

A THRESHOLD OF FLOWERS: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EROTICISM IN THE POEMS OF  
LEONA FLORENTINO

Sarah Blanton

A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Romance Studies (Spanish).

Chapel Hill  
2016

Approved by:

Juan Carlos González Espitia

Irene Gómez-Castellano

Samuel Amago

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sarah Blanton: *A Threshold of Flowers: Public and Private Eroticism in the Poems of Leona Florentino*  
(Under the direction of Juan Carlos González Espitia)

Leona Florentino (1849-1884) is a foundational poet and dramatist from the port city of Vigan, located on the northern Philippine island of Luzón, then part of the Spanish Empire. Florentino's literary production blurs and challenges established gender boundaries and regulations. Writing from the doubly marginalized perspective of a woman and of a colonial subject, Florentino utilizes the imagery of the garden to mobilize a verdant critique against the established gender roles, structures of desire, and domestic and public spaces. Many of Florentino's known poems were written for public celebrations. However, the private poems she composed conjure erotic themes in a more conspicuous fashion. This study analyzes the ways in which Florentino utilizes garden imagery in two celebratory poems and one erotic composition to harness the tensions between the public and private spheres, and illuminates her representations of gender roles and female sexuality in nineteenth century Vigan.

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Awake, O north wind, and come, thou south! Blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruits.

(Song of Solomon 4:16)

In nineteenth century Spain, restrictive gender roles made women's intellectual and creative activity a difficult undertaking. The role summarized by the rubric of the *ángel del hogar* was the norm: women were expected to be silent and obedient wives and mothers, subservient to their husbands and responsible for their children (Kirkpatrick 212). Women occupied the domestic, interior space of the home while the outside world was reserved for men. In the far reaches of the Spanish empire, Philippine *mujeres indígenas* were also trained to be docile, patient, and submissive. Spanish missionaries published manuals for young girls and established colleges where they could be sheltered and “remolded to the image and likeness of the perfect woman of the Iberian society of their time” (Mananzan 27). Though gender roles were strictly observed in Spanish and Spanish colonial society and women were expected to remain within the space of their homes, one space existed that bridged the domestic and public sphere. The garden was understood as a feminine zone, yet it also marked a permeable interface between the female-coded interior space of the home and stereotypically masculine spaces in the metropolis and beyond (Stackelberg 71).

Leona Florentino (1849-1884) is a foundational poet and dramatist from the port city of Vigan, located on the northern Philippine island of Luzón, then part of the Spanish Empire. Florentino's literary production blurs and challenges established gender boundaries and

regulations. Writing from the doubly marginalized perspective of a woman and of a colonial subject, Florentino utilizes the imagery of the garden to mobilize a verdant critique against the established gender roles, structures of desire, and domestic and public spaces. Many of Florentino's known poems were written for public celebrations. However, the private poems she composed conjure erotic themes in a more conspicuous fashion. This study analyzes the ways in which Florentino utilizes garden imagery in two celebratory poems and one erotic composition to harness the tensions between the public and private spheres, and illuminates her representations of gender roles and female sexuality in nineteenth century Vigan.

Born to a wealthy family, Florentino demonstrated her precocious intellect and curiosity at an early age.<sup>1</sup> A local Augustinian priest named Evaristo Abaya soon identified her talent and before the girl was ten years old, he taught her how to write in both Spanish and her vernacular language, Ilocano (de los Reyes, I. 312).<sup>2</sup> When she was fourteen, in order to maintain the ownership of certain properties within her family, Florentino's parents arranged for her to marry her cousin, Elías de los Reyes (Santiago 580). Due to her poetic talent—it is said that she was able to improvise poetic verse effortlessly—she was often asked to prepare verses for birthday celebrations and wedding feasts (de los Reyes, I. 398). Her husband did not support her literary or creative inclinations, and they eventually separated. Afterward, she moved to a small neighborhood outside of the city where she lived until she died at the age of thirty-five. Though she is regarded the “first vernacular poetess,” one of “the first two Filipinas to write unabashedly secular works,” and “a bridge from oral to literary tradition,” little of her known work is published (Bragado 52, Santiago 580, Vartii n.p.). While Florentino may not have published her

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<sup>1</sup> Some sources postulate that Florentino's mother tutored her as a young child, before her talent was identified by the local priest (Mambao, n.p.).

<sup>2</sup> While most texts claim that Abaya was a priest, several texts state that he was a curate (Foronda 169).

work in her lifetime, people in the city could recite her verses even after her death (de los Reyes, J. 2). The three poems discussed in this essay appear in Isabelo de los Reyes's work *El Folk-lore Filipino*, published in 1890, six years after Florentino's death.<sup>3</sup> Isabelo de los Reyes, her son, selected and adapted some of her poems and translated them from Ilocano to Spanish (de los Reyes, I. 319).<sup>4</sup>

De los Reyes divided his mother's poems into two categories: congratulatory poems and erotic compositions. The imagery associated with the two cited congratulatory poems, composed for the purpose of public recitation, provides a foundation for this essay to explore some recurring motifs in Florentino's poetry. The first poem, "Felicitación satírica," centers on a *solterona*, or spinster, on the occasion of her twenty-eighth birthday. According to De los Reyes, the woman in question suffered from ill-humor because she desired a young suitor and the only individuals seemingly displaying interest in her were older men (de los Reyes, I. 338). This piece playfully offers advice to the woman who is considered by many to be beyond her prime. As both poet and character are considered outsiders in different ways, this section will examine the ways in which Florentino encourages the spinster's solitary lifestyle and stands in solidarity with her. The second poem, "Coronación de una soltera en sus días," celebrates a young maiden's birthday. The verses are directed to the young Filipina as the poet admires her beauty and places

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the difficulty accessing this work, the three poems can be found at the end of this essay.

