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Florante at Laura and the Formalization of Tradition in Tagalog Poetry

BIENVENIDO LUMBERA

GROWING urbanization towards the end of the eighteenth century altered the composition of the audience for Tagalog poetry. A middle class elite was coming up and the simple rewards of folk and pious poetry no longer satisfied an audience of *indios* who had come down from the hills or out of the hinterlands and taken pride in being town-dwellers. Through a web of fantasy and ornate language, glimpses of medieval court life were revealed by metrical romances (*awit* and *corrido*) based on Spanish ballads. Jose de la Cruz (1746-1829), also known as "Huseng Sisiw," seemed to have intuited that the new subject matter—the loves of highborn knights and maidens—required a different language. With him began a reform in the diction of Tagalog poetry which reached its culmination in Francisco Baltazar's *Florante at Laura*.

Courtly love, transmitted to Tagalog poetry by way of the Spanish romances, suffered a sea-change in traveling from Europe to the Philippines. C. S. Lewis, in *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, describes the original manifestation of this tradition:

The sentiment...is love, but love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love. The lover is always abject. Obedience to his lady's slightest wish, however whimsical, and silent acquiescence

in her rebukes, however unjust, are the only virtues he dares to claim.... This solemn amatory ritual is felt to be part and parcel of courtly life. It is possible only to those who are, in the old sense of the word, polite.... Only the courteous can love, but it is love which makes them courteous.... The poet normally addresses another man's wife, and the situation is so carelessly accepted that he seldom concerns himself much with her husband: his real enemy is his rival. But if he is ethically careless, he is no light-hearted gallant: his love is represented as a despairing and tragical emotion—or almost despairing, for he is saved from complete wanhope by his faith in the God of Love who never betrays his faithful worshippers and who can subjugate the cruellest beauties.¹

The text of a song that Baltazar wrote on commission illustrates the characteristics of courtly love as it appears in Tagalog poetry of the nineteenth century.² The poem consists of eight stanzas meant to let a young lady, who is closely guarded by her parents, know about the love she has aroused in an admirer. In the opening stanza, the speaker compares his heart to a boatman who must row with care lest his boat capsize. This fear of making the wrong move is the result of his love:

Inaasam-asam na kahit isang dali
masasarili ko ang dikit mong pili,
ng aking masabing poon kang may-ari
ng buhay ko't pusong sa sinta'y lugami.³

The inaccessibility of the woman makes the lover suffer, but the frustration of erotic desire makes her all the more desirable. Music is the means by which he can communicate his desire:

Kaya nga't kung minsang iyong nahihingi
tumugtog ng alpa ang palad kong sawi,
dalanging mataos sa Diyos na hari
maging dila yaring lahat kong daliri.⁴

¹ Oxford, 1959, pp. 2-3.

² Hermenegildo Cruz, *Kun Sino ang Kumatha ng "Florante"* [The Man Who Wrote "Florante"] (Manila, 1906), pp. 148-149. Cruz gives the poem the title "*Sa Kinakasi Niyaring Buhay*" (To the One I Love).

³ I always look forward to but one brief moment / when your rare beauty will be for my eyes alone, / for then I can say that you're the mistress / who rules my life and this heart languishing for love.

⁴ Thus, at those times when you ask / that I, miserable one, play on my harp, / my urgent prayer to God the King / is that my fingers turn to tongues.

There is only one message that the "tongues" would speak: that the player worships the woman who has asked for music. The woman is no longer simply a mistress to be obeyed; she has been enshrined as a goddess worthy of lover's devotion:

At kung sa taginting na tunog ng kuerdas
laman ng puso ko'y maipatalastas
na masabi bagang parang pangungusap
na sinasamba ka, poo't liniliyag.⁵

No happiness is greater than to be allowed to express the lover's passion, and so he avails himself of any means to let his loved one know about it. But should his complaints cause distress, then he humbly begs forgiveness for such sin:

Patawad poon ko kung yaring halinhing
sa masayang iyong pusoy 'humilahil!
di ko kasalana't udyok ng pag-giliw,
walang magagawa kundi ang dumaing.⁶

Baltazar's *cundiman* embodies "Humility, Courtesy, . . . and the Religion of Love." Here is courtly love, Tagalog-style—love that is unattainable, that brings suffering, that ennobles the lover, that rules the lover's life. Adultery has been edited out. In place of the husband, the obstacles to the consummation of love may be the girl's parents, her social position or her inviolable chastity. How adultery—central to the very concept of courtly love from its inception in Provencal poetry—came to be omitted in Tagalog poetry influenced by the courtly love tradition, is perhaps a question for the sociologists rather than students of literature to puzzle out. The literary explanation is suggested by the fate of the tradition in Spain. Otis H. Green, in tracing the evolution of courtly love in Spanish literature, notes that many writers tried to reconcile an imported concept essentially contrary to Christian morality with the native Castilian urge toward religiosity. The result was the

⁵ And when the notes strummed on strings / proclaim what my heart holds, / they will be saying, as though in words, / I worship you, my mistress and my love.

⁶ Forgive, my mistress, if these my complaints / should mar the gaiety of your heart! / It's not my sin for love compels, / all I can do is plead with you.

infusion of Neoplatonist elements which justified courtly love by relating it to the contemplation of beauty that eventually leads to virtue. The beautiful being but a form of the true, desire for a woman in courtly love is then sanctioned by reason. Finally courtly love was endowed with supernatural sanction by associating it with Fate, Fortune or Nature which was considered to be a manifestation of Divine Providence.⁷ While the Spanish writers were not always successful in dignifying, nay, Christianizing, courtly love, their efforts served to blur the immoral outlines of the tradition. In the most famous of all Spanish tales of chivalry, *Amadis de Gaula*, the object of the hero's devotion is a maiden, although his love for the Lady Oriana retains the marks of humility, courtesy and the deification of the beloved.⁸ Although strangely enough, there is no record of this tale having been adapted into a Tagalog metrical tale, it was the sanitized version of courtly love in *Amadis* that found its way into Tagalog love poetry. As a subject of nineteenth-century poetry, courtly love stamped a poem with urbanity, and its great exponent was Baltazar's metrical romance *Florante at Laura*.

A Matter of Perspective. The first edition of Baltazar's *awit* was never handed down to the twentieth century. Hermenegildo Cruz claims that it was first published in 1838, the year Baltazar finished serving a prison term in Manila.⁹ In the edition of 1861—the only one extant among those issued during the lifetime of the poet—the poem bears the title of *Pinagdaanang Buhay ni Florante at ni Laura sa Cahariang Albania* (The History of Florante and Laura in the

⁷ Otis H. Green, *Spain and the Western Tradition* (Madison, Wis. 1963) I, pp. 74-91.

⁸ Green, I, pp. 104-111.

⁹ Since there is no extant copy of the first edition, 1838 is at most a conjectural date. Virginia Gamboa-Mendoza notes that doubt has been expressed that Baltazar wrote his poem before establishing residence in Bataan, in the essay "Ang Masinop na Pag-Aaral ng Iba't-Ibang Pagkalimbag ng *Florante at Laura*" (The Methodical Study of the Various Editions of *Florante at Laura*), *Publications of the Institute of National Language*, IV, No. 27 (October 1940), p. 3. n. 2.

