

LATIN ROOTS OF PHILIPPINE LITERATURE AND CULTURE

by Lito B. Zulueta



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The essay that follows this piece is not part of a larger publication project, at least it wasn't conceived as such at first: it was written in January 2021 and has remained unpublished because it wasn't really meant to be published, not at once, perhaps. But I must confess that at that time, I was goaded by the prospect of the following month, February, being Valentine's Month, in writing the historical, philosophical, and literary moorings of love and romance, as Filipinos understand them at present.

Since then, I have written similar essays on Philippine literature, mainly term papers for my Ph.D. Literature classes at the Graduate School, which I hope to redact for publication as essays in popular journals, or to burnish and supply with more learned footnotes to heighten their pedantic

polish for publication in academic journals, preferably those internationally indexed. The latter reflects the breadth of the enterprise I have pursued: “research” or, in Spanish, “*investigación*,” into the Latin moorings of Philippine culture. The former reflects my “publicist’s” bias, and by that, I mean employing “publicism” (in the classic European term of the term as both polemic and consciousness-raising), or “popular journalism,” to better spread and make readers understand rather arcane, perhaps technical, or heretofore unknown, aspects of Philippine literature.

Therefore the project is more or less to trace the European roots of Philippine literature and culture—the roots being Latin in general and Spanish in particular. Postcolonial academics, of course, may decry this as Eurocentric and even anti-Filipino. Still, I focus on the European roots of Philippine culture as a corrective to the Anglo-American bias of much of our literary taste and scholarship. Moreover, whatever Eurocentrism may be is checked or balanced by some relevant recourse to transoceanic Hispanic studies (for example, the *korido* being a naturalization of the Mexican *corrido*, which in itself is an Americanization of the European metrical romance). These literary types and forms inherited from Spain and Europe were eventually naturalized into Philippine literary and cultural forms.

Admittedly, this project draws from my double role as a literary journalist and literature teacher.

ROMANCE AND ITS INVENTION IN THE PHILIPPINES

by Lito B. Zulueta

The Philippines' Romeo and Juliet are by widespread acclaim and historic canonization *Florante at Laura*, the star-crossed lovers of the eponymously titled *corrido* by Balagtas. Like Shakespeare's tragedy which is set "in fair Verona," the magnum opus of the Tagalog bard is exotically set in the Middle Ages in the dark and dismal forest of Epirus off *Florante's* "luckless land" of Albania. The anachronism should at least indicate that "romance" in the Philippines is an import; it's not native to the Philippines. It's an "invention."

Let me explain. *Florante at Laura* (F&L) is a "*korido*," which is derived from the Mexican "*corrido*," a ballad that tells a story. The genre is another proof of the dynamic cultural exchanges between the two countries for 250 years from the 16th to the early 19th century when the Philippines was administered from the Spanish vice-royalty of Mexico. Tagalog scholars prefer to call F&L "*awit*" or song, but it is obvious that the *awit* is a Filipinized form of the *corrido*, which is the Mexican adaptation of the Spanish metrical romances. The Mexican *corrido* and the Filipino *awit* and *korido* are indigenized forms of the European romances; they're imports that have been naturalized.

Mexican *corridos* are, like F&L, in quatrains. But unlike Balagtas' work, which runs 402 lines (this does not include the famous dedications to "Celia" and the "Reader"), Mexican *corridos* run for only a couple of stanzas, a dozen or so at most. This is because, according to T.H. Pardo de Tavera, "*corrido*" is a Mexican corruption of the Spanish "*ocurrido*" (something that

occurred). Thus the corrido in Mexico has been transformed from a medieval Spanish metrical romance into a tale in verse about a current event. Corridos became especially prominent during the Mexican revolution in the early 19th century. They continue to be written today as shown by the merry cottage industry of “narcocorridos,” ballads about drug trafficking and drug wars in the Mexican narco-state.

But while Mexico’s is about a current event, Philippine corridos have remained a body of fantastic and legendary tales, the materials and themes of which belong to Europe and which were introduced by the Spaniards, such as “Jaime del Prado,” “Doce Pares de Francia,” “Bernardo del Carpio.” (Nowadays to denote the naturalization of the Mexican corrido, literature scholars call the Philippine metrical tale “korido.”) Many of the Philippine corridos were written in octosyllabic verse, so that F&L, written in dodecasyllabic verse, is classified by some scholars today as an “awit” or song. But this is a later development introduced by Tagalog scholars. In the late 19th century, writers and scholars such as Pardo de Tavera, Vicente Barrantes, Wenceslao Retana, and Teodoro M. Kalaw classified F&L as a corrido. They would be closer to Balagtas’ time. Moreover, the Visayans also wrote metrical romances, which they called corridos. The Tagalog corrido as separate from the Tagalog awit would be a later distinction by Tagalog scholars in the 20th century.