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I will be using Isabelo de los Reyes' Spanish translations. De los Reyes included commentary and interpretations of his mothers' poetry in an appendix. At times he also intervened in the poems by interpolating his explanations. It has been noted that "her son censured his mother's erotic and rebellious production" because such features in a female writer were regarded as subversive (Vartii, n.p.). Some of these commentaries by de los Reyes (as well as the translations themselves) are problematic and will necessitate further investigation. Moreover, obvious discrepancies exist within the Spanish and English translations of the poems, so it proves necessary to edit another translation of the original Ilocano poems into both Spanish and English.

a crown of flowers on her head.<sup>5</sup> This celebratory poem more clearly elicits erotic undercurrents. The garden motifs in these celebratory poems take on more explicitly sensual connotations in the final poem, “Declaración simbólica,” which was written as part of the poet’s own private reflection. Examining the ways in which Florentino identifies with the *solterona* in the first poem, how she expresses desire in the second poem, and the manner in which she directly states her erotic inclinations in the third poem, this essay reveals how the poet experiments with what can be said in the public and private space. Furthermore, by using imagery from the liminal sphere of the garden, Florentino establishes homoerotic undercurrents and challenges normative gender performance.

In “Queer Reader/Queer Muse,” Librada Hernández posits that because women in the nineteenth century were considered outside the realm of erotic passion, they often expressed their sensual feelings and desire with each other within the domestic sphere or, according to Hernández, a “queer site” (63). Her analysis of women’s relationships within the domestic space—such as at birthday parties—resonates with Florentino’s poetic production for celebratory events. Florentino playfully composed “Felicitación satírica” as if she were writing a traditional love letter to Castora, the guest of honor. Isabelo de los Reyes writes: “Cuando las simpáticas y hermosas ilocanas (solteras) celebran sus cumpleaños, pues allí no se celebran los días, sus pretendientes (vulgo, *dongguiales*) las agasajan con cartas de felicitación” (250). He presents an example of such a letter written in verse, with the letters arranged in an acrostic pattern that spells the name of the “beloved.” Florentino writes her “felicitación-consejo” for Castora in a similar fashion (de los Reyes, I. 330). Instead of shaming her for her unsuccessful attempts at

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<sup>5</sup> This image evokes Hellenistic influences, particularly that of Sappho. I will explore this Sapphic undercurrent in a later and ampler investigation of Florentino’s production.



finding a husband, Florentino appropriates the voice of a male admirer to encourage Castora to enjoy her solitary lifestyle. In the nineteenth century context, becoming a wife and mother was the highest calling and the most important role for women, which may be why Florentino omits information from her poem and uses literary strategies such as metaphor to skillfully dissimulate her unorthodox message.

In “Felicitación satírica,” like many of her other known poems, Florentino describes the woman she is addressing as if she were a flower, which is a practice that reflects the overarching European and global interest in floral representations through the course of the nineteenth century. Many works concerning floral representations were circulated during this time, and Romantic poets often embedded their texts with the language of flowers.<sup>6</sup> A representative text is *Le Language des Fleurs* by Charlotte de la Tour, the first flower dictionary, published in France in 1818. De la Tour outlined symbolism associated with flowers spanning back to the Middle Ages and her classification of meanings of flowers soon circulated throughout Europe and the Americas (Heilmeyer 16). These floral interpretations were adapted to the regional contexts of the Americas and elsewhere, where new meanings were developed and applied to flowers. A flower served as a “messenger of the heart” in literature (Heilmeyer 16). Florentino often uses

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<sup>6</sup> Other representative books published in the nineteenth century that contain further information on the language of the flowers include: *El correo del amor: nuevos modelos para escribir cartas amorosas; adicionado con El lenguaje de las flores* (Anonymous, 18??); *Nuevo lenguaje de las flores y colores: considerablemente aumentado y corregido / por J.M.F.*; *The Language of Flowers, or, Floral Emblems of Thoughts, Feelings, and Sentiments with Twelve Coloured Groups of Flowers* (Tyas, Robert, 1869); *The Language of Flowers: Poetically Expressed: Being a Complete Floras Album* (Adams, John S., 1847); *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* (Adams, H.G., 1858 [c1853]); *Floras Lexicon; An Interpretation of the Language and Sentiment of Flowers; With an Outline of Botany, and a Poetical Introduction* (Watermine, Catharine H., 1855)

floral imagery as a symbol, which suggests that she, too, as an avid reader, was familiar with the stylistic trends circulating beyond her colonial space.<sup>7</sup>

One can imagine the scene here: Florentino standing before the “solterona” at the party, directing her voice to those that gathered, and referring to the woman as “un jazmín marchito / la soltera que llega a cumplir 28 años” (1). Florentino does not necessarily indicate that all unmarried women beyond the prime of their youth are like wilted jasmine flowers; instead, she is referring specifically to the woman before her. She advises that Castora should hold her head high despite her notoriety as a disgruntled woman, unhappy with her single status.

Florentino’s comparison of Castora to a withering jasmine plant is significant in several ways. According to *Lenguaje de las flores*, published in 1882, the jasmine represents *amabilidad*, or kindness.<sup>8</sup> Florencio Jazmín states that individuals associated with the jasmine represent “personas dotadas de un carácter tan feliz que parecen nacidas para ser el vínculo de la sociedad; tienen en sus modales tanta facilidad y gracia, que soportan las diferentes pasiones” (Jazmín 85). By calling Castora a wilted jasmine, Florentino alludes to the notion that the woman is not beyond hope of rejuvenation; with the metaphorical addition of water, she can come back to life and embody a character celebrated at the heart of society, graceful, and tolerant of different passions. She does not need to let herself deteriorate out of a sense of disappointment

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, within the Philippine colonial context, there were most likely botanical indexes and guides that were produced during this time. This type of scientific classification, coincident with the rise of “folklore” as a category of analysis, occurred when the language of flowers was a prevalent discourse. I will research the context and development Florentino’s use of European and Filipino flora within her literary production as well as the possible architectural variations of a Spanish and Filipino garden space.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Oxford Dictionary, the language of the flowers is “a set of symbolic meanings attached to different flowers when they are given or arranged” (Oxford).

that she does not meet societal expectations for a woman by getting married and bearing children.

