

BILINGUAL EDITION
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THIS SORROW THAT LIFTS ME UP

FLORBELA ESPANCA

Selection and introduction

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Translation

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Illustrations

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SHANTARIN

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CONTENTS

- 10 **Contributors to this edition**
- 11 **Introduction**, by Cláudia Pazos-Alonso
- 22 **Florbela Espanca**
- 25 A vida e a morte
Life and Death
- 27 **from *Livro de Mágoas***
- 28 Vaidade
Vanity
- 30 Eu...
I'm...
- 32 Tortura
Torment
- 34 Lágrimas ocultas
Hidden Tears
- 36 Torre de névoa
Tower of Mist
- 38 A minha Dor
My Sorrow
- 40 As minhas Ilusões
My Fantasies
- 42 Neurastenia
Neurasthenia
- 44 Angústia
Anguish

- 46 Alma perdida
Lost Soul
- 48 Mais triste
Sadder
- 51 **from Livro de «Soror Saudade»**
- 52 «Soror Saudade»
'Our Lady of Longing'
- 54 O meu mal
My Misfortune
- 56 Caravelas
Caravels
- 58 O nosso mundo
Our World
- 60 Prince Charmant...
Prince Charming...
- 62 Esfinge
Sphynx
- 64 Tarde demais...
Too late...
- 66 Ódio?
Hatred?
- 68 Renúncia
Disavowal
- 70 Horas rubras
Smouldering Hours
- 72 Princesa Desalento
Princess of Despair

- 74 Da minha janela
From My Window
- 76 Exaltação
Exultation
- 79 **from *Charneca em Flor***
- 80 Charneca em Flor
Moor in Bloom
- 82 Versos de orgulho
Proud Verses
- 84 Passeio ao campo
A Walk in the Countryside
- 86 Se tu viesses ver-me...
If you came to see me...
- 88 O meu condão
My Power
- 90 Noitinha
Sweet Evening
- 92 Lembrança
Memory
- 94 Mendiga
Beggarwoman
- 96 Supremo enleio
Supreme Rapture
- 98 Ser Poeta
To Be a Poet
- 100 Mocidade
Youth

102	Amar! To Love!
104	Nostalgia Nostalgia
106	Ambiciosa What I Crave
108	Crucificada Crucified
110	Espera... Wait...
112	Interrogação Questions
114	Volúpia Wanton Passion
116	Filtro Love Potion
118	Mais alto Higher
120	A voz da tília The Voice of the Linden
122	Não ser Not Being
124	? ?
126	In memoriam In memoriam
128	Árvores do Alentejo Trees of the Alentejo
130	Sou eu! It's me!

- 132 Panteísmo
Pantheism
- 134 Pobre de Cristo
Penury
- 136 A uma rapariga
To a Girl
- 139 «He hum não querer mais que bem querer.» (Camões)
'It's a not loving anything else that's a great love.' (Camões)
- 140 *II – Meu amor, meu Amado, vê... repara*
II – My love, my lover, look... see here
- 142 *III – Frémido do meu corpo a procurar-te*
III – The quiver of my body seeking yours
- 144 *IV – És tu! És tu! Sempre vieste, enfim!*
IV – It's you! It's you! You really came, at last!
- 146 *VI – Falo de ti às pedras das estradas*
VI – I talk about you to the kerbstones
- 148 *VII – São mortos os que nunca acreditaram*
VII – Dead are those who never believed
- 150 *IX – Perdi os meus fantásticos castelos*
IX – I lost my fantastical castles
- 152 *X – Eu queria mais altas as estrelas*
X – I wish the stars were higher
- 155 **from Reliquiae**
- 156 Évora
Évora
- 158 À Janela de Garcia de Resende
At Garcia de Resende's Window
- 160 Navios-fantasma
Ghost Ships

162	Blasfémia Blasphemy
164	Deixai entrar a Morte Let Death Come In
166	À morte Dear Death
168	Nihil novum Nothing New
170	Loucura Madness
172	O meu soneto My Sonnet
176	Liberta! Freed
178	Bibliography

Introduction

Phenomenal Florbela

Florbela Espanca (1894–1930) is one of the Portugal’s best-known poets. Today, more than ninety years after her premature death, this bilingual anthology allows English-speaking readers to see why her poetry deserves to be celebrated as the work of a ‘phenomenal woman’, to quote here the title of a famous poem by the Afro-American, Maya Angelou.

Portugal has long been inclined to see itself as a land of poets. It is, after all, the country of two giants of the western literary canon, the Renaissance Luís de Camões and the Modernist Fernando Pessoa, both considered to have changed the course of literary history in their respective times. Despite being a contemporary of Pessoa, and being, in her own way, radical, Florbela’s role in cultural modernity was not recognized until fairly recently. That she was long overlooked may have been at least in part due to the fact that she felt more at home in the traditional sonnet form cultivated by Camões than in a more avant-garde form such as free verse. But this is only part of the story: the reality is that, for most of the twentieth century, Portuguese mainstream culture remained resolutely blind to gender issues, with the predictable outcome that it continued to misguidedly conceive of itself as a fertile breeding-ground for male poets only.

