

University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Digital USFSP

Early Visions Bucket

Early Visions of Florida

1841

Donna Florida

William Gillmore Simms

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.usfsp.edu/early_visions_bucket

Recommended Citation

Simms, William Gillmore, "Donna Florida" (1841). *Early Visions Bucket*. 49.
https://digital.usfsp.edu/early_visions_bucket/49

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by the Early Visions of Florida at Digital USFSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Visions Bucket by an authorized administrator of Digital USFSP.

Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

William Gilmore Simms, Donna Florida



— William Gilmore
Simms (Encyclopedia
Britannica)

Born in 1806 in Charleston, South Carolina, William Gilmore Simms is synonymous with notions of the “Old South.” He began his career writing about local politics and editing Southern periodicals, and wrote most of his fiction about the colonial and Revolutionary periods, about which he researched a great deal. Simms became active in the years leading up to the American Civil War, advocating for secession. Simms was a believer in the American South’s ability to break away from the rest of the country and form what he thought of as an “ideal society.” William Gilmore Simms is an overlooked writer, mostly because of pro-slavery views.

Donna Florida, a narrative poem described in the prologue as “a work of the writer’s youth,” was first published in pieces in The Boston Monthly in 1841 and in Magnolia in 1843. An admirer of Lord Byron’s Don Juan, Simms was inspired to write about the subject in the wake of “constant remark and criticism” of Byron’s work, “particularly in connection with the premature and lamented fate of the unhappy writer.” Although never finished, the poem in its extended form of four cantos was eventually paid for and distributed privately by Simms, with the help of a few close associates. According to [The Simms Initiatives](#) at the University of South Carolina, Simms probably intended

to complete a fifth canto after receiving feedback, but because of his thriving career as editor of *Magnolia* and a burgeoning writing career, he never found the time.

The section below is the fourth canto of *Donna Florida* in its entirety. The first previous cantos tell the story of a young beautiful Spanish woman named Leonora, who is sixteen years old and has a wealthy father that desires to marry her off. One of her suitors is an older Ponce de Leon, who falls in love with her upon first sight. Leonora mocks Ponce de Leon for his grey hair and aging appearance, and tells him that if he can acquire water from the fountain of youth in Florida, she will have his hand in marriage. Ponce de Leon sets sail across the ocean for Florida, and upon his ship meets a young sailor named Don Ferdinand de Laye. This young gentleman also seeks Leonora's hand in marriage, and although he does not have Ponce de Leon's money or fame, he is young and attractive and therefore a threat to Ponce. Canto Four begins with Ponce de Leon's ships landing on the coast of Florida after his long journey at sea, with the two men anxious to descend upon the fountain of youth and compete for Leonora's affections.

Edited by Samantha Wong, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Further Reading

Simms, William Gilmore, [*Lily and the Totem, or, The Huguenots in Florida*](#) [1850].

Ridgely, Joseph V., *William Gilmore Simms*. Twayne's U.S. Author Series. New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1962.

[Canto IV] I.

I want a Muse, as Byron did a hero;

None of your frowsy dames of classic ages,

Cold, marble damsels, always below zero,

Forever 'mongst the chronicles and sages,

But one who would not shrink from a *bolero*,

Did we require to have on in our pages;

Who'd laugh, or sing, or dance, when I request her,

Nor wait for the certificate from Nestor.

II.

After my own heart I would have her fashion,
A lively, prompt, frank damsel, fond and free;
Blood in her veins and in her bosom passion,
And in her soul a sense of liberty,
That bids her, as the mood directs, still dash on,
The generous sport to share, the sight to see;
Loving all noble things, – for its own sake,
The beautiful, – and striving still to make.

III.

What care I for the classical proprieties,
The unities, and all that sort of thing;
I rather choose to deal in contrarities,
And sometimes sermonize, and sometimes sing;
What if I grope? – 'tis one of my varieties,
Of temper, – you shall see me on the wing;
I ask not what your Aristotle's say,
But free as any, make myself a way.

IV.