After comparing the soltera to a “jazmín marchito,” Florentino warns Castora: “Y debe preocuparse mucho de que / su mercancía no se haga *consumo*” (3-4). These poignant lines emphasize the importance of a woman’s physical appeal in masculine society; she refers to the woman’s merchandise, which connotes a woman’s worth in society in terms of her physical, material and social attributes. If Castora is not careful about how she comports herself, her age may make her undesirable. In this way, aging coincides with the anxiety of losing one’s youth, vitality, and the possibility of establishing a stable future. In the following lines, the poem warns that regardless of measures taken against withering away, “cuando ya se inclina al suelo / siempre ha de caer / porque su lozanía ya se ha marchitado” (6-8). The poetic cadence of the words could have invoked a performative presence that also inflected the meaning of the poem in specific ways. In the public, social setting, Florentino’s poems were enlivened within the festive nature of the occasion, and in this way the innuendo and connotation that could have been “read” or understood by the audience was indeed very different from that afforded by the act of textual reading, which has its own specific economy of “decipherment” and “reading between the lines.”

Florentino, who also reputedly wrote theatrical plays and *sainetes*, recited her congratulatory poems with a flair for drama in festive, public settings. Given that her literary production bridges the oral and written traditions of Ilocano literature, Florentino demonstrates a command of classic Greek and Roman rhetoric. Literacy was not widespread in the colonial Philippines, but Florentino had been schooled, was a voracious reader and found entertaining ways to express her playful wit to her largely illiterate public. Perhaps Florentino maintained an erect posture when she spoke these lines to Castora, conveying her words of advice in a visual

manner and accentuating the lines in a corporeal way. As a way to encourage the woman to resist signs of aging and despair imposed by society, Florentino would portray confidence and urge her to perform a pleasant disposition, as if she were showing the contradiction between what a spinster is supposed to be and what an unmarried woman could aspire to be. This strategy of opposition is further stressed in verses 9-12, where the poetic voice advises to be happy and youthful, even when growing older.

This interplay between poking fun at Castora's situation while also giving her unorthodox personal advice gestures to the classic satirical mode. Ralph M. Rosen explains in his book *Making Mockery: The Poetics of Ancient Satire* that certain ambiguities within satire "make it virtually impossible to decide where the 'meaning' of satirical poetry actually resides . . . they [satirists] encourage audiences to *believe* that the meaning of satire is in fact straightforward and *unambiguous*" (Rosen 218). In this way, Florentino utilizes satire to speak in a kind of code to Castora; some listeners would have certainly understood the poetic nuance of her verse, while others—especially those individuals who preferred to adhere to societal expectations—most likely would have let it go unnoticed. This can be seen in the first line of the poem, when instead of saying kind words at the woman's birthday celebration, she immediately invokes her age: "Es como un jazmín marchito / la soltera que llega a cumplir 28 años" (1-2). The double meaning of this first line resides in that, on the one hand, Florentino is simply teasing Castora for being old on her birthday; at the same time, the poet communicates a sexual innuendo by suggesting that Castora resembles a "jazmín marchito," alluding to the flower's representation of female anatomy. Given Castora's frustration with finding a suitor, this line suggests that she is thirsty for a suitor's attention; it has been some time since she has been sexually aroused. Thus, the more occluded message is found in the interpretation that Florentino is encouraging Castora to

deliberately take more libidinous and sensual pleasure in life, nourishing herself so as not to become “marchito,” as will be further explored later in the analysis of the poem. Those in the gathering who recognized this undercurrent would keep listening for more playful double *entendres*. (1). In nearly every line that follows, one could understand that Florentino is simply poking fun at Castora and telling her to cheer up despite being an old spinster. In a situation that fosters this tension of ambiguous meanings and morals, “when someone comes along who wants to censor a satirist they are often accused by the satirist’s fans and devotees of failing to understand what is really going on with such performances, failing to appreciate what we have come to call a poetics of satire” (Rosen 247). This tension is evident in Florentino’s literary production, as her husband and son both attempted to censor her production throughout her life (Vartii n.p.).

In this way, her satirical rendering of Castora’s situation “makes a vivid case for satire as a discrete form of marked fictional discourse, inscrutable to notional ‘outsiders,’ and operating in an elusive, perennially unstable moral universe” (Rosen 217). In one moment, Florentino appears to be giving a didactic message to Castora, and in another, she seems to poke fun at her just as the rest of society tended to do. However, according to Rosen, within the public space of the satirical performance there is a group of “insiders” who “understand satire as a closed, fictive space, and who revel in, rather than problematize, its comic ironies” (Rosen 218). The power of satire resides within the art of maintaining moral ambiguities. Florentino’s capacity to maintain these ambiguities within the public space —by speaking simultaneously as the married sage giving advice and as the unhappy wife envious of Castora’s potentially advantageous position as a single woman— within the public space allows her to deliver a particular message to *some* of

the audience, and subvert having her subject matter being censored —because of her gender— by others.

Instead of ridiculing Castora, Florentino conveys a message of hope when she urges her to “muéstrate siempre lozana y alegre / aunque tu vejez ya se avecina” (11-12). Florentino directs her to maintain a good disposition true to the nature of the jasmine, despite the fact that she is getting older and is still unmarried. In the face of social pressure to adhere to gender norms during this period, Florentino stands in solidarity with the *solterona*, playfully teasing as well as instructing her, as if stating that wilting flowers can nevertheless enjoy life fully.

After instructing Castora to demonstrate an attitude of contentment and resist lowering her head like a drooping flower, Florentino advises: “si mides bien / el vino que vendes / muchos te querrán / especialmente el viejo S. y B.” (13-16). Just as Florentino utilized the jasmine flower, she now employs the symbol of wine to allude to more sensual themes. The wine that grows better with age can be interpreted as a symbol of the woman’s appearance; she should display her beauty with method so as to gain the attention and affection of those around her. The metaphor also insinuates that by cultivating a pleasant persona, Castora’s charm may produce intoxicating effects and cause old men to fall in love with her. Instead of being disappointed that she has not found a husband, Florentino encourages her to embody a personality akin to Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and fertility that shares his bounty not with one, but with many.

