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What if philology is not enough?
The *oral theory* as an aid in the analysis of lyrical poetry

As people of late literacy, as those who still read stories printed on paper, brought up in the cult of the book, and even more so as philologists and editors of manuscripts, we treat writing as sacred. We collate copies and transmissions, write hundreds of dissertations arguing about the correct interpretation of one character. But did their authors attach equal importance to the letter of their texts? And even to their authorship? Would a modern scholar write his/her treatise and sign it in the name of Plato or Aristotle, as our ancestors did? Might they have had different goals and ideas, was it simply that they did not need to constantly update their list of publications?

While this philological accuracy may well serve, for example, philosophical texts (or their present-day readers who feel compelled to categorize strictly concepts and notions), it is not the case for poetry. This is especially true for lyrical poetry, composed for singing and to be performed according to the singer's or to his audience's varying preferences. A written copy of such verse might be preserved in one of dozens of versions.

For the 40-50,000 years of the so called "behavioural modernity" of *homo sapiens*, the period characterised by alphabetic writing (distinguishing vowels and consonants, which, according to Eric Havelock, began to change the way we categorize the world in the 5th century BC) is shorter than 3000. Even then its cultural incorporation was uneven. European vernacular languages began to adopt alphabetical writing about 1000 years ago, but the treatment of a text (especially an artistic one) primarily as an oral product would persist a good deal longer.

In the first part of my paper, I will present some examples of the durability of the orality of texts among early modern writers, while in the second part I would like to show how a researcher of vernacular lyric might employ the tools of oral theory. (A theory devised by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in response to the Homeric question, then developed by other Hellenists such as Margaret Alexiou and her followers to discuss the lyrical laments of women preserved mainly in epics and tragedies). This will be shown on the example of the 13th-century Galician-Portuguese *cantiga de amigo* (a woman's song to a lover), an archaic female folk genre, embraced by *Trovadores* and composed by kings and courtiers.



Date and Venue:
Wednesday, 29th June 2022, 6pm
Zentrum für Alte Kulturen („Atrium“), SR 2
Langer Weg 11, 6020 Innsbruck