Kingdom of Albania).¹⁰ Told in 399 dodecasyllabic quatrains, the narrative claims to have been "based on various 'historical scenes' or portraits relating events in ancient times in the Greek Empire" (*Quinuha sa madlang "cuadro historico" o pinturang nag sasabi sa mga pangyayari nang unang panahon sa Imperio ng Grecia*), although no Spanish ballads have so far been found to contain Baltazar's plot and characters.

As the title promises, the narrative tells of the love story of Florante¹¹ and Laura. The son of a counselor to King Linceo of Albania, Florante left his native land at the age of eleven to study in Athens. Also in Athens, attending the same school, is Adolfo, the surly son of an Albanian count. Adolfo was highly regarded as the most outstanding student until Florante wrests the honor from him. Enmity develops between the young men, and it erupts in violence during the performance of a school play in which both of them take part. In a scene requiring swordplay, Adolfo tries to kill Florante, but the latter's friend Minandro is able to parry the blow. Adolfo is sent home to Albania, but Florante stays on to finish his studies. When Florante returns to Albania, the king makes him general of his army and the young warrior distinguishes himself in his exploits in the war against the Moors. Florante falls in love with

¹⁰ This edition, by Imprenta de Ramirez y Giraudier in Manila, is very rare. Reprinted in an annotated edition by Carlos Ronquillo in 1921, it was copied in mimeoscript by the Institute of National Language in 1965. This copy of the reprint is the source of my quotations from *Florante*.

¹¹ A futile issue disputed by students of Baltazar's poem is the proper spelling of Florante's name. Some claim that the name should start with a *P* because the poet attributes to it the meaning of "one who weeps, ever in the embrace of suffering," which indicates that the name comes from the Latin word *ploro*. Those who maintain that Florante is correct cite a passage in which the name is associated with *flor*, flower. It seems to me that Baltazar was playing on the ambiguity created by the fact that Tagalog speakers often pronounce *F* as *P*, there being no *F*-sound in the language. Stanzas 179 and 180 contain both senses: "the name Florante, my singular blossom" (*taguring Floranteng bulaclac cong bugtong*) and "This is my name... given to one who weeps, ever in the embrace of suffering" (*Ito ang ngalan co... pamagat na ambil sa lumuha-luha, / at cayacap-yacap ng madlang dalita*).

Laura, the king's daughter, and once again he finds himself pitted against Adolfo who is also in love with the princess. Once while aiding in the defense of a distant kingdom, Florante is summoned back to Albania and, upon reaching the kingdom, seized and thrown into prison. It turns out that Adolfo has instigated a revolt and has usurped the throne. The king and Florante's father have been executed and Laura has supposedly consented to marry Adolfo. Adolfo orders Florante out of jail, and then has him tied to a tree in the forest where he is left to die. The Persian warrior Aladin, banished by his father the Sultan who has fallen in love with Aladin's sweetheart Florida, wanders into the forest and saves Florante from two lions about to devour the Christian warrior. For five months the two warriors, Christian and Moor together, live in the forest. One day they overhear two women conversing in the wilderness. The women are Laura and Florida. Florida had run away from Persia, and in her wandering chanced upon Adolfo who was trying to force himself on Laura, and killed him. The two pairs of lovers are reunited. When Minandro arrives with the army in search of Florante, the latter is proclaimed king of Albania. Aladin and Florida are converted to Christianity, and they return to Persia after the Sultan dies.

The summary of the plot reveals a number of anachronisms that betray the derivativeness of the poem and, at the same time, demonstrate its originality. The derivativeness has been unabashedly announced in the title page where the sources of the poem were given. It is with pride that the reader is told that the poem is based on "*cuadros historicos*." The Tagalog metrical romance grew out of a craving for sophistication which, in the minds of the natives, was synonymous with the culture of the colonial masters. It was a medieval society the poets and the audience were looking at, but that did not make any difference to them. The ideals that the heroes of the ballads stood for—love, justice, loyalty, and faith—were timelessly appealing to a people who had had the slightest contact with the world beyond the boundaries of the colony. But as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century, the *awit* and the *corrido*, like the *pasion*, seemed to have become too

"native" for the taste of the more fastidious readers, those who belonged to the *ilustrados*, the "enlightened ones." Being one of the *ilustrados* himself, Baltazar saw the need to refine the sensibilities of his readers. And so *Florante at Laura*.

That he was an "enlightened" poet Baltazar never lets his readers forget. The footnotes incorporated into the poem explain allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, elements that no previous poem displayed with such ostentation. "*Sa Babasa Nito*" (To the Readers of This Work) calls attention to them, making clear that the poet was aiming at an audience more literate than the usual run of *awit* and *corrido* readers:

Con sa biglang tiñgi,i, bubot at masaclap
palibhasa,i, hilao at mura ang balat
nguni cung namnamin ang sa lamang lasap
masasarapan din ang babasang pantas.¹²

With insouciance that only a self-assured poet can summon, Baltazar tells his readers how to read his lines:

Ang mayandang letra alin mang talata
dimo mauatasa,i, malalim na uica
ang mata,i, itinging sa dacong ibaba
boong cahuluga,i, mapag-uunaua.¹³

Thus did Baltazar anticipate T. S. Eliot by almost a century in motivating the reader to follow the relationship between allusion and meaning in a poem. The juxtaposition of these two poets is not as preposterous as one might suppose, for both of them were trying to bring into their respective languages erudition that emanates from a great tradition. This is not to suggest that Baltazar succeeded in *Florante at Laura* to the same extent that Eliot did in *The Waste Land*. As will be

¹² In quoting from Ronquillo's edition of the poem, I have not reproduced the accent marks of the 1861 *Florante* to avoid confusion, since the manner in which the marks are currently used differs from that employed in Baltazar's time.

At a glance this may look unripe and sour, / being green and still quite young, / but savor the taste of its meat / and it will be enjoyed even by a literary sage.

¹³ If there's a marked word in any line, / whose deep meaning you can't fathom, / direct your eyes to the bottom of the page / and you'll comprehend the sense it makes.

shown a little later, Baltazar's classical references were but a little more than erudite decor.

A survey of the allusions used by Baltazar shows us a Tagalog poet who had gone to school and stored up information on Greek and Roman mythology. It is likely that the poet knew some Latin, the language being part of the course of study at the Colegio de San José, and had read some Virgil and, possibly, Homer in translation. But he did not have to go to the classical poets to pick up bits of mythology. Medieval Spanish ballads about Greece and Rome abounded in the various *cancioneros* so that when Baltazar used the expression "*anang mga poetas*" (according to the poets) in explaining some of his allusions, he is probably referring both to the cultist and anonymous poets of the *romances históricos*.¹⁴

The first stanza of the poem proper contains two allusions. The forest which is the setting of the poem is said to be located outside the "city of Epirus" and "on the banks of the river called Cocytus." The sun which finds it difficult to penetrate the growth is referred to, "in the manner of Latin and Greek poets," as "Phoebus." It is worth noting that in the first 22 stanzas of the poem, Baltazar has 11 footnotes, with 29 others scattered among the remaining 377 stanzas.¹⁵ The opening parts are obviously meant to impress the "literary sage."