This poem can be interpreted simply as a thoughtful, playful, encouraging message for Castora, but it also connotes the poet’s profound sensitivity to the subject at hand. Florentino advises Castora on how to better live her life. Moreover, this advice could reveal how Florentino would live if she had the opportunity to be single again, without the responsibilities that come with having a husband and children, especially considering her own marriage is unhappy.

Though Florentino's poetic talent was celebrated by the city, her husband did not support her and in fact both he and her family shunned her. Florentino's directions are pointed and thorough, alluding to the idea that she, the poet, has considered Castora's plight. In the recited poem, Florentino responds to the spinster's circumstance with joviality instead of admonishment. Moreover, returning to the overarching theme of flowers in these poems, Susan Kirkpatrick states that "these poems imply a kind of shared subjectivity between the speaking 'I' and the object it addresses: reading the flowers' secret language, the poet discloses her own emotional life" (Kirkpatrick 219).<sup>9</sup> Mutatis mutandis, these "satirical congratulations" that Florentino composed for Castora are satirical in the basic and classic sense of the word: she is able to write poignantly about Castora's situation because of her own self-identification as an outsider and simultaneous envy of the spinster's circumstance. Florentino projects her own desires and more liberating expectations on Castora's future possibilities as an unmarried, childless woman.

Given the public setting, the poet does not deliver her message directly. In addition to utilizing metaphor, she also omits certain details that the astute participants could understand. When she instructs Castora to distribute the wine, she does not communicate, for example, the names of the individuals to which she is referring when she simply states "muchos te querrán/ especialmente el viejo S. y B." (15-16). Listening to her poems would be a kind of game for those attending the party, as they would need to divine the old male characters to which Florentino alludes.<sup>10</sup> One can imagine the glances exchanged among the "insiders" at the party

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<sup>9</sup> This quote corresponds to Kirkpatrick's analysis of Carolina Coronado's poetry. Both Coronado and Florentino lived at the same time and their poetry shares many similarities, especially with regard to the language of flowers. Another project for future investigation would be to analyze Florentino's literary production within the larger context of the *hermandad lírica* of the nineteenth century, tracing their affinities and potentially shared literary influences.

<sup>10</sup> It is also possible that Isabelo de los Reyes opted not to include these individuals' full names at the time of the publication of his book. As a part of this future project, it will be necessary to locate Florentino's original poems in

when Florentino delivered those playful lines; Florentino subtly indicates what she is *not* saying as much as to what she *is* saying (Rosen 218).

Florentino reminds Castora to remain pleasant and positive several times in the poem, and advises again that she enjoy herself when she states “Procura divertir tu ánimo / especialmente cuando se hacen cariñitos / la vieja D. y M., / que son como *tigui* de comezón” (21-24). Like many of Florentino’s poems, the erotic allusions intensify as the verses go on. Once again, she refers to a couple *haciendo cariñitos* without directly stating their names. Florentino asserts that Castora should not simply tolerate, but enjoy when she sees affectionate caresses between the couple. It is likely that she is referring to two well-known individuals in the community who have a reputation of publicly displaying their amorous relationship.

Within this dynamic of concealment and revelation, the poet utilizes metaphor again to elaborate on the erotic scene: she refers to the old couple as “*tigui* de comezón” (24).<sup>11</sup> Comparing the couple to *tigui de comezón* could refer to the viewer’s reaction to the sight of two people so openly expressing their affection. Witnessing D. and M. caressing each other produces an itchy, irritating feeling. However, Florentino advises Castora to enjoy the sight of the *cariñitos*, which could also mean that she is referring to the pleasurable sensations the couple is feeling when they are touching each other, alluding to a more particular itch that is indeed being scratched.

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order to confirm whether made these changes in order to avoid confrontation with real people in Vigan at the time he published *El Folk-lore Filipino* and sent his mother’s poems to be included in the World Exposition in Madrid in 1892 and in St. Louis in 1904.

<sup>11</sup> My research points to *Tigui* as either a plant, a root, or a caterpillar found in the Philippines that, when touched, causes an itchy reaction. Further research needs to be done to establish *tigui*’s true meaning.



Florentino uses the *tigui* not only to demonstrate the sensual feeling of irritating, itching or sensual rubbing, but also to create an erotic scene that no one, especially a woman, could have expressed in a public setting otherwise. Florentino's poetry often establishes a naturalizing or normalizing environment by comparing women to flowers. By incorporating garden motifs, Florentino utilizes the liminal space that exists between domesticity and the outside world to test the boundaries of how far she can go within her public address and invoke erotic, playful and salacious themes. Considering the relationship between the couple at hand, who caress one another like a *tigui de comezón*, Florentino advocates for Castora to adopt a more accepting and open attitude about amorous relationships, even to go so far as taking pleasure in the amorous and sexual bonds that the other couple publicly demonstrates. Castora is represented at the beginning of the poem as a withered flower that may become rejuvenated if she would embrace and even vicariously enjoy watching the couple touching each other. Once refreshed by the necessary wetness that revitalizes withered flowers, potential suitors would be more attracted to Castora's improved disposition. Florentino ends the poem by assuring Castora that if she follows her advice "no dudes que alcanzarás / el séptimo matrimonio / que ha establecido don Domingo (Otro viejo pretendiente suyo) (26-28). At first glance, it seems that this line might conform with the gender structures of the time, indicating that Castora could look forward to becoming don Domingo's spouse, thus fulfilling her role as a woman in Spanish colonial society—even if it meant she would become his seventh wife. Like much of Florentino's poetic production, however, these verses can also be interpreted in a more liberating way, in which Castora is assured that if she becomes more open and amicable, she might conquer multiple lovers in the same fashion as don Domingo.

In this way, her satirical rendering of Castora's situation "makes a vivid case for satire as a discrete form of marked fictional discourse, inscrutable to notional 'outsiders,' and operating in an elusive, perennially unstable moral universe" (Rosen 217). In one moment, Florentino appears to be giving a didactic message to Castora, and in another, she seems to poke fun at her just as the rest of society tended to do. However, according to Rosen, within the public space of the satirical performance there is a group of "insiders" who "understand satire as a closed, fictive space, and who revel in, rather than problematize, its comic ironies" (Rosen 218). The power of satire resides within the art of maintaining moral ambiguities. Florentino's capacity to maintain these ambiguities within the public space—by speaking simultaneously as the married sage giving advice and as the unhappy wife envious of Castora's potentially advantageous position as a single woman—within the public space allows her to deliver a particular message to *some* of the audience, and subvert having her subject matter being censored—because of her gender—by others.

