Arthur in the Alhambra?
Narrative and Nasrid Courtly Self-Fashioning in The Hall Of Justice Ceiling Paintings

Cynthia Robinson
Department of Art History and Visual Culture, GM08 Goldwin Smith Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA

Abstract
This essay reconsiders the “Arthurian” identification of a number of the scenes that compose the ornamental program of the painted ceilings above the northern and southern alcobas of the Alhambra’s Hall of Justice, proposing a reading that privileges Castilian versions of well-known courtly romances over French ones. The scenes are read as representations of the stories of Flores y Blancaflor, as well as Tristán de Leonís. Both tales, however, have been further altered and adapted in order to privilege the ideological concerns of the Nasrid court, both as an Islamic political entity with an agenda of jihād and—in a fashion that could easily be viewed as contradictory—as a participant in medieval Iberia’s much-discussed frontier culture, which involved a “marriage of convenience” with Castilian allies.

Keywords
Arthurian iconography, Floire et Blanchefleur, Tristan and Isolde

The courtly themes and “Christian” style of the paintings atop the northern- and southern-most of the three shallow alcoves that compose the so-called Hall of Justice of the Alhambra’s Palace of the Lions have led scholars to assume their incomprehensibility both to their original audience and their patrons (Illustrations 6 and 13). Valérie Gonzáles, for example, states that their removal or disappearance would not change the palace’s aesthetic or iconographic message in the slightest.1 This essay, however, together

1 Jesús Bermúdez Pareja, Pinturas sobre piel en la Alhambra de Granada, Publicaciones del Patronato de la Alhambra; 1 (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife, 1987); Jerrilynn D. Dodds, “Paintings in the Hall of Justice of the Alhambra: iconography and
with the others that form this collection, intends to demonstrate that thepaintings are both an integral and a fully integrated part of the program ofsignification of the structure they adorn. Moreover, as I will argue, it is intheir iconography rather than in their style that the key to their importanceis found. The motifs on the ceilings contain a multiplicity of meanings whichboth communicate a coherent narrative with a social message tailor-made to Nasrid interests, and exist in direct relationship to the palace’s larger program of signification.2

Assumptions concerning the paintings’ “Otherness” to the palace’s larger“Islamic” ornamental discourse have lead to the identification of iconographicsources whose meaning, absurdly, must first be effaced before theirincorporation into the Nasrid palace’s system of signification may be permitted.Dodds, for example, whose article still serves as a point of departure for all other scholars taking up the topic, singles out “seven independent . . . centers of action,” six of which she identifies as belonging to “the Arthurian cycle.” Examples of these include the “Tryst Beneath the Tree” (Illustration 7) from the French version(s) of Tristan and Isolde, which Dodds sees (mistakenly, I believe) as having been conflated or confused with the “Fountain of Youth;”3 a “Wild Man who, having captured a Lady, is being attacked by a Christian knight” (identified by Dodds as a


2 This article also serves as the prelude to a monographic study which will seek to fullyassess the Alhambra within its cultural context[s]—the Nasrid court, the Iberian Peninsula and the Islamic and Mediterranean world[s] during the late fourteenth and early fifteenthcenturies.

3 Rather than a “misunderstanding” of the iconography of the Fountain of Youth theme, the figures which Dodds (191) refers to as “little naked people swimming” are in fact caryatids who hold up the upper basin of the fountain in question. The topos of a marble fountain with mimetic or lifelike sculptures of human figures, while it may at first glance seem quintessentially European or “Western,” was in fact of interest to Nasrid poets who almost certainly composed and/or dedicated some of their verses in the Palace of the Lions itself. This issue, along with the interesting perspective on attitudes toward mimesis inNasrid culture which it offers us, will be treated in Cynthia Robinson, “Toward a Poetics ofOrnament in Granada’s Alhambra: Allegorizing Metaphor,” for a festschrift in honor of Oleg Grabar’s eightieth birthday. Edited by Gulru Necipoğlu; to be published in 2008.