Nine of the first 11 allusions are to characters and places in mythology—Avernus, Pluto, Cocytus, Narcissus, Adonis, nymphs and the Harpies. Checking the footnotes against present-day classical dictionaries like *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* and *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, one notes that Baltazar indeed knew his classical lore. The names and terms that the poet drops are part of his learning, as two examples will show. The first is the reference to the Harpies (11). The note goes:

¹⁴ See *Romancero General*, ed. Agustin Durán, I, in *Biblioteca de los autores españoles* (Madrid, 1945), X, 301-396.

¹⁵ For the sake of convenience, the stanza number will be given after quotation or references instead of page number. This will allow the reader to use any edition of *Florante* in following the discussion of the poem in this paper.

Harpías ay mababangis na Diosa ng mga Gentil, ang tahai, sa mga islang ngala,i, Estrofadas, at sa gubat sa tabi ng ilog ng Cocito; ang catauan ay parang ibon, muc-hang dalaga, baluctot ang mga camay, ang cuco, i, matutulis, pacpac paniqui at macamamatay ang baho ng hininga.¹⁶

The data provided are drawn for the most part from Virgil's description of the Harpies in the third canto of the *Aeneid*. As detailed in its explanations is the note on the Furies (76):

Furias, mga diosas sa inferno, anac ni Aqueronte at ng gabi; tinatauag namang Eumenides, sila,i, tatlo: Megeras, Tisiphone at Alecto; ang buhoc ay parang serpiente cung may ibig silang pagaliting sinoman, ay bubunot ng isang buhoc na serpiente, at ipapasoc sa dibdib ng 'tauong pinagagalit nguni,i, hindi namamalan; siyang pagdidilim ng mata sa galit, at sasa-gasa na sa lalong panganib.¹⁷

Here, information from Aeschylus is mingled with later Roman additions.

Further indication of the range of Baltazar's knowledge of classical matters is the reference to a tragedy in which Florante, Adolfo and Minandro take roles when they are students in Athens (224-226). The notes seem to suggest that the plot is that of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, but the dramatis personae—Eteocles, Polynices, Jocasta and Adrastus—suggests that Baltazar probably obtained his information through secondary sources, *romances históricos* in all likelihood. In the footnote on the myth of Oedipus, Baltazar gives the name of

¹⁶ Harpies are fierce goddesses of the Gentiles, living in the islands called Strophades, and in the forest by the banks of Cocytus; their bodies resemble those of birds, their faces are those of women, their hands crooked, with pointed nails; they have bat's wings and the stink of their breath is fatal.

¹⁷ Furies, goddesses in hell, daughters of Acheronte and the night; when called the Eumenides, they are three: Megaera, Tisiphone and Alecto; their hair are like serpents, and when they want to make anybody angry, they pull out one serpent-hair, and this is put inside the breast of the person they want enraged without his being aware of it; this darkens the eyes with wrath, and he will pit himself against the greatest dangers.

the shepherd who found the abandoned baby as Forbante, a detail that neither Aeschylus nor Sophocles provides.

But it is unfair to Baltazar to say that his classical allusions are simply for purposes of currying favor with the *ilustrados*. It is true that the references to Greek and Roman mythology do not have any organic function; they may be excised without doing damage to the sense of the poem. Nevertheless, they serve two legitimate functions: they create verisimilitude in a tale supposed to have transpired in a part of the Greek "empire"; and they cast a mythical light upon the characters, making them bigger than life. The allusions to Greek and Roman gods and goddesses situate the four main characters within a context that lends credibility to their adventures and exploits.

As a result of the poet's use of classical allusions, anachronisms crept into the narrative. The story is set in the Middle Ages during the wars between the Christians and the Moors, but a lot of details seem to locate the action in Greece during pre-Christian times. Thus, Florante believes that the streams are inhabited by nymphs and naiads, although his sentiments are those of a medieval Christian who sees the world as "a vale of tears" where evil arises because of concupiscence and where God's will is ever at work in many inscrutable ways. Aladin is a Moor, but he invokes Mars and the Fates in expressing the hate he cannot unleash against his father. When Florante is sent away to be educated, he goes to Athens whereas a young intellectual of the Middle Ages would certainly have gravitated towards the renowned universities of Paris, Oxford, Bologna or Salamanca. Florante's native land is Albania, as known in the Middle Ages through the geography of Strabo, but the forest in which we find the hero is more of a tropical jungle than a woodland along the Mediterranean.

Evidently, Baltazar had tried to get away from the usual adaptations of Spanish ballads when he wrote *Florante at Laura*. In doing so, he attempted to incorporate into the one work diverse elements from various types of Spanish ballads—those dealing with chivalry (*romances caballerescos*), with Moorish tales (*romances moriscos*), and with Greek and Roman

themes (*romances históricos*). The resulting poem teems with anachronisms that, ironically enough, prove the originality of its creator.

To be able to appreciate *Florante at Laura* in spite of its offenses against twentieth-century poetics, it is essential that the reader view the poem within the context of the period that produced it. First of all, the reader must realize that Baltazar's audience, both *ilustrados* and ordinary *indios*, was one brought up on oral poetry. For the Tagalogs of Baltazar's time, poetry was meant to be chanted or sung, not read in the privacy of one's study. For this reason, the analytic temper was slow in developing among the audience for poetry. The absence of the normative influence of literary criticism during the nineteenth century allowed the creative artists all the freedom in letting their fancies run wild, and the audience seemed to have accepted extravagant fancy as the mark of the superior poet.

Baltazar's career as a playwright must not be overlooked in accounting for the anachronisms in the poem. On the stage, words and action are not susceptible to the close analysis to which a reader may subject a poetic text. Strictly speaking, when a scene is transpiring on the stage, no detail can be anachronistic. The apprehension of an anachronism is possible only when the scene is arrested and contemplated. On the stage for which Baltazar wrote, words and gestures were more important than anything else, so that any number of anachronistic details may crop up without ruining the effect of the scenes. There are many indications that when Baltazar wrote the *Florante* he saw it as a *comedia*. This is confirmed by the presence of many devices in the poem that seem to have been brought over from the stage.