While "Felitación satírica" is a poem composed for a woman considered a spinster, "Coronación de una soltera en sus días" celebrates a young, single, Filipina on her birthday. The messages expressed in these two juxtaposing poems convey, in different ways, Florentino's nuanced technique of incorporating multiple meanings within the context of a congratulatory birthday poem. In both poems, Florentino follows the classic rhetoric of birthday speech, in this case outlined by the Greek rhetorician and commentator Menander Rhetor, which "consists of introductions, praise of the day, encomium of the family, encomium of the person according to the normal divisions, and praise of the day again" (Rollinson and Geckle 102). As I will show, Florentino follows this classic format, but also uses it to challenge the larger structure of the gender expectations of her time in her address to the *soltera*.

“Coronación” begins with general congratulatory words, wishing the young woman a year of good health and happiness and encouraging her to imitate the purity of Santa Rosa, the patron saint of the Philippines, known for her immaculate purity, and who, out of penance and devotion to God, wore a crown of thorns covered by flowers (Aymé, n.p.). The poet uses the collective voice, such as “debemos alegrarnos todos / y adorarte / con puro amor” (6-8). Florentino recognizes that up to this point the girl has grown within her loving parents’ home. But the general, collective, and celebratory poem that initially follows the traditional rhetorical formulation transforms into a more intimate and familiar one when she ceases to refer to those gathered and speaks to the young girl directly. The reciter initiates this more intimate tone by calling the young woman *mellang*, an endearing nickname for Emilia. Upon invoking the girl’s nickname, Florentino compares her to a flower, saying: “y ahora, *mellang*, tu eres un pimpollo / que abres tu capullo como una sampaga” (19-20). A sampaga flower is variety of jasmine that had been introduced into the northern Philippines centuries before. A strikingly fragrant plant, the jasmine transforming from a bud to perfumed flower —opening its petals to the world— establishes the intimate and erotic tone that dominates the central section of this poem. Unlike Castora, who, considered to be too old for marriage, was likened to a withered flower, the young *soltera* is equated with a flower bud at the point of blossoming. Hence, the flower’s stages of development in these two poems reflect the stages of a woman’s life, a dynamic that is paralleled by the imagery of the petals of a flower that share similar aesthetics with female genitalia. In this way, the *soltera*’s likeness to a budding flower represents her virginity and her blossoming gestures towards her coming of age and fertility. Just as Florentino expresses desire when she discusses Castora’s possibilities as an aging (but lively) unmarried woman who can actually have more than just one love interest, when she addresses the maiden on her birthday, a profound,

unquenchable longing and an affirmation of the youth's blossoming sexuality permeates her language. She recognizes the girl's youth, promise, and celebrated position in society.

Garden motifs allow Florentino to speak publicly about taboo topics such as admiration for unconventional lifestyles and erotic desire in her poetry; as Florentino communicated erotic symbolism by means of the *tigui* in "Felitación satírica," she also utilizes garden imagery to portray erotic desire in "Coronación." As previously mentioned, calling the maiden by her nickname *mellang* initiates a more familiar tone in the poem. Following tradition, Florentino then offers a bundle of flowers to the maiden, stating "acepta gustosa en tus lindas manos; no lo deseches que aunque pobre, es obra de puro amor" (21-24). Florentino apologizes for the state of the flowers, pleading with the maiden not to cast them aside. The maiden's youth and beauty are again highlighted in the description of the girl's lovely hands. The flowers, which are not in their prime, are an exchange coming from Florentino's hands, and she apologizes for their lowly quality. This gesture of false modesty handing the withered or simple flowers from the married poet's hands to the young maiden is charged with meaning. The evocation of the wilting flowers returns to the anxiety in the poem dedicated to Castora about aging and losing one's worth. The relevant image is that the withered flowers are passing from Florentino's hands to the hands of the maiden, associating Florentino with the decaying, unquenched gift. If Florentino is represented by the withered flowers, the *soltera* has the capacity of communicating humidity to the thirsty petals, metaphorically invoking homoerotic themes.

After Florentino passes the faded flowers to the maiden, she states "quita los obstáculos de mi camino / que me impidas el paso para que mi corazón venga a apagar su sed de amor / en la inagotable fuente de tu envidiable hermosura" (29-32). This stanza, the most suggestive one recited at the party, is located halfway through the poem, as if to be hidden between the more

general introductory and closing stanzas. Florentino, who recited her poems in a public space, wrote in such a way as to protect herself; she composed utilizing metaphor and carefully placed the more provocative verses where they were most likely to subvert suspicion or prevent negative reactions. The obstacles, therefore, are the boundaries and limitations of expression in the public space. Asking the maiden to remove any obstacles in her path, Florentino demonstrates her desperate longing to come, as she elaborates, to the fountain of the girl's enviable beauty to quench love's thirst. This fountain exists in the garden, in the place where lovers can safely meet. Utilizing this symbol, Florentino takes the context of the poem away from the birthday setting and addresses the beautiful maiden on a more intimate level.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, this line, which refers to quenching one's thirst, alludes to the flowers previously described in the poem. The thirst from which the poet suffers confirms that she identifies herself with the wilting flowers passed to the maiden's lovely hands. Florentino symbolically hands the flowers to the maiden, and verbally states that only from the girl's fountain of beauty can she quench her thirst. Considering Florentino's identification, then, with the wilted flowers, her assertion that the young girl could revive them by quenching her thirst establishes strong erotic connections between the two women. By asking the maiden to revive the dry flowers, she simultaneously conveys her desire for love as well as her anxiety about aging and displacement.