My muse must suit my purposes and nature, –
My country, – be of kith and kin with mine;
Ardent, impetuous, a bold, generous creature,
With eye and soul that might be born of wine;
A gushing heart that speaks in every feature,

Impulsive, with a courtly wit to shine;

None of your puling dames, all lamentation,—

Yet ready with tears when there's occasion.

V.

She must have health and strength—a wing that soaring

Through cloud and storm may make the heavens her own;

An eye that far, thro' depth of sky exploring,

May challenge the keen glances of the sun;

A wealth of thoughts and images, outpouring,

Worthy the wondrous world, her wing hath won;

And, still subservient to her song, the splendor,

Of all that makes her realm, of rich, and wild, and tender!

VI.

Her rocks, her streams, her mountains as they stand,

Homes of the pure, the beautiful in heaven;

Skies softly set, that, spreading o'er the land,

Show bridals of rare beauty, morn and even;

And oh! the mighty rivers, wild and grand,

With seas that leap from heights by thunder riven;

And all the thousand tributary sights,

That in our forest land, reveal such dear delights.

VII.

Of these must she partake,— whatever glory,

Boon Nature yields us of the bright, the fair,
Shall, in her every feature, have its story,
Prove her original and must make her dear;
The giant tree by years and moss made hoary,
The wondrous cavern and the fountain clear;
Hills, vales and streams, must still reflect her beauty,
Inspire her strain and win her constant duty.

VIII.

A rare and wondrous form, she rises slowly,
Even by her own magnificence opprest;
Though proud her glance, yet is her aspect holy,
As speaking the sweet peace within her breast;
Though distant still, yet neither dim nor lowly,—
The single star that flames upon her crest,
Shall blaze upon the nations till they own, the sovereign is most worthy of the throne.

IX.

Such is the Muse I summon!—In our sight,
The Apalachian summits,— at our feet,
The bay of Tampa, glorious in the light
Of spring and with its wealth of flowers made sweet;
We stand amid a cavalcade most bright,
In all the pomp of arms and steeds complete;
The old knight at their head, and with a visage

As fierce as ever El Cid wore, at his age.

X.

Beside him, second in command, that stranger,

Known for the nonce as Ferdinand de Laye;

The very picture of chivalric danger,

A tall, bright form, with plume and armor gay:

Free of his fearless step, —no forest ranger,

More supple, though upon his shoulders lay,

Some fifty pounds of mail, and sword his fist in,

That might have amply served the old Philistine.

XI.

Ah! well might Don Ponce sigh as he survey'd him,

Vault from the yielding earth into his selle;

Once on a time, ere age had so affray'd him,

He, too, might possibly have done as well;

But in such effort now, his joints betray'd him,

He strove, indeed most manfully—and fell;

But up at length, his stiffen'd legs a-straddle,

He sunk, with inward pray'r, into the saddle.

XII.

And this important duty scarcely ended,

When ho! the trumpets, and the clang of strife;

The foeman was upon them!—wildly blended

Were savages and Spaniards,— life for life;
Thick flew the hurtling arrows, well intended;
Loud roar'd the matchlock and out flash'd the knife;
'Twas but a minute's conflict, and yet ne'er, sir,
Had Juan Ponce beheld a foe fight fiercer!

XIII.

But in the battle he forgot his years,—
Recall'd the tide of youth, the day when first,
Alive to glory and unknown to fears,
His charger thro' the Moorish squadrons burst;—
Plucking bright honor from his rival peers,
With all youth's daring and ambition's thirst;—
Once more the spirit of that day blazed out,
Right and left charging, making hideous rout.

XIV.

"A Leonora!" was his battle cry!—
But louder than his own was heard De Laye's;—
"A Leonora!" still its thunder'd high,
And much it did the ancient knight amaze;
Until he thought it might be sympathy!—
"Worthy young man,"—he could but on him gaze,
As, with each stroke, that smote a savage slain,
"A Leonora!" went the cry again!

XV.

Never did youthful knight his spurs to win,
So seek the combat with such bloody bent;
Don Ponce was brave, and loved the battle's din,
But ne'er had he beheld such fell intent;
For wheresoe'er the strife was hottest seen,
Like some dread angel on destruction sent,
Wing'd with impetuous rage and chainless might,
De Laye was there, still smiting, sworn to smite.