The unravelling of the plot does not follow a chronological order. The story begins *in medias res* so that the complete story comes to us through a series of speeches that serve as flashbacks. If one is to trace the story from Florante's childhood, he would find the pertinent episodes in stanzas 172-203. More than two-thirds of the action, as a matter of fact, has already transpired before the reader meets Florante tied to a tree in the forest. The hero's four lamentations (13-32;

39-66; 86-97; 105-125) are soliloquies that provide the exposition, explaining how he got to be in the forest and why he is in such deep sorrow. Aladin, the Moorish prince, enters the forest, and in sorrow begins to explain his presence in the same place (77-82). He hears the voice of Florante and finds him as two lions are about to attack the helpless hero. Then follows Florante's account of his childhood and the circumstances that led to his capture. A time lapse of five months is disposed of in one stanza. Aladin tells Florante about the rivalry between him and his father over Florida (352-360), supplying the reader with more details that have been only hinted at the first time he appears. Florida's account of her escape from Persia in order to look for her lover (361-369) intrudes into Aladin's story. The lovers are reunited, and Laura's story (375-390) tells about the revolution that overthrew her father and put Adolfo in power, her frustrated attempt to warn Florante, the five-month period she asked of Adolfo to think over his proposal of marriage, and the death of Adolfo. Minandro arrives with his army. Florante and Laura are proclaimed monarchs of Albania and they all return to the kingdom in triumph.

Like a practised playwright, Baltazar ties up the various episodes neatly, relying on coincidences to create a coherent narrative. These coincidences, too, were part of the tricks of the playwright's trade that Baltazar brought over to his metrical romance. Except for the Teatro de Tondo and the Teatro de Gunao in Manila, there seemed to have been no other permanent theaters of Tagalog drama during Baltazar's time.¹⁸ Most of the performances of Tagalog plays were given in the outdoors on temporary stages set up for the occasion. This stage was usually nothing more than a platform with dressing room space in the backstage area. To keep action going on such a stage, the playwright had to depend on arbitrary exits and entrances such as the ones we find in Jose de la Cruz's *D. Gonzalo de Cordoba* and Baltazar's *Bayaceto y Dorlisca*.

¹⁸ Wenceslao E. Retana, *Noticias histórico-bibliográficas de el teatro en Filipinas desde sus orígenes hasta 1898* (Madrid, 1909), pp. 62-63 and 76-77.

In *D. Gonzalo* the heroine is about to drink poison, thinking that her sweetheart has killed her brother, but Don Gonzalo chances upon her and prevents the suicide.¹⁹ In *Bayaceto y Dorlisca*, Acmet, finding Dorlisca asleep in her chamber, hears her call on Celim in a dream and so discovers that she is in love with his brother.²⁰ The same fortuitousness of events may be noted in *Florante at Laura*.

The Poetic Design Florante and Laura, Aladin and Florida—Christians and Moors, and lovers all. These are stock figures of the Tagalog *awit* brought together because the convention of the form had always brought them together. The originality of Francisco Baltazar is in charging the convention with meaning, in giving new life to a tired situation. He makes the four characters function like a quartet whose lives and loves create contrasts and parallels delineating the thematic design that gives unity to the poem. Florante and Aladin have in common misfortune in love and war. Laura has been taken away from Florante by Adolfo, and Florante is convinced that his sweetheart has betrayed him. Florida has been taken away from Aladin by Sultan Ali-Adab, Aladin's own father. Florante, recalled from battle, falls into a trap set by Adolfo. Aladin, returning victorious from the conquest of Albania, is imprisoned by his father when victory turns into defeat. Florante, the Christian, laments the death of his father to whom he was deeply attached. Aladin, the Moor, laments the evil his father had visited upon him in taking Florida away. Florida and Laura are also implicitly compared and contrasted. Laura is all femininity, Florida Amazon-like. Laura tries to bring about Adolfo's downfall in writing to Florante, but her letter falls into the hands of the villain. Florida has greater cunning. Hearing that Aladin is to be executed, she pleads for his life with the Sultan, knowing her power over him. When she is about to be wed to the Sultan, she puts on the disguise of a warrior and runs away. Once Laura realizes that she has no way out, she asks Adolfo for a five-month interim to think his proposal over, with the intention of committing suicide should rescue fail to come after that

¹⁹ Jose Maria Rivera, *Huseng Sisiw* (Manila, 1933), p. 20.

²⁰ Cruz, pp. 140-147.

period. Finally, Florante and Laura, the Christians, are saved from their respective dooms by the Moors, Aladin and Florida. By intercalating the fates of the four lovers and reuniting them in the forest, Baltazar gives his poem texture which is considerably more complex than has generally been recognized.

The thematic design of *Florante at Laura* is founded on the theme of love, of course. Florante is the embodiment of the courtly lover. The first time he sees Laura, he falls in love with her right away. Previous to this, he had lost his mother and he was certain then that her death was the greatest sorrow any man could know, that the event was death itself. But he falls in love and, unable to tell Laura about his love, Florante says:

Dito co naticman ang lalong hinagpis,
higuit sa dalitang na unang tini-is,
at binula-ang co ang lahat nang saquit,
cung sa cahirapan mula sa pag-ibig.²¹ (291)

Andreas Capellanus, in his famous codification of the rules of courtly love, *De Arte Honeste Amandi* (ca. 1184-1186), illuminates us on the nature of Florante's suffering: "Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved . . . When a lover suddenly catches sight of his beloved his heart palpitates. . . He whom the thought of love vexes eats and sleeps very little. . . A slight presumption causes a lover to suspect his beloved. . . a true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved."²²

On the verge of death as he cries out his woes while tied to a tree, the lover prays to God to make Laura think of him, for the mere act of remembering will suffice to give him strength. One notes that miraculous power is attributed to the lady-love. Thus, when Florante prepares for battle, Laura would sew his standard and help him put on his armor. As an

²¹ Then did I go through greater affliction, / greater than the grief I had earlier known; / and I was proof that other sorrows don't count / beside the pain that is born of love.

²² "The Rules of Courtly Love," *Portable Medieval Reader*, ed. J. B. Rose and M. M. MacLaughlin (New York, 1949), pp. 116-117.

emblem from his beloved, the first letter of Laura's name is written in jewels on his helmet.

Andreas also says, "He who is not jealous cannot love A man in love is always apprehensive. . . . Real jealousy increases the feeling of love. . . . Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved."²³ Such is Florante's jealousy that when he sees the lions before him, he no longer fears for his life because the poisoned thoughts of Laura's infidelity have already killed him:

Guni-guning ito,i, lubhang macamandag
agos na luha co,t, puso co,i, ma agnas,
tulo calolua,t, sa mata,i, pumulas
cayo aquing dugo,i, mag-unahang matak.²⁴ (124)

Florante's jealousy has no basis in fact. As counterpoint to the situation of the courtly lover, Baltazar introduces Aladin's experience with love. His father has taken his sweetheart from him and banished him from Persia. Aladin's thoughts about love reveal a man whom experience has toughened. He has seen the sterner face of love:

; O pag sintang labis nang capangyarihan
sampong mag aama,i, iyong nasasaclao!
pag icao ang nasoc sa puso ninoman
hahamaquing lahat masunod ca lamang!²⁵ (80)

Here is no languishing lover, but one protesting against the divisive power of the God of Love.

Through the figure of Aladin, passionate love is tied up with filial love. Florante voices the ideal relationship between father and son when he recounts his childhood years to Aladin:

Cong sa cabaita,i, uliran ng lahat
at sa catapanga,i, pang-ulo sa Ciudad,

²³ Andreas Capellanus, pp. 115-116.

²⁴ Most venomous is this thought; / flow then, my tears, and erode my heart; / dissolve, my soul, and surge out of eyes; / and you, my blood, race out in drops.