In this way, Florentino blends the classic rhetoric of birthday speech with the innuendo associated with satire. Rosen explains that "all poetry can be said in one way or another to imply some sort of relationship with an audience, but satirical poetry, especially when it is written in

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<sup>12</sup> In various Filipino communities—including in Ilocos Sur—indigenous Filipino and Spanish courting and matrimony rituals blended together. Some of these marriage rituals lasted for a week or more before the couple was officially considered married. Given Florentino's appropriation of the male voice by utilizing the form of a suitor's love letter in her poem to Castora, it becomes another task to our list to investigate the ways in which her poems may also mimic or invoke these rituals. Further research needs to be done to consider whether the obstacles she mentions might be connected to these Spanish-Filipino courting rituals.

the first-person, wants (or, more precisely, *claims* to want) that relationship to be particularly intimate, even urgent” (Rosen 243). In the classic model of satire, the poet employs a tone of urgency in order to bring individuals in the audience to the poet’s cause. Florentino does this with a twist: she attempts to win the favor of only one individual, the celebrated girl. Reciting a poem with such transgressive undertones—as a woman—at a birthday celebration not only experiments with what can and cannot be said within a public space, but also challenges the larger societal structures in place. In this way, her skillful compositions create an interplay between eroticism and satire that evokes homoerotic connotations and calls into question larger issues of gender norms and hierarchies within the colonial space.

As demonstrated in “Coronación,” Florentino adopts the feminine submissive, humble role within the context of the public space when she addresses the maiden, calling her “soberana de todas las rosas” (34). The rose, the most highly esteemed of all garden flowers and known as the “queen of flowers,” is a symbol of love (Heilmeyer 74). The poet submissively pleads “permíteme que venga / a admirar tus encantos. / por tu día venturoso / permíteme ofrecerte / mi rendido corazón” (35-39). The poet’s devotion and amorous admiration for the maiden manifest themselves within these lines, so much so that in Isabelo de los Reyes’ translation he applies a footnote that he finds it is “curiosa la costumbre ilocana de aprovechar esta ocasión solemne de declarar el amor, cuando otras veces procuran que sea muy secreta su pasión. A una declaración amorosa, suelen las ilocanas contestar con un insulto indecente” (de los Reyes, I. 342).<sup>6</sup> Keeping in mind that the ideal Filipina is submissive and modest, and under normal circumstances cannot entertain praise from another, de los Reyes’ footnote further demonstrates that it is precisely

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<sup>6</sup> As explained in the introductory section, Leona Florentino’s son often interjects his own interpretations, judgments, discomfort, and general sentiments with respect to his mother’s poetic production (especially concerning her more erotic poetry). These interventions point to another reading of the gendered, colonial dynamic in Florentino’s literary productions that I will explore in the future.

within the public space that Florentino is able to access the intimate, personal space, and express her desire and affection to the maiden. Purity and innocence were important qualities for women in colonial Vigan. This is demonstrated in another section of *El Folk-lore Filipino*, when de los Reyes indicates that “los ricos no suelen tomarse la molestia de cortejar a sus adoradas, lo cual es por cierto muy penoso muchas veces, porque en Ilocos no se permite hablar con las jóvenes; y saludarlas, a veces lo toman por cinismo y nos insultan solo por ésto” (de los Reyes, I. 378). Florentino thus implies that it is unbecoming for a woman to receive or give amorous attention, as purity was the most important aspect of her personality. Florentino exploits this opportunity in the domestic space of the home —yet public space of the party— to express her tender and romantic feelings toward the maiden.

Just as Florentino described the couple caressing one another like *tigui* toward the end of the previous poem, she arrives to an overtly erotic and intimate space with the maiden when she recites this poem, ultimately offering her “rendido corazón” (39). After her invocation of the family, thanking them for raising such a good young woman, she delivers her amorous verses. Immediately after reciting the erotic verses, Florentino abruptly apologizes, ending the poem again in a more generic, congratulatory way. After offering the maiden her heart, she states: “Y perdóname si / por lo que acabo de decir / he incurrido en alguna falta” (40-42). Her acknowledgement that she may have breached too closely the boundary of intimacy reiterates Florentino’s testing of gender divisions at the crossroads of the public and private space. After the apology, she returns to the general congratulatory blessings expected. In the end, Florentino invites all the attendees to exclaim “¡Viva!” to the maiden (48). This final call to collective engagement distracts from the personal confession that preceded it.

The third and final poem discussed here, “Declaración simbólica,” was written as a personal reflection. This piece, categorized by Isabelo de los Reyes as an erotic poem, was never intended for public recitation and more explicitly illustrates the queer tension alluded to in “Felicitación” and “Coronación.” In many ways, “Declaración” more clearly articulates what could not be openly said in the congratulatory poems, and many of the same themes remain: desire, thirst, wilting petals, beauty, flowers, and rejuvenation. Furthermore, the entire poem is staged in the garden. This garden space is unique in that it allows romantic and sexual passions to be realized. Lovers in classic literature – such as Fernando de Rojas’s Calixto and Melibea or William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet – demonstrate this aspect of the garden’s potential for creating a space for intimacy.

Conjuring the image of a flower, the poem begins: “El rocío de Abril ha regado el brillante cáliz / de una lozana flor” (1-2). In contrast to the other poems discussed, this poem begins with a vibrant, healthy flower, wet with April’s dew. Returning to the language of flowers, Susan Kirkpatrick postulates that flowers are linked “to the poet’s gender and status . . . . Read in terms of their intertextual relations with a poetic tradition that goes from the Spanish Golden Age through the neoclassical period, these flower poems can be seen as complex transformations of the significance of the flower as a poetic figure” (216). In this way, flowers can symbolize emotions, erotic desires, and even can make “the flower a figure for desire itself” (216). The springtime setting indicates lushness and fecundity, as seen in the vibrant flower and represented in the girl’s robust youth, and the flower’s description as a “cáliz” or goblet, communicates the quenching of a thirst, connecting the desire with the poetic voice. This first image of flower petals that form the shape of a chalice—which are wetted by springtime dew—points to a fulfilled sexual intercourse, even from the very first line. The sensuousness of this



fertile, springtime scene is palpable when one considers the beauty of the flower, the taste of the dew within the chalice, and the tactile contact of the dew coating the petals. Upon invoking sight, touch, and taste, the poem continues to conjure the sense of smell within this lush scene: “y su suavísimo aroma / ha embriagado y consolado a un triste adorador” (3-4). It is only when the flower had been caressed by the dew that the delicate fragrance permeates the space. While the aroma is delicate, its potent fragrance bewitches the male figure looking upon it. The verse establishes four subjects within the stanza: the flower, the dew, a male admirer who is inebriated and comforted by the aroma of the flower, and the poetic voice itself. The very first stanza depicts a sated erotic desire; these intimate expressions need not be hidden or occluded by more general verses acknowledging the community. Florentino expresses strong sentiments at the outset, utilizing floral images with less restraint.

