As Cynthia Robinson has recently highlighted, in the current generation of scholarship, study of the Alhambra (fig. 1), a palatial city constructed in Granada by the Nasrids (r. 1238–1492), the last major Muslim dynasty in the Iberian Peninsula, has been oriented by the seminal work of Oleg Grabar. Of particular importance for the field in general and the present essay in particular has been Grabar’s assertion that the “iconographic inscriptions” were “chosen in order to emphasize some special purpose of the building or to make an association which is not a priori obvious.” Grabar refers here concretely to the abundant poetic epigraphy throughout the Alhambra, which had long been recognized as one of its most salient features. But typical of his work, one finds theoretical richness in his hybrid formulation, “iconographic inscriptions,” which opens a new perspective on the interrelationship of word and image, epigraphy and architecture. Much important work has followed that lead. Informed by semiotic theory, José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, Valérie Gonzalez, and D. Fairchild Ruggles in their various ways read the Alhambra as a text; that is, they take its architectural structures, gardens as well as palaces, and its decoration to constitute elements in a system of signs designed to communicate a message—a message most often understood to concern the power of the sultans who were patrons of the works.

Robinson herself stands within that general line of inquiry. Drawing particularly on Puerta Vilchez, she has opened new directions through what may be called a cultural studies approach—studying Islamic buildings “within the cultural framework intended by patrons for very specific publics”—dating back to her work on the arts of the taifa period. First, Robinson considers built structures as the site of cultural practices, such as the majlis of the court elite in the Aljafería in Saragossa, social assemblies that included poetic recitation as a principal element. Her examination raises poetry from an incidental ornament—if one may still speak of ornament as incidental after Grabar—to the level of a major contributor to the construction of a fundamental aesthetics embracing architecture no less than literature. Second, she demonstrates that those aesthetic principles may be used to draw a new map of cultural interaction between Muslim al-Andalus and its Christian neighbors. The latter point is especially relevant to Robinson’s analysis when she turns her attention to the Palace of the Lions in the Alhambra.

The bridge that carries Robinson’s argument from the Aljafería to the Alhambra is a verse inscribed on the wall of a different palace in the Nasrid complex, the Qalahurra al-jadīda of Yusuf I (r. 1333–54), commonly known today as the Tower of the Captive. The verse, composed by Ibn al-Jayyab (1274–1349), a court poet and vizier of the Nasrid sultans, reads: “It [the Qalahurra] speaks bādī poetry: paronomasias, antithesis, caesuras, and muraṣṣa (muṭṭab-baq, muḥṭassan, and muraṣṣa).” Antonio Fernández-Puertas has observed that explicit reference to poetic devices was unusual in mid-fourteenth century Arabic verse. Against that backdrop, the verse in the Qalahurra al-jadida caught the attention of scholars such as Puerta Vilchez and Emilio García Gómez, the philologist to whom all contemporary work on the poetic inscriptions of the Alhambra is indebted. But it was Robinson in her In Praise of Song who highlighted the importance of bādī poetry, which originated towards the end of the ninth century at the Abbasid court in Baghdad and was prevalent in medieval Arabic poetry, for understanding the aesthetics of al-Andalus throughout the taifa period, thus providing the more proximate point of departure for my discussion. Robinson observed, for instance, that al-Badī was the name of one
of the palaces of al-Ma’mun (r. 1043–75) in Toledo in the taifa period, which “indicates that both [al-Ma’mun] and his contemporaries conceived of palace and poetics as intimately connected.” A detailed examination of Ibn al-Jayyab’s verse in the Qalahurra al-jadīda is the heart of the study that follows, but before turning to that reading, I would frame the underlying issues in my approach to poetic figuration, particularly with respect to its differences with Robinson’s argument.

In studying the poetics of the taifa period, Robinson had demonstrated the centrality of “transformative metaphor,” the effect of which, she summarizes in “Marginal Ornament,” was “fusion and sameness.” Delineating the distinct cultural context of the later Nasrid period, Robinson cites a new and contradictory emphasis on mimetic description—that is, literal imitatio—articulated in the poetics of Hazim al-Qartajanni (1211–85), an Andalusian poet and literary critic, as well as a corresponding shift in the Alhambra (as compared to the Aljafería) to “aesthetic principles of differentiation and categorization.” Although in Ibn al-Jayyab’s verse the reference to badi’ would suggest continuity between his own poetics and the theory and practice of this tradition dating back to the taifa period and earlier, Robinson declares that the four tropes enumerated in the verse “are explicitly related to the differentiation and organization of the various ornamental themes, materials, and techniques of the ‘Tower of the Captive,’” which is to say, following her argument, that they pertain to the work of mimesis. Yet Robinson also notes that “a new element has been added to al-Qartajanni’s theory of poetic mimesis” in the late fourteenth century, expounded by Ibn al-Khatib (1313–74), a vizier and an illustrious literary figure at the Nasrid court. Robinson refers to this element as “bewitchment,” which she characterizes as “an aesthetic