This anonymous poem consists of three stanzas, each of which is followed by a refrain from which the song takes its title. The poem is a source for the fifteenth-century composer Joan Cornago’s “Missa Ayo visto lo mappamundi.” It survives in two manuscripts, suggesting its broad popularity in the Mediterranean. One was compiled by a Catalan poet-notary who lived in Naples. The composer Cornago probably gained familiarity with the song and its melody at the Neapolitan court of Alfonso I, which he visited in April 1453. This dates the song from before the middle of the fifteenth century.

The use of the image of a map is of particular interest because it suggests a court audience’s familiarity with world maps, portolan charts, and with the genre of island books known as isolarii. The poem puns the toponym Sicily against the proper name Cecilia, using both names to recall the memory of both Sicily (Cicilia) and his love Cecilia, each of which he calls more beautiful “islands” than could be seen in a tour around the Mediterranean. The anonymous court poet plays the sailor’s absence from his beloved against his familiarity with the islands on world maps by making a circular journey away from Sicily, first to Corsica and Sardinia, then east to Cyprus, Crete, and the M orea, and outside of the Mediterranean to the Castillian possessions in the Atlantic, and to England and Scotland. The itinerary traces a spiral departing from his homeland and his love as an occasion to remember his love for both. The final stanza compares his love to the “Kingdom of Two Sicilies,” as the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily were known under the Aragonese, and to the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia. (The reading “in the calendar” is not present in the manuscripts, but one codex offers a variant reading—“la terç’ à·n lo calandari”—which suggests some corruption in the Italian text.) The poet’s love cannot be found on any chart because, unlike them, he implies, she is divine.


Translation and commentary by Daniel Brownstein. The image of Sicily and part of Italy is taken from map 10 in Battista Agnese [portolan atlas] ca. 1544 (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G1001.A4 1544, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gnrlnag.html). The broadsheet is printed on Fabriano with a Vandercook No. 4 press at the Juniper Press, Madison, Wisconsin. The type is Narrow Bembo Condensed Italic set by Michael and Winifred Bixler, Skaneateles, New York. Block by Royal Graphix, La Crosse, Wisconsin. 216 copies have been initialed and numbered.

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