²⁵ O Love, so great is your power / that both father and son come under your sway; / when you gain entry into anyone's heart, / he defies every law in obedience to you!

ualang casingdunong mag mahal sa anac,
umacay, magturo sa gagauing lahat.²⁶ (178)

Recalling the death of his mother which occurred while he was in Athens, Florante speaks of the memory as "thought... that the swift flow of tears couldn't wash away":

! Camandag cang lagac niyaong camatayan
sa sintang Ina co,i, di nagpacundangan,
sinasariua mo ang sugat na lalang
nang aquing tinangap na palasong liham!²⁷ (234)

Once again, Baltazar employs the Moor for contrast. In the forest Aladin overhears Florante's loving invocation of his dead father, and ironically remarks on the distance between his feeling and Florante's:

Ang matatauag cong palayao sa aquin
ng ama co,i, itong aco,i, pagliluhin,
agauan ng sinta,t, panasa-nasaing
lumubog sa dusa,t, buhay co,i, maquitol.²⁸ (103)

The contrast established between Florante and Aladin is meant to reflect the difference between Christian and Moor and the cultures that produced them. What may now impress us as weakness in Florante was actually intended, in the light of the courtly love tradition, as gentility, a virtue fostered by Christian upbringing. What seems to be strength of character in Aladin was, in the same light, rudeness induced by a culture untouched by the blessings of the Christian religion. But Baltazar is not content to parrot the naiveté of the conventional contrast between Christian and Moor. He shows that underneath the labels Christian and Moor, men are essentially brothers. Aladin makes this point when he assures Florante, whom he has saved from the lions, that he is in safe, though enemy, hands:

²⁶ Of goodness of heart, he was a paragon /and in bravery, the kingdom's top man, / no wiser father in loving his son / and leading him to goodness and wisdom.

²⁷ Venom poured by death / that didn't spare my beloved mother, / you open up the wound that I sustained / when that arrow of a letter struck.

²⁸ The only affection bestowed on me / by my father is to turn against me, / wrest my love from me, and wish / that I should sink in grief and die.

Moro aco,i, lubos na taong may dibdib,
 ay nasasaclao rin ng utes ng Langit,
 dini sa puso co,i, cusang natititic
*natural na leyng sa aba,i, mahapis.*²⁹

Florida saves Laura from Adolfo because she sees her, not as a Christian, but as a woman helpless against a lecherous man. Thus, in the forest—away from the society of men where labels divide one man from another—four people discover human solidarity.

A fourth aspect of the theme of love as treated in *Florante at Laura* is patriotism. That the sentiment occurs in a Tagalog poem written during the first half of the nineteenth century is worth noting, because we know of no precedent in poetry written during the previous centuries. Florante's first lamentation is full of bitterness over the injustices that Adolfo's reign has brought down upon Albania:

Sa loob at labas, ng bayan cong saui
 caliluha,i, siyang nangyayaring hari
 cagalinga,i, bait ay nalulugami
 ininis sa hucay nang dusa,t, pighati.³⁰ (14)

More explicit in its patriotic fervor is the final lamentation in which Florante says farewell to Albania to which he remains devoted in spite of its change of loyalty:

Paalam Albaniang pinamamayanan
 ng casama,t, lupit, bangis caliluhan,
 acong tangulan mo,i, cusa mang pinatay,
 sa iyo,i, malaqui ang panghihinayang.³¹ (104)

It has become customary to read political meaning into *Florante at Laura* on the basis of the passages in which the

²⁹ A Moor I am, but a man with a heart, / a man governed by the same laws of Heaven; / here in my heart is engraved / the natural law to pity him who suffers.

³⁰ All over my hapless country / treason has established its reign, / while goodness and wisdom lie prostrate, / buried alive in the grave of grief.

³¹ Farewell. Albania, kingdom now / of evil, cruelty, brutishness and deceit; / I, your defender whom you now murder, / nevertheless lament the fate that has befallen you.

hero speaks of his love of Albania.³² There can be no doubt that Baltazar drew upon contemporary conditions when he made his hero speak out against injustice, corruption and oppression, but one must guard against exaggerating the political content of the poem. The tradition of attributing a deliberately political intent to Baltazar's work ignores the fact that the poet's emphasis falls on the love of Florante and Laura, and anybody who reads it as a political allegory leaves a lot of details in the poem unaccounted for.

Allied to the theme of love is the theme of injustice. This theme is first sounded in the opening stanza of Florante's first lamentation:

Mahiganting langit bangis mo,i, nasaan?
ngayo,i, naniniig sa pagca-gulaylay
bago,i, ang bandila ng lalong casam-an
sa reinong Albania,i, iniuaagayuyay.³³ (13)

Throughout this speech, Florante harps on the absence of justice, both human and divine. He concedes that God's ways are inscrutable, but he bewails the fate that he has suffered from the treacherous Adolfo, the ungrateful kingdom of Albania, and the fickle Laura. It is not only Florante who suffers from injustice. Florida and Aladin are the victims of Sultan Ali-Adab. Fired by love for his son's sweetheart, the sultan plots against his own son:

Dito na minulan ang pagpapahirap
sa saquit,t, ninasang buhay co,i, mautas
at ng mag victoria sa Albaniang Ciudad
pag dating sa Percia,i, binilangong agad.³⁴ (335)

The sultan's pretext is that Aladin had deserted his army and thus made it possible for the Christians to win back their city.

³² Teodoro A. Agoncillo calls it "a severe indictment of the ruling race, a voice raised in protest against Spanish iniquities and oppression."—*The Revolt of the Masses* (Quezon City, 1956), pp. 19-20.

³³ Just heaven, where is your wrath? / now you take your time in impotence / while the banner of grossest evil / waves over Albanian land.

³⁴ From then on, he made things difficult / for me, even wished that I were dead, / and when I conquered the kingdom of Albania, / I was thrown in jail when I returned to Persia.

All evil, according to Florante, is the outcome of desire for the ephemeral:

O tacsil na pita sa yama,t, mataas!
o hangad sa puring hanging lumilipas!
icao ang dahilan ng casamang lahat
at niyaring nasapit na cahabaghabag.³⁵ (19)

Here Florante touches upon a motif that underlies the plot of the poem. Adolfo usurps power because he wants wealth, power and honor which are described as "fleeting like the wind." To gain power, he foments a revolt by making the people believe, through a forged decree, that the king wants to impose a monopoly on wheat and foodstuff. To get Florante within his clutches, he sets up a ruse which brings the warrior back from Etolia by means of another forged decree. Laura, for her part, pretends to think over Adolfo's suit for five months, although she intends to commit suicide to avoid being married to him. The story of Aladin and Flerida is also built around the motif of illusion. The bond between father and son proves to be no bond at all when the sultan falls in love with his son's sweetheart. The sultan imprisons his son on the basis of trumped-up charges—that Aladin has deserted his army. Flerida makes the sultan believe that she is willing to marry him provided Aladin is set free. She then disguises herself as a young man and flees from Persia.