In addition to her poetry, which speaks passionately of longing, love and sexual liberation against the backdrop of the interwar *années folles*, the life-story of Florbela Espanca itself reads like a soap-opera script. She was born out of wedlock in Vila Viçosa, a small town in the Alentejo, to a teenage domestic servant who died young. Her father was an amateur photographer and left us many pictures of his daughter’s formative years. Her much-loved brother, Apeles, an aviator, died when his plane fell in to the Tagus in 1927. Although on one level Vila Viçosa was a sleepy provincial town, it was also the proud home of the monumental palace of the Braganzas, who visited intermittently up to the end of the monarchy in 1910. One can only imagine that the traces and presence of the royal family in Florbela’s hometown must

have fed the imagination of a sensitive young child. Her first known poem, written at the tender age of eight, displays unusually precocious metaphysical concerns in her thematic handling of life and death. As such it provides a fitting starting-point for this anthology¹.

Florbela was nearly sixteen when Portugal became a Republic. The seismic upheaval brought about by the change of political regime must surely have resonated with her, however subconsciously, not least given debates surrounding women's rights. It is worth highlighting that Republican reforms soon translated into some legal equality—for which first-wave feminists such as the lawyer, Ana de Castro Osório, and the gynecologist, Adelaide Cabete (also born in the Alentejo), had been clamouring. This resulted in one of the most progressive divorce laws in Europe at the time, from which Florbela herself would subsequently benefit: she was twice divorced and married three times in the space of twelve years.

Like the troubled Sylvia Plath after her, Florbela's poetry is often performative and her poetic persona regularly occupies centre-stage. Not unlike Plath, aware that 'Dying is an art. I do it exceptionally well', she eventually took her own life in December 1930—on the eve of her birthday (she was born on 8 December, the day of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of her native Vila Viçosa). Some of her poetry, posthumously collated under the title of *Reliquiae*, intimates that she envisaged death as the ultimate female refuge ('Let Death Come In', p. 165; 'Dear Death', p. 167). Her desire to return to the maternal womb of the Alentejo was also poignantly prefigured in the sonnet 'Penury' (p. 135) from *Charneca em Flor*—initially published in 1929 in a literary magazine under the arguably more evocative title of 'Minha Terra' ('My Homeland').

After her untimely demise in 1930, Florbela quickly became the stuff of legend, thanks to the irresistible combination of a turbulent biography

1. The text of the poems in this anthology broadly follows the Estampa editions of *Livro de Mâgoas*, *Livro de «Soror Saudade»*, and *Charneca em Flor*, while retaining the pre-1990 spelling agreement. In the case of the poems gathered and published posthumously under the title of *Reliquiae*, this edition was based on *Sonetos Completos* (Coimbra: Livraria Gonçalves, 1936). For 'A vida e a morte', the source text was the *fac-simile* manuscript included in *Obras Completas*, ed. by Rui Guedes (Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 1985), vol. II, p. 43. For 'Liberta!' the source text was the manuscript held by the Grupo de Amigos de Vila Viçosa.



Vaidade

Sonho que sou a Poetisa eleita,
Aquele que diz tudo e tudo sabe,
Que tem a inspiração pura e perfeita,
Que reúne num verso a imensidade!

Sonho que um verso meu tem claridade
Para encher todo o mundo! E que deleita
Mesmo aqueles que morrem de saudade!
Mesmo os de alma profunda e insatisfeita!

Sonho que sou Alguém cá neste mundo...
Aquele de saber vasto e profundo,
Aos pés de quem a terra anda curvada!

E quando mais no céu eu vou sonhando,
E quando mais no alto ando voando,
Acordo do meu sonho...

E não sou nada!...

Vanity

I dream I am the chosen Poetess,
she who knows all, speaks all,
whose imagination is unsullied and perfect,
gathering all the world in a single line!

I dream a line of mine shines
bright enough to fill the world! And delights
even those dying from longing!
Even those with deep, unquenched souls!

I dream I'm Someone here in this world...
Someone with knowledge, vast and profound,
at whose feet the earth bows down!

As I go deeper into lofty dreams
and keep soaring higher,
I wake up from my dreams...

And I am nothing!

Eu...

Eu sou a que no mundo anda perdida,
Eu sou a que na vida não tem norte,
Sou a irmã do Sonho, e desta sorte
Sou a crucificada... a dolorida...

Sombra de névoa ténue e esvaecida,
E que o destino amargo, triste e forte,
Impele brutalmente para a morte!
Alma de luto sempre incompreendida!...

Sou aquela que passa e ninguém vê...
Sou a que chamam triste sem o ser...
Sou a que chora sem saber porquê...

Sou talvez a visão que Alguém sonhou,
Alguém que veio ao mundo pra me ver,
E que nunca na vida me encontrou!

I'm...

I'm she who walks lost around the world,
I'm she who's got no direction in life,
I'm the sister of Dreams, and it's my lot
to be crucified... full of sorrow...

A misty shadow, thin and fading,
whom bitter fortune, solemn yet strong,
drags brutally toward death!
A soul in mourning forever misunderstood!

I'm she who goes by and no-one sees...
She they call sad without it being so...
She who weeps without knowing why...

I'm perhaps an image Someone dreamt up,
Someone who came to this world to find me,
and never once crossed my path!