

Classic Poetry Series

Francisco Balagtas
- poems -

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Francisco Balagtas(2 April 1788 – 20 February 1862)

Francisco Baltazar y dela Cruz, known much more widely through his nom-de-plume Francisco Balagtas, was a prominent Filipino poet, and is widely considered as the Tagalog equivalent of William Shakespeare for his impact on Filipino literature. The famous epic, *Florante at Laura*, is regarded as his defining work.

Early life

Francisco Baltazar was born on April 2, 1788 in Barrio Panginay, Bigaa, Bulacan as the youngest of the four children of Juan Baltazar, a blacksmith, and Juana de la Cruz. He studied in a parochial school in Bigaa and later in Manila. During his childhood years. Francisco later worked as houseboy in Tondo, Manila.

Awards and titles

The popular Filipino debate form Balagtasan is named after Balagtas. Balagtas also won an award during his schooldays and graduated valedictorian in Madrid. He was recognized by the Pahayagang Kastilyano (Spanish Declaration) and became the front cover for two weeks.

Life as a poet

Balagtas learned to write poetry from José de la Cruz (Huseng Sisiw), one of the most famous poets of Tondo. It was de la Cruz himself who personally challenged Balagtas to improve his writing. (source: *Talambuhay ng mga Bayani*, for Grade 6 textbook) In 1835, Balagtas moved to Pandacan, where he met María Asunción Rivera, who would effectively serve as the muse for his future works. She is referenced in *Florante at Laura* as 'Celia' and 'MAR'. Balagtas' affections for MAR were challenged by the influential Mariano Capule. Capule won the battle for MAR when he used his wealth to get Balagtas imprisoned under the accusation that he ordered a servant girl's head be shaved. It was here that he wrote *Florante at Laur*. In fact, the events of this poem were meant to parallel his own wrote his poems in Tagalog, during an age when Filipino writing was predominantly written in Spanish. Balagtas published *Florante at Laura* upon his release in 1838. He moved to Balanga, Bataan in 1840 where he served as the assistant to the Justice of peace and later, in 1856, as the Major Lieutenant. He was also appointed as the translator of the court. He married Juana Tiambeng on July 22, 1842 in a ceremony officiated by Fr. Cayetano Arellano, uncle of future Philippine Supreme Court Chief Justice Cayetano Arellano. They had eleven children but

only four survived to adulthood. He died on February 20, 1862 at the age of 73. Upon his deathbed, he asked a favor that none of his children become poets like him, who had suffered under his gift as well as under others. He even went as far as to tell them it would be better to cut their hands off than let them be writers. Balagtas is so greatly revered in the Philippines that the term for Filipino debate in extemporaneous verse is named for him: balagtasan.

Legacy

An elementary school was erected in honor of Balagtas, the Francisco Balagtas Elementary School (FBES), located along Alvarez Street in Santa Cruz, Manila. There is also a plaza and park (Plaza Balagtas) erected in Pandacan, Manila while most of the streets were named after various Florante at Laura characters in honor of Francisco Balagtas. His birthplace, Bigaa, Bulacan, was renamed to Balagtas, Bulacan in honor of him. His great-grandson and heir, Richard Balagtas, is currently a high school student in New York City. He possesses the same interest in poetry and learning as his great-grandfather and will hopefully be attending Johns Hopkins University on the fall of 2012.

Cay Celia

Francisco Balagtas

Florante's Lament

Vengeful Heaven, where is your wrath?

now my land is overcome, prostrate,
and in beloved Albania's infinite skies,
lately the flag of evil flies.

"Within and without my country of grief,
betrayal reigns, is enshrined, esteemed;
degraded everywhere, the heart's goodness
is consigned to the lowly pauper's grave.

"All manner of good and deed are cast
into the sea of mockery and perturbation,
each good man is treated without respect,
without burial rite entombed.

"But, oh, the cheat, the traitor, the black
of heart, are enthroned in praise,
and for each scoundrel incense is burned,
and offered up in fragrant smoke.

"Betrayal, dishonesty hold high
their heads, and the righteous is timid, bowed,
dismayed, reason itself is on its knees,
fatigued, and to weep is all that's left for it.