It is in the character of Florante, however, that the motif of illusion is fully developed. A good deal of his suffering in the poem is the result of a grand delusion—he thinks that Laura has abandoned him and given herself to his rival Adolfo. He torments himself with the imagined betrayal, losing all will to live because of it. The Florante we find tied to a tree in the beginning of the poem and the Florante on the throne of Albania at the end are two different people. The first is a weepy courtly lover while the latter is a successful monarch. The change in the character seems unmotivated at first, but closer study reveals that Baltazar is relating an ini-

³⁵ Ah, perfidious desire for wealth and power, / ah, covetousness for honor fleeting like the wind, / you're the cause of every ill / and of this my piteous state!

tiation story in which a young nobleman earns through suffering the wisdom required of a king.

Midway in the poem, Baltazar puts in the mouth of Florante seven quatrains on the proper upbringing of children (197-204). The passages introduce the pedagogical pattern that Florante's progress toward kingship follows. The section opens with an enunciation of the Stoicist philosophy which Florante's father implements when he sends his son to Athens in spite of his wife's tearful protests:

Pag ibig anaqui,t, aquing naquilala
di dapat palac-hin ang bata sa saya
at sa catoua-a,i, capag-namihasa
cong lumaqui, ualang hihintang guinhaua.³⁶ (197)

The world is a "vale of tears" and every man must learn early in life to steel himself against any form of suffering. Otherwise a man feels helpless when the onrush of grief comes:

Munting cahirapa, mamalac-hing dala,
dibdib palibhasa,i, gauing magbata,
ay bago,i, sa mundo,i, ualang quisap mata
ang tauo,i, mayroong sucat ipagdusa.³⁷ (201)

Florante then recounts his student days, the wide renown he gains as a brilliant student and the beginnings of his rivalry with Adolfo. At the performance of a Greek tragedy in which he and Adolfo participate, illusion becomes reality when Adolfo, playing the role of Polynices, tries to strike down Etœocles, played by Florante, in earnest. At the end of his stay in Athens, Florante is counselled by his teacher Antenor, warning him about appearances and how they can deceive:

Cung ang isalubong sa iyong pagdating,
ay masayang mucha,t, may paquitang giliu,

³⁶ I think I understood then the meaning of love / as not conditioning the growing child to constant joy, / for once he becomes so used to happiness, / no more bliss awaits him when he grows up.

³⁷ The lightest burden will be thought heavy / because the heart has never learned to bear it; / and in this world, quite unforeseen / suffering inevitably falls on man.

lalong paingata,t, caauay na lihim
siyang isa-isip na cacabacahin.³⁸ (246)

The Florante we find in the beginning of the poem is the same man who in times past was forewarned but has nevertheless been taken in by the deceitful Adolfo. His outcries against heaven, Laura, Adolfo and Albania are the complaints of a novice coming to grips with harsh lessons out of school. That Adolfo is able to entrap him reveals that Florante has not yet acquired the cunning that Antenor wanted him to cultivate. In accusing Laura of infidelity and protesting the injustice of God, Florante shows himself to be very much the child he himself describes in recalling his childhood:

Ang tauong magau sa ligaya,t, ali
mahina ang puso,t, lubhang maramdamin.
inaacala pa lamang ang hilahil,
na daratana,i, dina matutuhang bat-hin.³⁹ (199)

In his first lamentation, he sounds like an Old Testament prophet invoking the wrath of God to destroy his enemies. At one moment he admits that God's will is inscrutable, but at the next he complains that Heaven does not listen to his cries. He rails against the ingratitude of the kingdom he had defended in the past, betraying a lack of political acumen that should make him see that war does not abide by the rules of courtliness.

And yet, in spite of all indications that Florante is a callow youth, the end of the poem presents us with Florante reigning in Albania as an ideal monarch. Is this the usual tacked-on happy ending of metrical romances? A second glance at the poem uncovers details that justify Baltazar's ending.

In four lamentations, Baltazar allows the reader to know Florante better. Three of these lamentations open with a

³⁸ If you're greeted upon your arrival / with a smiling face and affectionate show, / take greater care for there lurks an enemy / against whom one must always be ready.

³⁹ A man who's used to bliss and joy / is weak at heart and thus too easily hurt, / sorrow to come is still a thought / but already he's disheartened and distressed.

retorical question. As a query that demands no answer, the device characterizes Florante as unaware of his own callowness. On the other hand, it also ties up the young man's character with the motif of illusion—Florante is searching for an answer to what seems to be unanswerable. The first lamentation begins with the invocation of Heaven's wrath: "Just Heaven, where is your wrath. . .?" The second opens with "Alas, Laura . . . why did you give / to another that love already mine. . .?" The third starts thus: "Alas, my loved and loving father, why was your life ended before mine. . .?" The fourth and final lamentation is a surrender to despair, a tacit admission that the search has failed, after which Florante faints before the ravening lions.

But the search has failed only from the point of view of the naïve Florante. He is saved from the lions by Aladin. Later in the poem, Baltazar makes explicit the symbolism of Florante's deliverance when he alludes to the Resurrection as Florante tells his story to Aladin:

Bilang macalauang maliguid ni Febo
ang sangdaigdigan sa paca-gapus co,
ina-acalang na sa ibang Mundo
imulat ang mata,i, na sa candungan mo.⁴⁰ (345)

The search has not been in vain because Florante learns his lesson regarding illusion and reality when he is saved by Aladin. Regaining consciousness and finding himself in the arms of a Moor, Florante is startled and he tries to tear himself away:

Nang muling mamulat ay naguiclahanan
"¿sino? sa aba co,t, na sa morong camay!"
ibig na i-igtad ang lunong catao-an,
nang hindi mangyari,i, nag-ngalit na lamang.⁴¹ (146)

⁴⁰ Twice did Phoebus go around / the world while I was bound; / when I thought I was already in the other world, / I opened my eyes and found myself in your lap.

⁴¹ When he opened his eyes he was startled: / "Who . . . ? Alas, I'm a Moor's captive!" / The strengthless body wanted to spring away, / and when it failed, he could only gnash his teeth.

But Aladin assures him that though a Moor, he does not intend any harm on Florante. He had heard Florante's cries and when he saw the lions, he had to come to the Christian's rescue. Reassured that he is safe, Florante tells Aladin his life-story. The technical requirements of plotting conceded, the fact that Florante's story comes at this point is significant. The account takes up 178 of the poem's 399 stanzas, giving us portraits of Florante as a child (172-203), as a student (204-253), and as a warrior (254-344). These represent three stages in Florante's development. Florante in the forest is going through the final phase of his development before he becomes the ideal monarch at the end of the tale. Earlier, in his lamentations, Florante has shown himself to be naïve and impetuous, prone to trust his illusions about people and ideas. His meeting with Aladin recalls Antenor's warning about Adolfo. We know that Florante had failed to heed his teacher and suffered as a consequence. His initial impulse upon realizing that Aladin is a Moor explains why Florante fell into Adolfo's trap—Florante trusts too much in appearances. Aladin's garb identifies him as an enemy; his appearance is a cue for danger. Once he realizes that Aladin's compassion transcends religious differences, Florante's progress toward reality begins. The Resurrection image he is to use later in talking about his deliverance from death, emphasizes his realization that Aladin has brought him new life. Thus, the final phase in Florante's growth may be said to have completed his humanization.

