tender age of seven (in formal, political terms), Ruy Gutiérrez de Henestrosa, son of Juan Fernández de Henestrosa, King Pedro's head valet and head majordomo of Queen Blanca (Blanche de

Bourbon), and she moved with him to Carmona south of Sevilla, where they lived with the king's children. After King Pedro had been murdered by his brother Enrique de Trastámara in 1369, the latter besieged Carmona and finally took the city in 1371. Although he had promised safe conduct to Martín López, he broke this pledge, apprehended his opponent, a partisan of the murdered king, and had him publicly executed. Leonor was imprisoned together with other members of her family in the dockyard of Sevilla, the Atarazanas.

Their miserable life there lasted for eight years, until she was released, following Enrique's death in May of 1379 and could move to her mother's family, that is, to her aunt María García Carrillo, Countess of Aguilar, in Córdoba, though still suffering from the disgrace brought upon them by the king. All her family members and relatives had died in the prison, except her husband. In 1392 the black death reached Córdoba, so Leonor and her family fled to Santa Ella and later to Aguilar, where her son died of the epidemic. Afraid of becoming infected, her aunt's family asked her to leave, so Leonor was forced to return to Córdoba.

On May 25, or June 26, 1404 she was appointed as the first-ranked chambermaid, that is, advisor and confidant, for the Queen Catalina de Lancaster, which rankled some of her male contemporaries because she practically ruled the country. However, in 1412 she lost the queen's favor and was expelled from the court under threat of being burnt at the stake if she ever returned. She spent the rest of her life in Córdoba where she created two foundations in 1423 and 1428. She died sometime between July 4 and 10, 1430 and was buried in the chapel which she had ordered to be constructed in 1409, situated in the church of the Monastery of San Pablo de Córdoba. All these aspects of her later life are, of course, not covered by her *Memorias*.

While the historian can draw more biographical information about her in the *Crónica de Juan II* by Alvar García de Santa María and in the *Crónica del reinado de Pedro I* by the Chancellor López de Ayala, her personal account, as brief and limited as it seems, offers the most personal perspectives and stands out as a fascinating document determined by literary as well as by other narrative features. During her years of imprisonment in Sevilla, between 1401 and 1404, Leonor dictated her *Memorias* to a scribe. At first sight, for sure, this is not a literary document in the traditional sense of the word, and so it challenges us in our reflections on women's contribution to the written word, and hence to the literary canon. But at closer examination we recognize the tremendously personal involvement, the passion and dedication,

hence the author's real and deep commitment to the written word which provides her with the critical medium to transform her difficult life which was subject to royal idiosyncracies into a platform for her personal defense, self-realization, self-representation, and also her own self-transformation into a mouthpiece of larger ideals and values.

If we, hence, consider Leonor's fascinating literary or historiographical statement in light of other texts written by late medieval women, we quickly recognize strategic similarities bonding some of those writers together. Even though the differences to Christine de Pizan or Helene Kottannerin are certainly vast, those melt away quickly when we examine in detail the writing strategies and purposes in this Spanish memorial narrative. Here we encounter a female writer who has realized the significance of writing for her political and subjective self-realization. As much as she emphasizes, above all, her personal family history, discussing marriage arrangements and other political agreements, the *Memoria* ultimately prove to be, after all, an early example of Spanish autobiographical writing.

All the same questions regarding the texts by Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–after 1438) or Helene Kottannerin could be raised here as well, and the critical response would always result in a diffuse new definition of literature and writing at large. In this regard, Leonor contributed considerably to the development of women's literature at large during the late Middle Ages, although she did not rely on fictional narrative strategies. Of course, her *Memorias* prove to be quite different material than fictional texts produced at her time, and yet they are strong and remarkable representatives of the female discourse on how to allow female writers get their words heard and listened to. Even though Leonor did not express a particular interest in creating a literary work, she proved to be an accomplished author who knew how to handle both historiographical, autobiographical, religious, and also very emotional language.

The discussions and readings during our Institute made it possible for me to gain a solid theoretical and historical perspective regarding the situation of multicultural and multi-religious Iberia during the late Middle Ages. Of course, Leonor was a devout Christian, and she said virtually nothing about Arabs or Islam, but her *Memorias* reflect actual conditions in Andalusia during the late fourteenth century and allow us to grasp the political and cultural situation there as perceived through the lens of a female writer.

But the concept of Mediterranean Studies, combined with the notion of transculturality, contributes well to the critical analysis of Iberian female voices in the late Middle Ages. I pursued this concept further and examined the work of Leonore's near contemporary, the Scottish princess Eleonora of Austria's novel *Pontus und Sidonia* (ca. 1450s). An article grew out of that, which was published in September of 2015 (Transcultural Experiences in the Late Middle Ages: The German Literary Discourse on the Mediterranean World – Mirrors, Reflections, and Responses," *Humanities Open Access* 2015, 4(4), 676-701; doi:10.3390/h4040676 (registering DOI); <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/4/4/676>. So, altogether, the Institute in Barcelona was of great use for my own research, both in theoretical and in practical terms, that is, the opportunity to utilize major libraries there. Moreover, the exchange with the colleagues and the two leaders of the Institute was of great help, so kudos to Sharon and Brian, and of course to the invited scholars who led our discussions every week.