XVI.

The poison'd shaft fell harmless from his breast;
The heavy tomahawk of stone in vain,
Hurl'd by the vigorous savage, smote his crest;
The form that wing'd it sinks among the slain!
A host surround him; on each side they press'd;
They dart the lance, they hurl the stone amain;
He breaks their ranks, he cleaves the foremost down,
He wheels, he strikes, he shouts, he stands alone!

XVII.

Well might the savage tremble to behold
Such wondrous prowess.—Backward they recoil'd,
No more, in conflict so unequal, bold;
Vain had been shaft and stone, but magic foil'd;—

Such was their simple faith, which render'd cold,
Their valor;— and all vainly had they toil'd;—
No dripping scalp had yet been swung in air,
No pallid foe had yet sung out his soul's despair.

XVIII.

And death for them was in that thunder loud,
And death in every stroke of that keen blade;
Thunder and bolt of flame, when not a cloud,
Darken'd the day;— and smiting heart and head,
Shafts of pale lightning, whole battalions mow'd,
Easily as the bright scythe sweets the glade
In summer,— while the sun looks gaily on,
As if he nothing cared for green and glory gone.

XIX.

Their God thus heedless of their fate, they fled,
As hopeless of the fight,— when, from the wood,
Rang a wild whoop of death, to shake the dead—
A shrill, dread shout, that curdled gentle blood,
And o'er the heart a human horror shed;—
That shout revived their courage, and they stood,
Firm with new hope,— they knew the battle cry,—
Of him who long had led their arms to victory.

XX.

They answered with a joy, such as he knows,
Who, from the precipice, with death in sight,
Is sudden pluck'd, by friendly grasp, and glows
With hope, but late resign'd, and fresh delight;
With whoop of battle they confront their foes,
And fell the shout which now demands the fight;
While from the thicket's shad outsprings a form,
Gigantic, fir to rouse and sway the storm.

XXI.

Never did Art in happiest hour unfold,
So proud a presence;— never to the eye,
Did mortal, fashioned in superior mould,
The cunning scrutiny of Art defy;
Of woman love, or rival man behold,
A shape more perfect in its symmetry:
The Apollo, with his ready shaft to strike,
Was only not inferior, yet how like!

XXII.

Their great war captain!—Mico of the fight,—
'Yclept Seminolé! His giant frame
Was wrapt in cotton robe of virgin white,
That to his knees from his broad shoulders came;
Yet bare his neck and breast to sun and sight,

And bare his arms, whose muscular strength might claim

Our fear or admiration,— but that now,

We gaze with juster wonder on his brow.

XXIII.

The lion in his port, and in his glance,

The eagle, free, commercing with the sun;

Yet, subtle as the serpent's, to entrance,

The victim that he only looks upon;

How swift and yet how graceful his advance,—

How fearless as with fight already won;

He seeks no common foe, no feeble prey,

But, scorning all beside, at once confronts De Laye.

XXIV.

Thus, by a noble instinct, the brave,

Finds the true foeman;— 'mid the thick of foes,

Sees, at a glance, to whom boon Nature gave,

The soul for the noblest struggle;— where the blows

Rain deadliest, with the deeds choice spirits crave;—

Where danger shouts in blood, —whence honor flows;

And the big heart triumphing o'er the hour,

Dilates, in form erect and deeds of wondrous power.

XXV.

Well matched these mighty spirits, for De Laye

Was born to lord it; all apart he stood,
And saw, with fierce delight, upon his way,
The dusky warrior,— with admiring mood,
Beheld his mighty limbs, their easy play,
Yet massive, straight, like giants of the wood:—
Two lions from far countries,— each the king
Among his fellows,— each, impatient for the spring.

XXVI.

A moment thus, confronting, ere the strife!—
De Laye was armed in Spanish panoply,
With lance and sword, both red with human life,
And helm and shield.—Not so Seminolé;—
His naked breast was open to the knife,—
His brow, to sword or bolt of murder, free;
No shield before his heart;— upon his back,
The quiver, tho' the bow within his hand was slack.