Baltazar alludes to the Bible again when the two warriors are reconciled with their respective sweethearts. The forest has been described earlier as dark, gloomy, choked with thorny vines bearing poisonous fruits, and echoing with the horrible cries of nightbirds. It is also ringed by huge trees and inhabited by serpents, basilisks, hyenas and tigers (1-6). Before the hero is introduced, the poet-narrator caps the description of the forest with an allusion to Hades:

Ito,i, gubat manding sa pinto,i, malapit
ng Avernong reino ni Plutong masungit

ang nasasacupang lupa,i, dinidilig
ng ilog Cocitong camandag ang tubig.⁴² (7)

The reunion of the lovers transforms the sinister forest into the Garden of Eden itself:

Ano pa ngayong gubat na malungcot
sa apat, ay naging Paraiso,t, lugod,
macailang hintong canilang malimot,
na may hininga pang sucat na malagot.⁴³ (373)

At the close of the poem, love and justice have been reconciled. Laura's story about the fall of Albania and the treachery of Adolfo proves that Florante's jealousy was unwarranted. The army that Florante left in Etolia returns to Albania under the leadership of Florante's friend Minandro, and the kingdom has been recovered from Adolfo. Florante and Laura are proclaimed King and Queen, and Aladin and Flerida turn Christians. The reign of the new monarchs opens a golden age for Albania:

Caya nga,t, nagta-as ang camay sa Langit
sa pasasalamat ng bayang tangquilec
ang Hari,t, ang Reina,i, ualang naisip
cundi ang magsabog ng aua sa cabig.⁴⁴ (398)

The growth in virtue that Florante undergoes in the course of the poem is very much in line with the tradition of courtly love as Tagalog poetry received it from Spanish literature. Otis H. Green asserts that the Spanish writers of courtly literature found it necessary to find vindication for courtly love which somehow always moved from "pure" (involving only hearts and minds) to "mixed" love (involving hearts and bodies). Love therefore "made every effort to cast off its load of guilt and to achieve exoneration; sought, through

⁴² This forest is indeed close to the gate / of Avernus, the kingdom of stern Pluto, / and watering the area on which the forest spreads / is the River Cocytus with its venomous water.

⁴³ And so that forest of gloom / for the four became an Eden of delight; / several times they all but forgot / that they were living mortal lives.

⁴⁴ And so, hands were raised to Heaven / in thanksgiving by all the subjects; / the King and Queen had no other concern / but to scatter blessings all over the land.

the grafting of philosophical and Neoplatonic elements, to be the source of *all* virtue—not of all the virtues save one (chastity)—and to eliminate its sinful inheritance from eleventh-century Provence.”⁴⁵ Florante’s love for Laura, and the suffering it brought transforms him from a warrior into a man spiritually prepared to reign over a kingdom.

Sanction for the purging powers of suffering brought about by love was not difficult to find in the indigenous tradition during the nineteenth century. Missionary verse, most especially the *pasion*, insists on the value of suffering to the Christian. The first *Aral* in Gaspar Aquino de Belen’s *pasion* (1704) enjoins the reader to accept suffering joyfully:

Maganda,i, ang magcacasaquit
dito na ngani tomangis
nang cusang di pinipilit,
cun sa Dios ydarangpit
doon loloag sa langit.⁴⁶

Once *Florante at Laura* is seen in the light of the traditions that helped shape it, the lugubriousness of the hero does not only become acceptable but even essential to the meaning of the poem. Religious poetry, from Francisco de San José (*Memorial de la vida cristiana*, 1605) to Aniceto de la Merced (*El libro de la vida*, 1852) constantly spoke of the necessity of suffering for the Christian. The courtly love tradition gave suffering a secular coloring, but the end result was the same—pain brought about perfection.

The emphasis on suffering found support in Baltazar’s experience in the writing of drama. Baltazar is at his best when he is being declamatory. His talent was that of the true Romantic poet who could charge the atmosphere with his feelings, giving us a view of the poet’s spiritual landscape rather than a landscape of people and objects. Sorrow lends itself easily to portrayal on the stage, especially in drama which employs the

⁴⁵ Green, I, p. 78.

⁴⁶ Better to embrace suffering, / to weep here and now / in all willingness, / for when suffering is offered to God, / one finds comfort in heaven.

dodecasyllabic meter whose languid lilt captures melancholy most effectively. In the hands of a playwright intoxicated with language, the emotion always gives Baltazar occasions to weave his characteristically doleful verbal music.

The oft-quoted dedicatory poem which introduces *Florante at Laura* is illustrative of Baltazar's temper as a poet. Titled "*Cay Celia*" (To Celia), the poem contains 22 quatrains in which the poet looks back with nostalgia and pain to those days when he and Celia were sweethearts. It opens with the quatrain that has become what is probably the best-known passage in all Tagalog poetry:

Cong pag saulang cong basahin sa isip
ang nangacaraang arao ng pag-ibig,
may mahahagulap cayang natititig
liban na cay Celiang namugad sa dibdib?⁴⁷

Having established the image of the homecoming stranger, Baltazar then leads the reader back to the past and its landmarks: the village roads which Celia had trod, the rivers Beata and Hilom the lovers had frequented together, the mango tree by the roadside from which they had picked some fruit, the rock on the bank of the Makati River on which Celia stepped upon alighting from a boat, the *talinghaga* of love exchanged between them like cryptic pass-words. All these images are seen as through a haze beyond which a world of objects and places beckons. But the poet is not interested in those images in themselves but as details evocative of sorrow over love that did not flourish:

Ano panga,t, ualang di nasisiyasat,
ang pagiisipco sa touang cumupas
sa cagugunita, luha,i, lalagaslas
sabay ang taghoy cong "jo, nasauing palad!"⁴⁸

However, the poet does not suffer in vain—it has led him to sing "the tale of a hapless man":

⁴⁷ Leafing through memory to re-read / the days of love gone by, / I can make out no other word / than Celia who once nested in my heart.

⁴⁸ Indeed, the mind leaves nothing unturned / as it ponders over faded joy, / and reminiscence brings a rush of tears / while I sob out, "Alas, my wretched fate."