In any case, whether corrido, korido, or awit, F&L is a tale in verse depicting a hero’s exploits and adventures. Better still, it is a metrical romance” brought to the country by Spain via “Nueva Espana”—Mexico. Metrical romances are not native to the Philippines: they are originally European forms “Filipinized” by Balagtas and other Philippine poets.

“Romance,” contrary to today’s popular notion, was not really about love and its wages, although it may include such subjects in the narrative: “romance” originally signified a work written in the French language, which

evolved from a dialect of Latin, the Roman language. Of course, Latin also gave birth to the other Romance languages, such as Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, so that the metrical romances were written not only by the French but by other Europeans.

The metrical romance is a verse narrative form that developed in 12th century France and then spread to other European countries to displace the various epic and heroic forms of classic literature. Romance is distinguished from the epic, also a verse narrative, in that it represents not a heroic age of tribal wars, as in Homer's "Iliad," but a courtly and chivalric age—the age of knights and their adventures, of knights and their damsels. Its standard plot is the quest undertaken by a knight to gain a lady's favor; the main interest is courtly love, so the knight fights tournaments and slays dragons and monsters for the damsel's sake. It stresses the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honor, mercy to an opponent, and highly developed and exquisite manners.

Chivalric romance emerged from the Christian lay knighthood. After the barbarian overrun of the Roman empire and during the ensuing "dark ages," the Church made inroads and converted the barbarian overlords and their peoples. The early Church rejected war and the military profession but had to seek a *modus vivendi* with the warlike ideals and standards of the Germanic hordes. By the 11th century, there was the lay knighthood, "which gives further development to the idea of the defense of the Church, the religious symbolism of the military life, and the important connection with the cult of saints," wrote the German historian Carl Erdmann. The Christian knights later took part in the Crusades in the late 11th century, and the knightly ethos characterized the French epics. Chivalric romances and courtly love poetry came later in the 12th century. Needless to say, like barbarian wars Christianized by the Church and rationalized into the theory of the just war, courtly love is desire sublimated as ideal love and spiritual

romance. The knight was sworn to chastity. His libido was, in Freudian dynamics, sublimated to serve a higher calling, his raging loins channeled from their base instincts to a higher calling; in short, sex was spiritualized.

Love and romance are the inventions of the medievals. Contrary to common opinion, love was foreign to the classical age of the Greeks and the Romans. “The literature of the ancients did not rank love very high on the whole,” said the German philologist and scholar Erich Auerbach in “Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.” “It is a predominant subject neither in tragedy nor the great epic.” Love took a “central position” in medieval courtly romances as a spur for the knight to commit heroic deeds. “Love in the courtly romances is already not infrequently the immediate occasion for deeds of valor,” said Auerbach. “There is nothing surprising in this if we consider the complete absence of practical motivation through a political and historical context. Love, an essential and obligatory ingredient of knightly perfection, is a substitute for other possibilities of motivation that are otherwise lacking. This implies the fictitious order of events in which the most significant actions are performed primarily for a lady’s favor; it also implies the superior rank assigned to love as a poetic theme that became so important in European literature.”

Thus, love and romance are the inventions of the Middle Ages. They’re a European invention. Etymologically, “invention” comes from the Old French “*invencion*,” a medieval term meaning “finding” or “discovery.” The meaning survives in the Catholic Church feast every May 3, called the Invention of the Cross, commemorating the finding or discovery of the true cross by Empress Helen, Constantine’s mother. “Invention” here is related to the old understanding of the word “legend”; hence the title of the medieval best-seller by Blessed Jacobus da Voragine, OP, *The Golden Legend*, about the lives of saints. “Legend” here means “history” or “life” or “biography,” not myth or fiction as understood pejoratively in contemporary times. This is why I use

“Invention” in my title.

I use it also because it echoes the favorite word of the postmoderns, “construction.” Love and romance are inventions or constructions brought about by, at least based on Foucauldian terms, “discourses” or knowledge production about them. The chivalric songs and romances and other literary writings were discourses that constituted a body of knowledge about love and romance. During the Spanish period, the natives were fed a steady diet of metrical romances, such as “Amadis de Gaul,” “Bernardo del Carpio,” and “Infantes de Lara.” F&L was obviously written along the vein of metrical romances; they should therefore be a key discourse in Philippine knowledge about love and romance.

Ancient folk songs about love

But wasn't there any “indigenous” discourse on love in the Philippines before the Spanish arrival in the 16th century? The early Philippines mainly had oral literature “since these natives are not acquainted with the art of writing,” according to Miguel de Loarca. While the natives had scripts, they wrote only to send letters, not to commit their oral literature to texts. They also didn't have paper; they wrote on bamboo or the bark of trees. In any case, if they had paper, it would have been destroyed by the tropical elements.