Focusing completely on the object of desire, a garden full of flowers, she states directly: “semejans a la luz solar / de que viven aquellas” (7-8). Without the sun, flowers wither and die. In this way, the poetic voice considers her love to be life-sustaining. All of the references associated are profoundly sensual: the poet describes thirst being quenched, the warmth of the sun, and the inebriation and comfort of the gentle aroma. In the following stanza, Florentino discusses the bewitching attributes of her love: “El perfume de los claveles, / amapolas y otras flores / no es tan suave como tu dulce aroma, / enamora hasta el preocupado doctor o sabio” (9-12). Referring to various flowers such as carnations and poppies, among others, Florentino concocts a cologne that entrances even the worrisome doctor or wise man who usually think about less earthly subjects.<sup>7</sup> The strategic placement of *amapolas*, or poppies, right before the doctor and wise man

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<sup>7</sup> On several occasions, Florentino opts to declare the generic “flowers” instead of specifying a particular type. Recalling her identification with people and particular flowers in “Coronación”, the occluded information and silence is a literary device to gesture to other interpretations or meanings. These occluded references would also benefit from further investigation.

point to the flower's opiate properties that can be used to make narcotics such as morphine.<sup>8</sup> The poem's subject can compel the masculine, preoccupied doctor forget his hardships, just as it can comfort and intoxicate the sad admirer in the first stanza. Nevertheless, neither acts upon his attraction in the erotic scene; they are on-lookers, incapable of functioning in the enchanting presence of the flower.

The poetic voice, unlike the masculine *adorador* or *preocupado doctor*, declares in a sober, yet admiring way: “y el valioso oro, que deslumbra a quien lo mire / y el que llaman astro matutino, ambos se apagan ante tus fulgores” (13-16). The poetic voice singles out this flower's beauty as surpassing earthly elements: gold, a representative worldly beauty, cannot compete with the ethereal beauty of the poem's subject. Likewise, the morning star, a representative of celestial beauty, goes out in the face of the brilliance of the bloom.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the person to whom the poem is dedicated surpasses both terrestrial and heavenly beauty and treasures. Neither the masculine *adorador* nor the doctor can comprehend or dominate her unsurpassable beauty.

The following quatrain clearly refers to the celebratory poems that Florentino often composed, as it compares the beauty of the maidens to the beauty of the person to whom the poem is addressed. She states: “No te igualan ni las solteras, / cuyos encantos singulares atraen y consuelan; / cuyos cabellos adornados con sampagas / encienden amor volcánico” (17-20). As

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<sup>8</sup> Vigan's location as a port city facing the South China Sea also suggests that opium may have circulated within Ilocos Sur. Florentino's allusions to poppies and the “preocupado doctor” in her poetry, more commonly known as the “medicine man,” could be another veiled or dissimulated reference to the prevalent opium dens that were found throughout China and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. This, too, warrants further investigation.

<sup>9</sup> The earthly and celestial themes Florentino evoke are well represented in classic Spanish literature, especially of the Baroque period, with allusions to work by Luis de Góngora and Francisco de Quevedo. It is likely that Florentino had been exposed to these Spanish poets, as her son confirms that she was an avid reader (de los Reyes, I. 312). In addition, Florentino's use of metaphor and wordplay reflect Baroque traditions, further pointing to the influence of figures such as Góngora and Quevedo.

seen in the previous poem, “Coronación de una soltera,” it was customary for maidens to be crowned with flowers on their birthdays (de los Reyes, I. 338). These verses refer to the maidens, but here the lines openly connote the lustful desire directed toward them. The idea of a volcano erupting from the depths of the earth in a mixture of hot, liquid lava and smoke in appreciation of a maiden’s beauty affirms the sexual connotations indicated in the stanza. Significant parallels can be drawn to the previous poems recited in the public space in comparison to this private composition: the poet in the former poems expressed thirst that needed to be quenched, sensations of desire, and feelings of admiration. This poem in the private space openly conjures what could not be said in the former two.

Much like the congratulatory poems for the spinster and the maiden, Florentino slowly builds the tension before entering into the most intimate space; immediately after describing volcanic love, she invokes the ecstatic shriek of a woman. The final quatrain begins with an exclamation: “¡Ay morena!” (21). This utterance represents the climax of the sensual verses that precede it. The lines continue, “escucha y mira que / soy como la amapola sedienta de amor, y tú el rocío que me pudiera salvar” (21-24). In opposition to her submissive and humble position to the maiden in “Coronación,” here she commands the *morena* to look at her and recognize that it is with her dew that her thirst can be quenched. Furthermore, the poetic voice strategically takes on the role of a thirsty poppy, the flower most often associated with sleep, peace, and death (Heilmeyer 58). Selecting this flower intensifies the themes of wilting and thirst; the poppy symbolizes the poetic verses that the poet can utilize to lure, attract, and calm the object of desire, and the poppy can also represent the poet’s immanent death if her thirst is not quenched.

At the outset of the poem, the poetic voice describes a masculine “triste adorador” and lustily details the springtime dew moistening the chalice of the adored flower. At the end of the

poem, however, the masculine figure is gone and the poetic voice takes on the role of the lover who desires the adored subject. She is thirsty for the beloved's love to bring her wetness and rejuvenation, and in so doing the poetic voice inverts the masculine and feminine roles within the poem. In this moment, the poetic voice's wilting petals long to be penetrated by the beloved's springtime dew.