XXVII.

A surer weapon for the arm of might,
The mace within his grasp,— a weapon brought
From Apalachia's mountains,—dread in fight,
Of solid rock, and smooth; not idly wrought,
Nor idly borne,— descending with a blight,
Upon the hapless victim, and, to nought,

Crushing the light, the life, the brain, the bone,

Suddenly,— leaving death no privilege to groan.

XXVIII.

Keen was the glance he fixed upon the foe,

As if his mode of battle to divine;

Then, from his hand, he cast aside the bow,

As quite unworthy of his fell design;

A single shout, then came the sudden blow,

But well De Laye had understood the sign,

Seen in the warrior's eye;— the ready steed

Wheel'd sudden, and thus foil'd the dangerous deed.

XXIX.

The heavy mace, impelled by furious hand,

Went blindly whizzing through the pliant air;

In the next moment, the avenging brand,

Had cleft the Mico's brow or bosom bare,

But that a word,— a shout of fierce command,—

Brought forth new foes to make the Spaniard 'ware;

Out from the wood, a flock of darts took flight,

That, but for shield and mail, had much distress'd our knight.

XXX.

They saved the chieftain, but increased the ire

To wildest height of passion in De Laye;

Fierce was he at the least, and full of fire,
But deadly in his mood when kept at bay;
The worthy foeman, ever his desire,—
Him found,— a generous madness for the fray,
Bore him on reckless, while his trumpet voice
Went up, as if his soul within him did rejoice.

XXXI.

“Ho, Santiago!”—such was now his cry,
Spain's ancient cry of battle, which had led
So oft her gallant knights to victory,
Still conquering, though at every pore they bled;
Battle not beauty, now, was in his eye,
Else had he not forgot, what late, instead,
Taught by the veteran lover, he had shouted,—
Dread name alike to him and those he routed.

XXXII.

“Ho, Santiago!”—and with lance in rest,
He bore against the Mico, where he stood,
Poised on his club the broad and fearless chest,
And eye as calm as if his fiery blood
Had frozen, and no spirit in his breast
Warmed him to combat as in ancient mood;
Hushed, clam and placid as the storm, ere yet

Its black and trooping bands, in dread array have met.

XXXIII.

But not less terrible in calm,—his glance

Scann'd fearlessly the onset of his foe;

He moved not, though he saw the steed advance,

Nor raised the weapon, nor prepared the blow;

But when, outstretch'd, he saw the quivering lance,

His eye upon De Laye's, with heighten'd glow,

Spoke for his resolute purpose,—with the thrust,

Nimbly he leapt aside, as practised in the joust.

XXXIV.

He leapt aside, and as the steed rush'd onn,

Darted upon his path,—his eye revealing

A settled purpose, and a deed foredone,

Already, inn his thought. De Laye was dealing

On meaner foes the strokes designed for one,—

The Mico at his heels:—His charger wheeling,

Receives the fatal blow upon his forehead,

Struck with both hands, a stroke most hard and horrid.

XXXV.

It crush'd the b one, it sunk into the brain,—

The generous beast upon the sand is sprawling;

As oh! such savage triumph o'er the slain,

As deep to deep in stormy revel calling;
But small advantage does the warrior gain,
The brave De Laye, while yet the steed is falling,
Leaps to the earth, where, on the spot before him,
The giant savage stands, his huge mace waving o'er him.

XXXVI.

Oh! for thy noblest prowess, brave De Laye,
The occasion needs it; never more than now,
Stood danger, in red garments, in thy way;—
A vision swims before thee of the blow,
The lacerated skull—the wild array
Of howling wretches, ready for the flow
Of blood, most precious in its draughts to those,
Who deem such duty best ensures the skies repose.

XXXVII.

The master of the forest world is he,
Who claims the combat. Thou hast seen his might;—
A single stroke from him were death to thee;
Well for thee now, that, practiced dint he fight,
Taught best in schools of fence beyond the sea,
Thy skill hath won thee glory as a knight;—
Be firm, strike fairly,—bravely do thy part,
And Jesu keep thee, youth, and shield from thy heart.

