The title of this paper when it was first presented was rather different from the present one, and it contained the phrase, ‘problems of text and image.’ Here, those words have been removed, and replaced with ‘Arab Painting’ (in quotes) and a reference to Mediterranean courtly culture. The title’s change has, in addition to the usual peregrinations followed by a project between its initial presentation and its publication date, several explanations, and their enumeration and brief explication will serve as an introduction to the present essay. First, had I allowed the words ‘problems of text and image’ to remain, readers would have assumed that I intended to treat, in detail and at length, relationships between the text and the images of the Hadīth Bayāḏ wa Riyāḏ (Vat. Ar. Ris. 368). This matter, however, has already been addressed in another publication, and I stand by the conclusions reached there: that the manuscript’s almost certainly early-13th-century image programme is superior in quality to the text, particularly in terms of the relatively unsophisticated linguistic register of the latter; that the images were specifically conceived and placed in order to illustrate and explicate the love story they accompany; and that, particularly in the second half of the manuscript, they also serve (perhaps with a humorous intent) as a visual handbook for would-be courtly lovers attempting to overcome the ravages of lovesickness while remaining this side of acceptable courtly etiquette, but still ‘get the girl’ in the end. The present essay will address, instead, the stylistic affiliations of BR’s images within the larger group of images deemed by scholarship to compose the category of ‘Arab Painting,’ and will explain this relationship through emphasizing an aspect of the images which has not, to date, been given much attention: their subject matter. BR’s text recounts the trials and tribulations of a young Syrian dandy named Bayāḏ who accompanied his father, a merchant, to al-Andalus. Left to his own devices while his father exercised his trade, the young man saw, atop a tree, a beautiful slave girl (Riyāḏ).
as he wandered, one day, among the gardens along the shores of  the river Tharthār. He recited verses to her, made a date with her, and (of course) fell in love with her at first sight. In order to aid him in reaching his goal, he engages the aid of  an Old Woman (the text’s ‘ājūz), medieval Mediterranean mediatrix par excellence. She succeeds in introducing him into a majlis held in the palace of  the lady, or Sayyida, to whom Riyād belongs, but the majlis proves to be disastrous for the hero’s hopes because, after an excess of  love-song singing, his beloved openly and sincerely declares her love for him, thus committing an unforgivable breach of  courtyard etiquette and occasioning her separation from her beloved. The remainder of  the plot consists of  efforts on the part of  various mediators, including the ‘ājūz, to reinstate the girl into her mistress’ good graces, and to reunite the lovers. The text is a combination of  unrhymed prose and notably pedestrian poetry, with much of  the latter dedicated to fully explicating the miseries of  lovesickness.

To a one, and as might be expected, BR’s images are concerned with love, and particularly with courtly love; this, more than anything else, serves to distinguish them from the ‘Central Islamic’ images from which they are generally assumed to derive. None of  the other text-image groups examined in this collection deals with similar subject matter, nor am I aware of  a single 12th- or 13th-century illustrated manuscript from an Arabic-speaking context that does. Although stories concerned with love and its practice certainly continued to circulate during the centuries in question, it appears that they had considerably greater cultural visibility in al-Andalus than they did elsewhere in the Arabic-speaking regions of  the Islamic world. I consider this fact to be of  capital importance in the determination of  the relationship between these Andalusī images and their ‘Central Islamic’ counterparts. Moreover, although image programmes do not appear to have been produced to accompany love stories, courtly or otherwise, in the ‘Central Islamic Lands’ during the 13th century, a substantial percentage of  the European or Romance secular manuscripts concerned with the theme of  love from that period were lavishly illustrated. As I have argued extensively in a forthcoming publication, BR’s text would almost certainly not have been written in the form that it was had it not been for contact with European romance traditions, particularly the roman idyllique. The necessity to produce an image programme for a text for which a visual tradition did not yet exist, I believe, explains the complex relationships the BR images exhibit with, on the one hand, their ‘Central Islamic’ counterparts and, on the other, luxury objects of  markedly local relevance.

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The image programme of  BR is generally accepted as an example of  13th-century Andalusī ‘Arab painting.’ In other words, the paintings are consistently characterized as, on the one hand, being derived from the traditions of  book painting proceeding from the so-called ‘Central Islamic Lands,’ but, on the other hand, as being distinguished by clear and easily identifiable local traits (most often signaled are architectural details; these, indeed, have served best to convince scholarship at large of  BR’s Andalusī provenance). In terms of  their relationship to their purported eastern models, the images are almost always qualified, as in Ugo Monneret de Villard’s very first discussion of  them, as retardataire. In terms of  their relationship to other Andalusī objects, the similarities to date observed by scholars are, principally, formal; the fact that subject matter (that of  the courtly soiree, or majlis) also unites paintings and objects into a group has not been considered.

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3 Robinson 2006a. Relationships between BR and the roman idyllique will also be taken up in Robinson 2006b.

4 These associations have been strengthened recently by work done by Antonio Almagro (Almagro 1999) on the two-levelled, Almohad-period patio known as the Casa de la Contratación and located within the Sevillan Reales Alcázares. The Sayyida’s gardens, within the palace where a great deal of  the action takes place, appear to definitively correspond to this quintessentially ‘high-end’ Andalusī prototype, and the recent identification of  other patios of  this sort within the compound of  the Alcázares, one of  which appears to have been built during the 14th century under the patronage of  Pedro I ‘El Cruel’ de Castilla, attests to its continued popularity and cultural significance following the Christian [re-]conquest of  the Almohad capital.

5 Ettinghausen 1962.