During the Spanish period, there were attempts to record oral literature: the missionaries cited excerpts from them in their *vocabularios*; the Bicol epic “Ibalong” was translated in part into Spanish by Fr. Jose Castanon and published in Spain in 1895. These oral literary forms were mainly ceremonial songs for the dead, rowing songs (especially the Visayans who were traveling interisland), and heroic songs, which Loarca wrote was about “the exploits of olden times ... (so that the natives) always possess a

knowledge of past events.” It is because these oral forms were committed to memory that many of them were recorded during the 20th century.

As for “romantic literature,” the early Filipinos may have songs of love and courtship. I said “may” because while the love between a man and a woman should always occasion exalted poetry, the friar-philologists were wont to censor them or to refuse to admit them as literary samples in their dictionaries for obvious reasons. Research in the 20th century managed to save some of them, notably the *ambahan* of the Hanunuo Mangyan of Mindoro and the *laji* of the Ivatan of Batanes.

The *ambahan* is a witty exchange between a man and a woman. The late Dutch anthropologist Antoon Postma who researched the Mangyans translated one *ambahan* in which a young man woos a young woman:

My dear girl I like so much,
tomorrow when the sun shines,
we will leave this place of yours.
Let us go together then!
Both of us to be on the way
to my mother to propose.
She will be so very glad.

She initially refuses but gives in in the end:

My boy, busy courting me,
frankly, I will tell you then;
I don't like to give you up.
As long as you are with me,
It will only be through death!
It will only be through death!
Or my father, let them try,
all their prayers would not help!

Ivatan scholar Florentino Hornedo said the laji is the generic term for the lyric poetic tradition of Batanes, many of which would be poems about love or marriage. Unlike the ambahan, which is written in Mangyan script on bamboo, it is an “unwritten” or sung tradition. Here is one laji on how love overcomes all odds:

Where did you go yesterday? I have asked all
the passers-by about you,
but in vain. How could you find me?
I was hidden by my father and my mother
in the hollow of a bamboo; they stopped it
with the husk of a young coconut; and I may not be opened
with the hands, but I may be opened
by love for you, my beloved.

However dainty and entertaining, these poems could hardly be called discourses on love. They're folk songs that can be traced to the various aspects of the life and customs of the people of the age; as Jose Villa Panganiban wrote of them, “they are spontaneous and informal expressions indicating personal reactions to the experiences of daily life.” Love and its ceremonies came from the metrical romances of Spain and Europe.

Love in pre-Hispanic times

Upon the Spanish contact, missionary accounts of the natives hardly mention courtship or wooing conventions; they mainly deal with betrothals, marriage practices, and divorce. Jesuit Fr. Pedro Chirino, in his *Relacion de las Islas Filipinas* (published in Valladolid, Spain in 1604), said he had stayed in the Philippines for 10 years “before I learned that there was any man who had married several wives.” He had not known a polygamous native—not in “Manila, Mindoro, Marinduque, and Panai”—until he got to “Ibabao and Leite” (the former is around today’s Mandaue in Cebu). Apparently, the early

native stuck to one wife: "It is certainly, however, not a general custom in the Filipinas to marry more than one wife; and even in districts where this is done the practice is by no means general." (But it seems some men had concubines.)

Chirino believed that "the practice of having several wives" belonged to the Muslims who introduced it to the Visayans of Mindanao: "I believe that this evil custom in the islands of Mindanao and Leite has been derived from this sect; they are increasing throughout the world, propagating their cursed doctrine with as much zeal and concern as we do our holy faith."

As for the women, there were reports the Visayans in Mindanao could have more than one husband. "I had, however, been once told by a Spaniard that in a certain part of Mindanao, toward Dapitan, it was the custom of the Bisayan women to marry two husbands," Chirino wrote. This would not have been due to the Muslim influence since Islam allows polygyny only to men.

While Visayans tried to procure marriage from among their class, the Tagalogs were more liberal: "they are satisfied if the wife is not of inferior rank." Marriage between relations on the first degree of consanguinity was allowed among Visayans and Tagalogs: "Uncle and niece marry as readily as do first cousins; but brother and sister, grandfather and granddaughter, or father and daughter, can in no case marry."

While there may be no "romantic conventions," there are "distinct formalities of betrothal, which are accompanied by conventional penalties, most rigorously executed." Betrothal was made even before the betrothed was born! "Here is an example: Si Apai promises to marry Cai Polosin; these married persons make an agreement with another married pair, while the wives are with child, that if the wombs of their respective wives should bear a male and a female these two children shall be joined in marriage, under penalty of 10 gold taels. This compact is solemnized by a feast, where they

eat, drink, and become intoxicated; and he who later is the occasion of breaking the contract must pay the penalty. This is betrothal.”