XXXVIII.

With foot to foot,— eye flashing back to eye,—

Lips set, and weapons lifted, lo! they stand;

Mutely the opposing multitudes draw nigh,

Hush'd the shrill whoop, and still the stern command;

Each rests upon its brave for victory;—

Now soars the mace, now flashes forth the brand,

They strike, they shrink, recoil, and still advance,

While silence wraps the host, as in some deathlike trance.

XXXIX.

De Laye his buckler casts upon the ground,

As worthless in such conflict,—keen his steel,

A passage to the Mico's side hath found,

And the blood flows,—the savage seems to reel,—

But stung with fury, though but slight the wound,

The chief in swifter strokes begins to deal,

Reckless of wounds, he urges each battering blow,

Raining them down as fast as hail-stones on the foe.

XL.

So thick and fast the strokes, wielding at will,

His massive weapon with gigantic ease,

It tasked De Laye's best exercise and skill,

To baffle and avoid extremities;

But keen his eye, and calm his spirit, still;

The Mico's failing strength as last he sees,

And with new courage, makes a desperate pass,

Designing to bestow the *coup-de-grace*;—

XLI.

When his Toledo failed against the stone,

Snapp'd sudden at the hilt, and thus he stood,

Helpless, unarm'd, before his foe alone;—

What matter'd it with the Mico'ss streaming blood,

From three deep wounds, and eh untouch'd by one?

Flight would not serve, would shame his hardy mood;—

Grasping his dagger, he prepared to make,

The last dread struggle, fatal to partake.

XLII.

The mace is whirl'd aloft, the stroke descending;

De Laye prepared to rush within its sweep,

Disarm the fearful shock of death impending,

And, in his foeman's very grasp, strike deep;—

When, hark! a shot!—the certain bullet rending

The uplifted arm, anticipates the leap,

Down falls the weapon; from his hazy eye;

A gleam of hate and rage breaks on his enemy.

XLIII.

He bounds from earth, a vague desire impelling,
To grasp and strangle, in his fold, the foe;
De Lave eludes him;— but his heart rebelling,
Forbids that he should strike another blow;
A generous feeling in his bosom swelling,
Denies that one so fearless, battling so,
Should perish, prostrate, weaponless and maim'd;—
A feeling that Done Ponce severely blamed!

XLIV.

“You should,” says he, half angry and half jealous,
“Have dirk'd the dusky savage on the spot;
What need for pity on these pagan fellows,
Who'd make no bones of putting us in pot;
They're cannibals, so all the captains tell us,
And nothing, let me tell you's, to be got,
By fiddle-faddle notions of this nature,—
Pity is only for some fellow creature.

XLV.

Besides, the profit,—where is that I wonder,
Our charity should still begin at home;
Who goes abroad to use it, makes a blunder;
Would he show pity he need never roam;
Never you spare the foeman, once he's under,

Make his prayer short, and let it end in doom;—

His captive, and decreed, to fill his belly,

You'll feel the force of all these truths I tell ye.”

XLVI.

This homily was when the strife was ended:—

Let us return to brave Seminolé;—

Dim-sighted, with all objects round him blended,

In depth of shade, he sunk upon his knee;

Then wild the shriek from all his tribe ascended,

The clamor of a people's agony,—

And heedless of the shot now falling sorest,

They bore him off in safety to the forest.

XLVII.

Brave savages!—but terribly they paid,

The penalty of extreme devotion;

The path they took was cover'd with the dead,

As, after storm, the ship's path, on the ocean;

The wounded were all knock'd upon the head,

Out of their suffering,—that was Ponce's notion;

And much it vex'd him to behold De Laye,

With loathing in his aspect, turn away.

XLVIII.

“Too nice your stomach for success, De Laye;”

Thus the old soldier, as, among the slain,
Seeking the wounded, he pursued his way,
With bill or bludgeon freeing them from pain;—
A very busy man was he that day,
Though ever and anon he said again,
“Success needs no nice stomach,—it demands
Neither clean deeds, clean conscience, not clean hands.

