

Trento 19th January 2025

Introduction to improvised poetry in ottava rima in central Italy



Emilio Meliani and Marinella Marabissi performing in Cortona, 5th September 2021.
(<https://vimeo.com/747226313>)

The *ottava rima* is a metrical structure which is often found in the *lauda* and especially in its dramatic forms. A tradition of improvised poetry in *ottava rima* is still alive in Italy and the seminar is intended to illustrate its main characteristics. Generally improvised poetry is performed in the form of

the *contrasto*, that is a poetic duel, where poets sing in turns stanzas respecting the metrical structure of the *ottava toscana*. As a guarantee of the improvisation, the second poet must start his/her stanza with the last rhyme left by the previous poets. Although the poets documented by the 20th century researchers were mainly men, now also a significant number of women take part in the *contrasto poetico*.

The poets sing following a melodic pattern which coincides with four lines and it is repeated (sometimes with significant variations) for the last four lines. The contexts and topics of the *contrasto poetico* in Toscana, Lazio and Abruzzo as well as regional and individual singing styles are briefly illustrated.

Moreover, improvised poetry in *ottava rima* is investigated through its historical sources. Among them, the description of the *contrasto poetico* in Gidino da Sommacampagna's *Trattato deli rihtmi volgari* (1380s), the documentation about the performances of the 18th century *improvvisatrici* and about the peasant poet Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani, from the Apennines in the province of Pistoia, who fascinated some researchers in Italian literature like Niccolò Tommaseo and Giambattista Giuliani.

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