According to Chirino, the marriage dowry is paid by the husband, “an amount agreed upon, and fixed in accordance with his means.” In addition to the dowry, the man must give presents to the parents and relatives, “more or less according to his means.” The Jesuit father said that in Panay, he had witnessed a top Augustinian priest preside over the marriage of the son of the chief of the Tigbauan and the daughter of the chief of Oton. “I learned that besides the dowry (which was very large) and a generous offering sent to the convent, the husband bestowed, in his grandeur and munificence, presents upon the parents of the bride, her brothers and relations, and even upon the numerous slaves.”

As it turned out, this particular marriage between the children of two royal families didn’t last. According to Chirino, it appears that marriages in the early Philippines were revoked and ended in divorce “on the slightest occasion.” “If the cause of divorce is unjust, and the man parts from his wife, he loses the dowry; if it is she who leaves him, she must restore the dowry to him,” the Jesuit wrote. “But if the man has just cause for divorce and leaves her, his dowry must be restored to him; if in such a case the wife leaves him, she retains the dowry. For the husband, the adultery of his wife is sufficient ground for divorce; for the woman, just cause for divorce is more limited.” In divorce, the children would be divided equally between the spouses—ditto with enslaved people. If the couple had only one enslaved person, he would have to render one-half of his service to one and the other half to the other.

Ancient sex toy

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of “romantic” practices in the pre-Hispanic Philippines is genital piercing or penal beading. Also known as “pearling,” the earliest account of it was by no less than Antonio Pigafetta, chronicler of the Magellan expedition (1519-1521). Nearly a century later,

the practice continued to thrive, as shown in Antonio Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (1609): "Men skillfully make a hole in their virile member near its head, and insert therein a serpent's head, either of metal or ivory, and fasten it with a peg of the same material passed through the hole, so that it cannot become unfastened." The practice was said to increase sexual pleasure, especially of women. The penile ring struck the first Spanish chroniclers that, nowadays, Philippine sailors are known worldwide to sport in their sex organs the "bolitas," the Spanish word for small balls or marbles.

Not surprisingly, Spanish missionary chroniclers condemned the practice, like Fr. Francisco Ignacio Alcina, a Jesuit missionary in the Eastern Visayas near the second half of the 17th century, calling it "vile and diabolic." But even secular authors condemned it. The anonymous author of the *Boxer Codex* called the practice "abominable and bestial." In the English translation of Morga's *Sucesos* by the Hakluyt Society of England in 1867, the passage about penile rings was not translated and was retained in its original Spanish; apparently, the translator found it too shocking for Victorian sensibilities.

Native women weren't as prudish or squeamish as the Victorians since men did the controversial practice to satisfy their partners. Pigafetta said the men of Cebu underwent terrible practices, which obviously involved much pain and agony because it was the wish of the "babai" (women). The missionary chroniclers said the women mocked those men who did not wear the ring, calling them sissies. The practice should show that women in the early Philippines weren't exactly docile or innocent or servile to males. Morga called native women "vicious and sensual." He noted perverseness in both early men and women for undertaking "lascivious methods" of intercourse.

To the profound shock, especially of the early missionaries, the penile ring was called by the Visayans "*sacra*." How could such a depraved and perverted practice be called "sacred"! But the word may be the Spanish

translation of “*chakra*,” the Sanskrit word for “wheel,” referring to the Hindu mystical wheel or “energy points” in the body. Obviously, what the early Filipinos called “*sacra*” was derived from “*chakra*”; in this case, it was the mystical source of sexual energy.

Arrival of ‘amor cortes’

Betrothals, weddings, divorce, and kinky sex devices may give us some ideas about the “romantic practices” of the early Filipinos, but they do not constitute the love and romance we know now. Love and romance came from the European encounter starting in 1521 which was consolidated in 1565 with the return of the Spaniards. This is because the Spaniards brought with them their tales of “*amor cortes*,” or courtly love, to the Philippines.

Romantic literature and its later evolution constitute discourses that build up our knowledge and understanding of love and romance. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “Today courtly love is practical shorthand for an understanding of love that, according to some scholars, came into being during the Middle Ages and that constituted a revolution in thought and feeling, the effects of which resonated throughout Western culture.” The Middle Ages evolved what is now known as the “philosophy of love” or what the Swiss writer Denis de Rougemont calls “love in the Western world.”