This poem demonstrates the poet's desire to perform both the active and masculine role of dominating the adored subject and also the passive and feminine gesture of allowing the moisture from her beloved's chalice to nourish her wilting petals. In the liminal space of the garden with her adored subject, the poetic voice crosses and blurs established gender boundaries. She no longer needs to rely upon a male mediator to articulate amorous desire, and the *triste adorador* and the *preocupado doctor* are forgotten or excluded by the end of the poem. The poppy's thirst for her beloved's moisture renders uncertain which party is the penetrator or penetrated. It is likewise unclear who is the dominant actor in the garden. The image of the two flowers moistening one another by a shared springtime dew not only establishes strong homoerotic notions, but also denotes a more egalitarian, equal, and mutually beneficial relationship between the two lovers.

In all three poems analyzed, the poet represents desire through floral imagery and presence of water, yet the way she communicates that desire varies depending on the context in which she presents her poem. The rigidity of the gender roles implicated in private versus public spaces complicate her expression. Florentino wrote in such a way as to protect herself in the public sphere; she utilized metaphor and hid suggestive verses between generic quatrains to avoid suspicion and disguise desire and affection. Nevertheless, the author capitalized upon the public space of birthday celebrations and the ambiguity of garden imagery to express her illicit

passions. Thus, the conjunction of these three poems establishes Florentino's identification with the *solterona* and demonstrates her somewhat veiled desire for the maiden. The messages conveyed in the public poems culminate in the erotic composition, in which Florentino not only directs her speech to the godlike object of her desire, but commands this being to acknowledge her suffering, comfort her, and quench her thirst. In this way, Florentino demonstrates a masculine assertiveness, demanding her desire be recognized. At the end of the poem, however, she returns to her assigned feminine space, effectively blurring gender norms again within the space of the garden.

Leona Florentino, a largely ignored figure in academic discourse despite being considered "the first poetess of the Philippines," offers a unique voice to further understand the Spanish and indigenous legacies in Filipino literature and gendered colonial spaces (Hernández, P. and Ocampo-Martínez 39). While this article explores the role of Florentino's feminine voice in the public and private Spanish colonial space, much more needs to be done to establish her lasting legacies in Filipino literature and culture.

*Felitación satírica: a una solterona en sus días*

Es como un jazmín marchito	1
La soltera que llega a cumplir 28 años	2
Y debe preocuparse mucho de que su	3
mercancía no se haga <i>consumo</i>	4
Porque aún cuando se hagan todos los esfuerzos posibles	5
para sostener al jazmín, cuando ya se inclina al suelo	6
siempre ha de caer,	7
porque su lozanía ya se ha marchitado.	8
Temprano, pues,	9
debes evitar la terrible vejez;	10
muéstrate siempre lozana y alegre	11
aunque tu vejez ya se avecina.	12
Si mides bien	13
el vino que vendes,	14
muchos te querrán,	15
especialmente el viejo S. y B.	16
Reprime tu mal carácter	17
porque eso también es una de las causas	18
que apresuran la vejez,	19
especialmente cuando te hurta G. la coqueta.	20
Procura divertir tu ánimo,	21
especialmente cuando se hacen cariñitos	22
la vieja D. y M.,	23
que son como <i>tigui</i> de comezón.	24
Si sigues mis consejos,	25
no dudes que alcanzarás	26
el séptimo matrimonio	27
que ha establecido don Domingo.	28

*Coronación de una soltera en sus días*

Eternos regocijos acompañen	1
tu buena suerte de haber llegado	2
llena de salud	3
al día de tu navidad.	4
En este día feliz	5
debemos alegrarnos todos	6
y adorarte	7
con puro amor.	8
Me asocio también al común regocijo,	9
pues que deseo tu bienestar sempiterno.	10
Imita a Santa Rosa, cuyas virtudes	11
no han permitido mancharse su pureza.	12
Debes aumentar tus relevantes	13
cualidades con la modestía	14
y buenas obras, para que consigas	15
el reino de los cielos.	16
Tú has crecido en el regazo	17
amoroso de tus padres,	18
y ahora <i>mellang</i> tu eres un pimpollo,	19
que abres tu capullo como una sampaga ( <i>Nyctantes sambac</i> , Linneo)*.	20
Acepta gustosa	21
en tus lindas manos (se refiere al ramo de flores);	22
no lo deseches que aunque pobre,	23
es obra del puro amor.	24
En tu sien coloco	25
esta humilde guirnalda,	26
testimonio del cariño	27
de los que acudimos a festejarte.	28
Quita los obstáculos de mi camino	29
no me impidas el paso para que mi corazón	30
venga a apagar su sed de amor	31
en la inagotable fuente de tu envidiable hermosura.	32
Oh preciosa Mellang,	33
soberana de todas las rosas,	34
permíteme que venga	35
a admirar tus encantos.	36

Por tu día venturoso	37
permíteme ofrecerte	38
mi rendido corazón.	39
Y perdóname si	40
por lo que acabo de decir	41
he incurrido en alguna falta.	42
Ojalá vivas tranquila	43
y llena de gracia	44
como la Santa de tu nombre.	45
Y para publicar nuestro gozo	46
por tan fausto motivo	47
exclamemos todos: ¡Viva!	48



*Declaración simbólica*

El rocío de Abril ha regado el brillante cáliz	1
de una lozana flor,	2
y su suavísimo aroma	3
ha embriagado y consolado a un triste adorador.	4
Semejas a un jardín ameno y repleto	5
de rosas y azucenas;	6
semejas a la luz solar,	7
de que viven aquellas.	8
El perfume de los claveles,	9
amapolas y otras flores	10
no es tan suave como tu dulce aroma,	11
enamora hasta el preocupado doctor o sabio.	12
Y el valioso oro,	13
que deslumbra a quien lo mire	14
y el que llaman astro matutino,	15
ambos se apagan ante tus fulgores.	16
No te igualan ni las solteras,	17
cuyos encantos singulares atraen y consuelan;	18
cuyos cabellos adornados con sampagas	19
encienden amor volcánico.	20
¡Ay morena!	21
Escucha y mira que	22
soy como la amapola sedienta de amor,	23
y tú el rocío que me pudiera salvar.	24

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