Itong di matiis na pagdaralita
nang dahil sa iyo, o nalayong toua,
ang siyang umacay sa aco,i, tumula
autin ang buhay nang isang na aba.⁴⁹

As a poet, Baltazar is at his best when he savors the language of sorrow whose power lies not in its visual imagination but in emotive evocations. The opening stanzas of *Florante at Laura* should clarify the distinction made above. Here Baltazar presents the setting of his tale of a hapless man (1-8). The first stanza creates atmosphere through the use of modifiers: *madilim* (dark), *mapanglao* (sad), *matinik* (thorny), and *walang pag-itan* (dense). He then introduces a personified sun (Phoebus) whose light has to struggle in order to penetrate the wilderness. In the subsequent stanzas (2-4), he speaks of "huge trees," "horrifying birdcalls," "thorny vines twisting around the branches of trees," "poisonous fruits covered with floss," "dark-colored flowers," and "a strong odor that induces vertigo." The fifth and the sixth stanzas go into a more particularized description—most of the trees are cypresses and fig trees, the reptiles serpents and basilisks, and the beasts hyenas and tigers. The seventh stanza lifts the setting to the level of the mythical by alluding to Avernus, Pluto and Cocytus. The distribution of elements is suggestive of Baltazar's special powers as a poet. Four quatrains are used to create atmosphere in general terms, two to name objects, and one to give the place a mythical character. Clearly we have here a poet who is in his elements when building up for a mood. For this reason, he writes absorbing poetry when he is writing speeches for his characters, his sense of theatre imbuing them with dramatic power that fixes the reader's attention on the inner lives of the characters no matter how vacuous these characters may be.

Against a barren background, it is tempting to exaggerate the virtues of *Florante at Laura*. Compared to the metrical tales that have come down from the nineteenth century, it

⁴⁹ This misery that I cannot bear, / the misery you left, O joy that fled, / has led me to poeticize / and sing the tale of a hapless man.

is indeed a masterpiece in the handling of language, character and theme. But its flaws must not be glossed over, although it is only fair to the poet to see his failings in the light of the tradition behind him. The lack of convincing transition in time from one scene to another gives the poem an air of being highly contrived, an impression not helped by the anachronisms that prove most offensive to the twentieth-century reader. The sudden jump, for instance, from the rescue of Florante to the reunion with Laura (an interval of five months) creates a void in the poem which tends to confuse the reader who may fail to see that the character in the later scenes is no longer what he was earlier. The same flaw is in evidence in the conclusion of the poem. The reconciliation between Florante and Laura is set against a background of jealousy and suspicion that cannot be dismissed in a stanza or two. Baltazar's failure in this regard may again be traced to his career as a dramatist. Transitions in a *comedia*, from one year to the next, or one town to another, are matters of theatrical convention, so that they are acceptable no matter how sudden. Carried over from the native drama, these transitions prove unconvincing because they have not been adapted to the different pacing required by written work. Here we see that Baltazar, in spite of his recognition that written poetry is different from oral poetry, often falls back upon the conventions of the oral tradition. And so the irony of giving his poem learned footnotes but relying on poetic devices proper only to oral art.

Tradition Formalized. After *Florante at Laura*, salient characteristics of Baltazar's poem became fixed qualities of Tagalog poetry. The fact that the nineteenth century recognized the work as the best literary product by a native writer helped establish the poem as a paragon for later poetry. Its acceptance by the intelligentsia of the period affirmed its virtues, and subsequent poems, both lyric and narrative, were to duplicate those qualities that distinguished it from works previous to and contemporaneous with it.

The first fact that must be noted is the prestige that Baltazar conferred on narrative poetry as the vehicle for serious

literary expression. Although the *pasion* was the first written narrative poem, it was not until the great secular narrative poem was written that the full potential of the form came to be recognized. The *pasion* was a retelling of the New Testament, a fixed narrative. *Florante at Laura* invented its own narrative, and so opened all kinds of possibility for the writing of major poetry. This is not to say that the possibilities of the form escaped Jose de la Cruz in his lost metrical romances. Baltazar himself saw those possibilities, and it was his ability to draw together into the *awit* the various strands of poetic tradition which gave *Florante at Laura* the substantiality that brought it acclaim.

The treatment of the subject matter in *Florante at Laura* gave courtly love long life in Tagalog poetry. Thus, the courtly lover—that humble suppliant for a woman's love, suffering the pangs of jealousy and uncertainty, and finally perfected by his trials—was to become a stock figure in Tagalog love poetry. This lover appears in three guises. He may be the frustrated lover of "*Cay Celia*" whose suffering brings about a poem born of his longing to recapture the past. Or he may be the jealous lover, a reincarnation of Florante, who gains wisdom because of the sufferings he has had to endure in loving a woman deeply. Or, like Aladin, he may be a lover who has lost his sweetheart to a power he cannot resist because it represents another type of loyalty. All three suffer intensely and, we may add, rather ostentatiously.

Emotion—the poet's or the character's—as the determinant of the development of the subject matter was endorsed by Baltazar's practice in *Florante at Laura*. The objective world is but fitfully glimpsed in the poem which is devoted to the unfolding of Florante's reactions to a world that he believes has done him injustice. The faulty transitions discussed earlier in reference to the structure of the poem are indications of the poet's lack of interest in the mundane world outside Florante's or Aladin's inner life. Baltazar's dependence on the logic of emotion in developing his subject matter becomes in subsequent poets a tendency to narrow the range of the themes of poetry to those that are considered poetic,

e.g. idealized love, frustrated love, idealized landscapes that reflect the poet's feelings, etc.

The courtly love tradition brought with it rhetorical devices that took the place of images drawn from daily life in creating the texture of experience in the poem. The immediacy of the imagery of folk poetry was abandoned for the flights of fancy that the apostrophe, personification, metonymy or synecdoche allowed. The devices were certainly apt for the erotic fantasies of a courtly lover like *Florante* and the flights of fancy were acceptable within the universe of *Florante at Laura*. Ape'd indiscriminately by subsequent love poets, the rhetorical devices became extravagant mannerisms within the modest compass of shorter love lyrics. The folk *talinghaga* revolved around, a single image and could therefore function as a unifier of sensations and ideas within a stanza. Once it was jettisoned or suppressed, the result was the chaotic imagery that Retana noted in the Tagalog poets of Batangas in 1886.⁵⁰ Another effect, equally deleterious, was the tendency towards abstractness as brought about principally by personification, and toward exaggerated emotionality as encouraged by the apostrophe.

The dodecasyllabic line became the Tagalog meter after *Florante at Laura* demonstrated Baltazar's success with the measure. With the heptasyllabic line associated with folk poetry and the octosyllabic line with religious verse, the dodecasyllabic meter came to be identified with secular poetry during and after the nineteenth century.

The monoriming quatrain remained, however, as the standard Tagalog strophe. The longer lease on life that it got may be attributed also to Baltazar's effective use of the stanza in *Florante at Laura*. It is one element from the folk tradition that has persisted in Tagalog poetry; its balance of two lines against the two other lines has been maintained even in recent twentieth-century verse.

⁵⁰ *El indio batangueño, estudio etnográfico*, 3rd ed. (Manila, 1888), p. 41.

Finally, the aphoristic style Baltazar inherited from the folk tradition, from the proverbs in particular, led to the identification of the poet with the sage. Quality in poetry was equated with quotability. Ironically, it is the quotability of many of his quatrains that has made Baltazar the most misread of Tagalog poets. Entire passages from *Florante at Laura* have been quoted out of context by readers and critics in search of platitudes with which to adorn their essays and holiday speeches. The greatest irony is that Baltazar, in his time the epitome of urbanity as a poet, in our day has ceased to be read as a poet but rather as the wise man of the tribe.