Before the Middle Ages, love poetry was pure and straightforward sensual material. According to German-American romance scholar Erich Auerbach, “...up to the time of the troubadours, love poetry in the strict sense had never expressed anything other than sensual desire in all its variants, never praised anything but the material qualities of the object; the poets of love had always been conscious of treating a light theme unrelated to man’s serious concerns and unfit for sublime poetry; they had regarded their love, real or feigned, as a mere pleasure that would soon pass, or else as a

pathological, unnatural state.” All that changed when the Middle Ages evolved a mimetic art different from that of the classical era, more or less summed up in a work by the art scholar Max Dvorak: *Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art*. Pulling Europe out of the Dark Ages through its central and altogether radical teaching of the Incarnation, of God-becoming-man, and drawing from Neoplatonism with its reinterpretation of the Platonic ideas and forms from the Hellenic legacy of the collapsed Pax Romana, the Church naturalized the spirit and spiritualized earthly existence, as embodied in the literal English translation of Auerbach’s important work on Dante Alighieri—*Dante and the Earthly World*. This worldview was manifested in the literature of the Middle Ages, especially in courtly romances, by spiritualizing love and desire, reaching its apogee with *Dante’s Comedy*, now spiritualized as it were and called “divine.” Auerbach points out: “But here for the first time in Europe sensuous desire blended with the metaphysical foundations of a culture.”

This is the European-birther philosophy that governs *Florante at Laura* and continues to guide how Filipinos look at love and romance. Perhaps more than that, how they love and romance.

To be sure, in contrast to the representation of women in the early Philippines as “vicious and sensual,” these discourses consisting of courtly romances in which knights dedicate themselves to their lady loves to the point of death were largely built on the cult of the Virgin Mary, which formed a set of discourses in itself developed from early Christian times up to the Middle Ages; overall these discourses idealized, nay canonized, womanhood. Spanish missionaries introduced these discourses to the native converts, and they formed a strong part not only of their Catholic piety but of their daily life as well.

The story of F&L is by now permanently etched in our collective memory. *Florante* is tied to a tree in the dismal and dark forest of Epirus after falling into a trap by his rival Adolfo, who has taken over the Kingdom

of Albania by force. His beloved Laura has betrayed him, or so he thinks. She has indicated to Adolfo that she may yet say yes to him, but she's merely buying time to reunite with Florante or, if not, to commit suicide. But of course, Florante does not know this, so he laments her alleged perfidy while awaiting death. Two lions appear to devour him, but Aladdin slays them. The Muslim prince has been exiled from his kingdom and is nursing a broken heart since his lady love Flerida has chosen his father-king over him. Soon the two men overhear two women talking in the forest. They turn out to be Laura and Flerida. The latter says she sneaked out of the Persian kingdom dressed as a warrior to avoid marriage to Aladdin's tyrannical father. In the forest, she saw Laura about to be ravished by Adolfo. Flerida, a warrior princess if there was one, shot him down with an arrow. The two pairs of lovers are happily reunited. With Menander, Florante's friend, having overthrown the evil usurper, Florante and Laura return to Albania triumphantly while Aladdin and Flerida accept Christian baptism.

The anachronistic setting and historical background owing to the influence of chivalrous romances that were popular reading fare in the Philippines during the Spanish period, such as "Amadis de Gaula," "Las Serges de Espladian," and "Infantes de Lara." Balagtas' other known works, save perhaps for "La India Elegante y El Negrito Amante," have anachronistic settings: "Mahomet at Constanza," "Almanzor at Rosalina," and "Orosman at Zafira."

Novel of sentiment

Another influence in F&L was the Spanish "sentimental novel," a very late medieval genre emphasizing the agonies of loving. To be distinguished from the British and Continental novels of sentiment in the 18th century (Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, Rousseau's *Julie, or the New*

Heloise, and Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*), the Spanish sentimental romances had come much ahead—in the late 15th century!—starting with Diego de San Pedro's *Carcel de Amor* (Prison of Love). Oddly enough, its plot is similar to F&L: it is about the youth Leriano, a prisoner in a mysterious castle, who tells the narrator that his sufferings are because of his lady love Laureoala (very close to Laura!), who herself has been put in prison by her father, the king of Gaul, because of the false testimony by Leriano's rival, Persio. Leriano escapes, kills Persio, and rescues Laureola. But in a letter, she refuses to see him again. Dejected, Leriano slowly dies of melancholy, but not before praising women on his deathbed in true courtly-love fashion.