"And each mouth that opens
to speak the truth and right
is quickly stopped and cut
by the arrogant blade of death.

"O traitorous ambition for honor and riches!
O hunger for airy and fleeting praise!
You are the reason for all this sinfulness,

this misfortune that has befallen me.

“By the crown of King Lincaeus

and the riches of my father, the duke,
Count Adolfo was so bold to pour evil
upon Albania’s sovereign land.

“All these, O merciful Heaven

you witness, why suffer them persist?
O Source of sense and righteousness,
why permit them drown in ruthlessness?

“Lift your right and righteous hand,

swing the shining blade of your rage,
upon all evil in Albania’s kingdom pour
the full vengeance of your justice.

“Why, O Heaven, do you turn

a deaf ear to my suit and honest plea?
Why from this poor and luckless being
avert your face and shut your ears?

“And who could ever fathom,

O Great God, your sacred mystery?
The good will not happen on earth
if it is not Your Will.

“Alas, where now turn

for handhold, bring my heart’s lament,
If Heaven refuses to listen
to my plaintive cry, my faint complaint?’

Francisco Balagtas

Punò Nang Salitâ

Francisco Balagtas

Sa Babasa Nito

Francisco Balagtas

To Celia

If I recall and read again

those days in love's long-faded script,
would there be not a mark or trace
but Celia's, imprinted on my breast?

The Celia whom I've always

feared might forget our love,
who took me down these hapless depths,
the only reason for this turn of fate.

Again would I neglect to read

the pages of our tenderness,
or call to mind the love she poured,
the bitter struggle I gave for it?

Our sweet days gone,

my love is all that's left;
ever shall it dwell within
till I'm laid down in my grave.

Now as I lie in loneliness,

behold wherein I seek relief:
each bygone day I revisit, I find
joy in the likeness of your face.

This likeness painted with love

and longing has lodged within
my heart, sole token left with me
not even death can steal.

My soul haunts the paths

and fields you blessed with your footsteps;

and to Beata River and shallow Hilom stream
my heart never fails to wander.

Not rarely now my vagrant grief

sits under the mango tree we passed,
and looking at the dainty fruits
you wanted picked I forget my ache.

The whole of me could only

be intimate with sighs when you were ill;
for I knew as Eden kept a room us,
my hidden hurt was heaven still.

I woo your image that resides

in the Makati river we frequented;
to the happy berth of boats I trace your steps,
among the stones that touched your feet.

All these return before me now,

the joy of years, the blissful past,
where I would soak and steep myself
before I'm caught in brackish neap.

Always I could hear what you would say:

Three days and our eyes won't meet.
And the eager answer from my leaping heart:
There's only me but you prepare a feast.

So what was there in our

joyful past that memory could miss:
in constant retrain the tears do flow,
I sigh and weep: O hapless fate!

Where is Celia, joy of my heart?

Why could our blissful love not last?

Where is the time when just her look
was heaven's glimpse, my soul, my life?

Why, when we parted,

did this luckless life not cease?
Your memory is death, O Celia,
but in my heart you will not fade.

This long torment you brought,

I couldn't bear, O departed Joy;
but it took me by the hand to poetry and song,
about a life so trodden low, now lost.

Celia, my messages are mute,

my muse is dumb, her voice faint;
without my taunt she would not speak,
pray listen to me with mind and ear.

This first spring that breaks

from my parched mind I offer at your feet:
deign receive, from this kneeling heart,
even if you won't savor it.

If all this fell into slur and insult,

my gain is great from invested effort,
if complaint it is you now peruse,
remember, too, it is the author's gift.

O joyful nymphs of Bai, the placid lake,

Sirens whose voices bring music to my ears,
I come now to your sparkling shrine,
my forlorn muse implores you.

Rise now to shore and field,

accompany with lyre this humble song

that speaks: if fate this life may snip,
its fervent wish is that love won't cease.

Gleaming bloom of my mind,

Celia whose symbols are M, A, and R;
here I am adoring at the Virgin Madonna's
altar, F and B, your loyal servant.

Francisco Balagtas