Aside from courtly romances, F&L may have been influenced heavily by Spanish sentimental romances. In fact, an English critic was impressed by “the deep and delicate melancholy of the race” that he purportedly felt from reading F&L. Of its passages, the most frequently quoted by generations of Filipinos are the lover's agony of Florante (here with the English translation by George St. Clair):

Ay, Laurang poo'y bakit isinuyo

*Sa iba ang sintang sa aki'y pangako,
At pinagliluhan ang tapat na puso,
Pinaggugulan mo ng luhang tumulo?*

*Di sinumpaan mo sa harap ng Langit
Na di maglililo sa aking pag-ibig?
Ipinabigay ko naman yaring dibdib,
wala sa gunita itong masasapit.*

*Katiwala't ako't iyong kariktan
Kapilas ng langit anaki'y matibay;
tapat ang puso mo't di nagunamgunam
na ang paglililo'y nasa kagandahan.*

O dear loved Laura, why let stray
The love oft sworn to me alone?
How this true heart could you betray
Which oft with tears you called your own?

You swore by Heaven you'd ne'er betray
This heart confided to your care.
And I to give my heart away,
Nor foresaw fortune so unfair!

Your beauty, part of heaven's own blue,
I deemed eternal as the skies;
As true your heart, nor then e'er knew
That falseness dwells in beauty's eyes.

Just a while back, Florante has accepted with resignation his fate
with Job-like resignation.

*Datapuwa't sino ang tatarok kaya
sa mahal mong lihim, Diyos na dakila?
Walang mangyayari sa balat ng lupa,
di may kagalingang iyong ninanasa.*

*Ay, di saan ngayon ako mangangapit!
Saan ipupukol ang tinangis-tangis,
kung ayaw na ngayong dinggin ng langit
ang sigaw ng aking malumbay na boses.*

But who, Omnipotent, dare scan
Thy mysteries unspeakable?
There's naught on earth that shows Thy plan,
Design and will unbreakable.

Ah, where shall I, unhappy, cling?
Where hurl my lamentations drear,

If heaven and earth deny this thing—
My mournful cry of grief to hear?

Florante asks God to give him the consoling thought of his beloved
Laura.

*Kung siya mong ibig na ako'y magdusa,
Langit na mataas, aking mababata,
isagi mo lamang sa puso ni Laura
ako'y minsan-minsang mapag-alaala.*

*At dito sa laot ng dusa't hinagpis,
malawak na luhang aking tinatawid,
gunita ni Laura sa naabang ibig.
siya ko na lamang ligaya sa dibdib.*

If that I suffer be thy will,
Then may thy will, O Heaven, be done!
But make my Laura's heart beat still,
From time to time, for this sad one.

And on this vast and troubled sea,
Whose waves of grief I have to best,
This thought—"Laura thinks of me"—
Shall be the sole joy of this breast.

Memories of Laura are a balm to his lamentable plight.
*Kung apuhapin ko sa sariling isip
ang suyuan namin ng pili kong ibig,
ang pagluha niya kung ako'y may hapis,
nagiging ligaya yaring madlang sakit.*

If I think o'er, deep in my mind,
Our loves, when she was still my love.
Her grief, when fate was all unkind,
My heart from grief to joy could move.

But like Leriano pining for Laureola in *Carcel de Amor*, the balm of her memory turns to the hateful thought of Laura in the arms of Adolfo. And like Leriano, Florante would rather fade away in lethal melancholy.

*Nguni, sa aba ko! sawing kapalaran!
Ano pang halaga ng gayong suyuan,
kung ang sing-ibig ko'y sa katahimikan
ay humilig na sa ibang kandungan?*

*Sa sinapupunan ng Kondo Adolfo
aking natatanaw si Laurang sinta ko;
kamataya'y nahan ang dating bangis mo
nang di ko damdamin ang hirap na ito?*

But, o unhappy! erring fate!
What worth are love thoughts now to me,
When in the lap of him I hate.
Resting in peace my love I see?

In Count Adolph's own evil arms,
My lovely Laura now I see;
Death, where are now they grimmest charms,
That I from torment freed may be?

Aladdin, the Persian prince, shares Florante's sentiment. His father put him in prison, blamed him for allegedly abandoning the Crotona campaign, making way for its retaking by the Christian armies of Florante and Menandro. But his father may be just looking for an excuse to snatch Florida from his son. Pardoned by the king, on the pleading of Florida who's promised to marry him, Aladdin has been banished instead. He roams the forest of Epirus, a dejected victim of love just like Florante. Muslim prince and Christian noble become comrades in heartbreak.

*Magsama na kitang sa luha'y maagnas,
yamang pinag-isa ng masamang palad;
sa gubat na ito'y hintayin ang wakas
ng pagkabuhay tang nalipos na hirap.*

We two, whom tears annihilate,
Are one, joined now in misery.
Let's wait here for the final date
Of lives by Fate shaped cruelly.

Muslims, women, and OFWs

Modern critics and readers are hard-pressed to understand why F&L portrays the Muslim Aladdin sympathetically. But German Romance language scholar E.R. Curtius wrote that Islam had also “developed an ideal of knighthood, which exhibits ‘striking coincidences’ with that of the Christian West.” It likewise produced “a theory of courtly love.” Perhaps this explains why the Christian Florante and Laura have a parallel Muslim set of lovers in Aladdin and Flerida. In addition, at the height of the Reconquista in the 14th and 15th centuries, a new type of ballad arose, the “romance de Morisco” or Moorish ballad, which didn’t portray the Muslims as a fanatical, bloodthirsty people but as high-spirited and chivalrous, like Aladdin and Flerida.

But perhaps even more confounding is that Laura and Flerida save Florante and Aladdin. Prepared like Leriano to slink away to slow death by melancholy, the miserable pair of knights is stemmed from their pensive and somewhat suicidal sadness by the appearance in the forest of their lady loves, one of whom (Flerida) is attired as a warrior and in fact, has saved Laura from violation. Both women portray grim determination to maintain their dignity and stay faithful to their beloved. As Flerida reveals, she’s driven in her quest to be with her love:

*Isang hatinggabing kadilima'y lubha,
Lihim na nagbugos ako sa bintana;
walang kinasama kundi nga ang nasa,
matunton ang sinta kong nasaang lupa.*

One murky night, when all was still,
I quietly climbed o'er the wall,
Alone, but upheld by my will
To find my love, my life, my all.

F&L closes predictably with a happy ending, but generations of Filipinos will always remember it as having the most passionate lines to express love's wages and the lover's agony. For example, overseas Filipino workers – “*mga bagong bayani*,” as the tired government propaganda calls them—could relate to the following passage, separated as they are from their families because of the diaspora:

*May sakit pa kayang lalalo ng tindi
sa ang sumisinta'y mawalay na kasi?
Guniguni lamang, di na ang mangyari,
sukat ikalugmok ng pusong bayani.*

Is there on earth a fiercer pain
Than absence from the one we love?
Just thinking of it breaks again
The brave heart that no tears could move.

“*Mga bagong bayani*,” indeed.

Love in *Noli Me Tangere*

Florante at Laura was published in 1838, so by the time Jose Rizal was born in 1861, it was considered a best seller and a classic. In fact, Rizal carried an edition of it during his travels in Europe and recommended it to

the Austrian Filipinologist Ferdinand Blumentritt. He even included excerpts of the Tagalog masterpiece in his celebrated *Noli Me Tangere* (NMT). The novel, of course, is not romantic but “romanticist,” that is, part of the Age of Romanticism, the literary, artistic, musical, and intellectual movement in Europe in the first half of the 19th century that exalted emotion and individualism, nature and the past, and the medieval rather than the classical, the last attribute linking it to the age of chivalry and courtly love. In fact, the novel is a modern evolution in prose of the metrical romances. The novel is called *roman* in France, Italy, and Germany. Not surprisingly, the first modern novel—and to many critics, the greatest novel of all time—Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615), parodies the chivalric and courtly romances. It portrays in a farcical fashion in the first book (1605), and through philosophical discourse in the second (1615), the age-old dialectic between the ideal and the actual, dream and reality.

It would seem, in fact, that in Rizal’s novel, Ibarra’s lady love, Maria Clara, is straight out of a medieval romance. (At least they sound so in the English translation by Derbyshire.) Even before they meet after he returns from Europe, he’s filled with a magnificent vision of her beauty:

... he would have admired one of those fantastic visions, one of those magical apparitions that are sometimes seen in great theaters of Europe, in which to the muffled melodies of an orchestra, it was seen appearing amid a shower of light, a cascade of diamonds and gold, in an oriental decoration, wrapped in vaporous gauze, a deity, a sylph that advances without almost touching the ground, surrounded and accompanied by a luminous nimbus: in its presence flowers sprout, dance romps, harmonies awaken, and choruses of devils, nymphs, satyrs, geniuses, *zagalas*, angels and shepherds dance, wave tambourines, they make evolutions and deposit at the feet of the goddess each a tribute. Ibarra would have seen a very beautiful, slender

young woman, dressed in the picturesque costume of the daughters of the Philippines, in the center of a semicircle made up of all kinds of people, gesturing and moving with animation...

Maria Clara's beauty and purity are exalted:

Doña Victorina arranged in the young woman's magnificent hair a string of pearls and diamonds that reflected the most beautiful colors of the prism. She was white, too white perhaps; her eyes, which were almost always lowered, showed her most pure soul when she raised them, and when she smiled and revealed her small white teeth, one would say that a rose is simply a vegetable, and ivory, an elephant's tusk. Between the transparent tissue of the piña and around her white and shapely neck, the merry eyes of a necklace of brilliants winked, as the Tágalos say.

When the two finally meet after years of separation in Chapter 7 ("Idyll in the Azotea"), Maria Clara asks him chidingly, "Have you always thought of me? Have you never forgotten me on all your travels in the great cities among so many beautiful women?" And Ibarra replies:

Could I forget you? ... Could I be faithless to my oath, my sacred oath? Do you remember that stormy night when you saw me weeping alone by the side of my dead mother and, drawing near to me, you put your hand on my shoulder, that hand which for so long a time you had not allowed me to touch, saying to me, 'You have lost your mother while I never had one,' and you wept with me? You loved her and she looked upon you as a daughter. Outside it rained and the lightning flashed, but within I seemed to hear music and to see a smile on the pallid face of the dead. Oh, that

my parents were alive and might behold you now! I then caught your hand along with the hand of my mother and swore to love you and to make you happy, whatever fortune Heaven might have in store for me; and that oath, which has never weighed upon me as a burden, I now renew!

Maria Clara derided, defended

Convent-bred and with old people describing her as looking “like the Virgin,” Maria Clara in the modern era has become an object of ridicule, a laughing stock, the epitome of everything that’s wrong and laughable about Philippine women. She’s been called a “weakling” prone to fainting, a “clinging vine,” a “cloistered” nun-type shrinking at the slightest contact with the outside world. Nick Joaquin called all of this “the blackening of Maria Clara,” quite similar to “*la leyenda negra*” or “the black legend” of Spain allegedly having mercilessly oppressed the Philippines throughout the four centuries of its colonization. Joaquin said that nowhere in the two novels of Rizal is Maria Clara described as having fainting spells; she, in fact is portrayed as a very strong girl who’s not repelled by the sight of a leper and, instead, so moved by compassion that, because she has no money with her, gives him the only possession she has with her, a jeweled reliquary given her by her father.

When Ibarra is excommunicated, she’s not afraid to be seen by his side. She stands by her man. In the penultimate part of the novel, when she discovers a friar sired her, she evinces strength of character. She does not faint. Nick Joaquin eloquently rises to her defense:

The Maria Clara of Rizal, a mere girl, is subjected to the most awful and brutal and staggering revelation imaginable—a revelation that could crush a mature man. She staggers, but she isn’t crushed; she stands up under the blow. Is that the ‘spineless’ woman she is now declared to be? ... To save her lover, and to save her mother’s name, she agrees to marry, in cold blood, a

man she does not love, even at the risk of inviting the contempt of the lover she's trying to save. This, remember, is the decision of a mere chit of a girl ... When she learns that her lover is dead, she defies even her real father: she will marry no one, she will enter a nunnery. You may question her decision, but you cannot question she has a mind of her own and that she seems capable of bending the will of others to her own. Where, then, is the slave and chattel of men in this proud, passionate girl?

Apotheosis of Maria Clara

Earlier, in the azotea scene, Ibarra insists before Maria Clara that he had always thought of her in all his European peregrinations. That memory of her had served to check the sweet nectar of oblivion of the fatherland that became the fate of the Lotus eaters in Homer's "Odyssey."

Could I forget you? The thought of you has ever been with me, strengthening me amid the dangers of travel, and has been a comfort to my soul's loneliness in foreign lands. The thoughts of you have neutralized the lotus-effect of Europe, which erases from the memories of so many of our countrymen the hopes and misfortunes of our fatherland.

Ibarra said that in his travels, he saw her figure in his dreams standing by the shores of Manila, "a true daughter of the Philippines."

In dreams I saw you standing on the shore at Manila, gazing at the far horizon wrapped in the warm light of the early dawn. I heard the slow, sad song that awoke in me sleeping affections and called back to the memory of my heart the first years of our childhood, our joys, our pleasures, and all that happy past which you gave life to while you were in our town. It seemed to me that you were the fairy, the spirit, the

poetic incarnation of my fatherland, beautiful, unaffected, lovable, frank, a true daughter of the Philippines, that beautiful land that unites with the imposing virtues of the mother country, Spain, the admirable qualities of a young people, as you unite in your being all that is beautiful and lovely, the inheritance of both races, so indeed the love of you and that of my fatherland have become fused into one.

As the long passage shows, Maria Clara has assumed an apotheosis in the imaginings of Ibarra. The fatherland and the mother country Spain appear to meld in her person. She becomes a singular figure uniting past, present, and future, heritage, and history, desire and aspiration, faith and hope. As an object of exaltation in medieval romances, the lady love has become an icon of a bigger court, a larger arena. From the object of chivalry and gallantry, lady love has become the incarnation of country and nation.