XLIX.

“Where had I been and what my glory now,
Had I allow’d my nose to spoil my taste?
Jesu be praised! I’ve ever kept the vow
I made when first for battle I was graced;
I never lost a purse to ‘scrape a blow,
Nor spared a life to save my strokes from waste;
If pity every came to stay my mood,
Shouting, I struck, and banished her in blood.

L.

“The lad is brave enough, but I’ve no relish
For your nice stomachs,—and he turn’d away,
As if he thought my deeds were something hellish,
Would make him sicken but to see and stay;
And now he’ll go and all his own embellish,
Making me seem the lesser beast of prey;

The lion he, to overthrow and spurn,

The jackal I, to follow in my turn.

LI.

“A pretty story to be told in Spain,

And heard by Leonora!—Ha! that cry;

Methinks, ‘tis ringing in mine ears again,—

‘Twas surely a most strange audacity,

And I have just occasion to complain,—

I’ll charge him with the insolence, and by

The holy mother’s grace, if he don’t show me

Good reason for th’impertinence, then, blow me!—

LII.

“If crack’d crowns do not follow! Not so fast,

De Leon,—there’s some danger in crown-cracking,

With one in mould so far superior cast,

Such strength, with skill and sprit nowise lacking;

Less doubtful and less dangerous mode thou hast;

Send him still forward, in the van attacking,—

And as he seems to relish such employment,

Why, leave him, simply to its full enjoyment.

LIII.

But mum’s the word at present! He is nigh,

Confound him! with a brow as calm and quiet,

As if his soul were something all too high,
For common moods of man to vex with riot;
While I am burning with my jealousy,
Moved ever more his haughty head to fly as,—

Yet must I check my falcon!—Oh! thou wonder
Of valor, born, methinks, of blood and thunder!

LIV.

Let me embrace thee,— let me look upon thee,
Devour thee all with eyes of admiration;
How I rejoice me that my banner won thee,
My glory and the glory of the nation;
Well may thy comrade love, thy foeman shun thee,
Methinks thou giv'st them both the best occasion;
To-morrow shalt thou lead the way to glory,
As sure of fame as any chief in story.

LV.

Thy deeds already equal those of Cortez,
And what of the successes of Pizarro,—
His fights with the Peruvians were but sorites,
Of giants against pigmies,— men of marrow,
'Gainst men of straw and lath;— my memory short is,
But vainly would I from the ancients borrow,

A rival name for thine. To make all know it,

As I do, all that's wanting is the poet.

LVI.

But come! Enough of glory!—now for dinner,—

It should await us. Glory, when alon,

'S a sort of food, though fine, yet rather thinner,

Than suits with men like us, of blood and bone;

They need substantials, who have proved the winner

In such a game as that but lately done;—

But look ye, comrade, art though very sure a

Victory had been won, wert not for Leonora?

LVII.

“Dost know, that when I shouted out that name,

Most previous in my soul's vocabulary,

Your lips—unconscious, I supposed—the same

Re-shouted, in such accents,—tender, very,—

That, 'faith, I almost fancied I had shame;

As fearing of my errors you mad merry;—

But then again I fancied such might be,

The name of her, your own peculiar she.

LVIII.

But what of love and glory,—boyhood's passions,—

When men are hungry! Talk of one's renown,

Or sweetheart, when he's yearning for his rations,
And my life on it, but he knocks you down;
The heart depends upon the body's fashions,
The soul upon the substance,—it is known,
In England, the affections are at home in,
No other than that slaughter-house, the abdomen.

LVIX.

We Spaniards are not wanting in affection,
Yet would it be impertinent to say,
Our creature-comforts sail in close connection
With the dear fancies in our souls that sway;
Even in an omelet, open to detection,
The feelings of the heart still find their way,—
Whither—we need not ask,—but in one's stomach,
Love lies so snugly, it would seem his hammock.

LX.

“He fattens there, and grows in time as saucy,
As if it were his own, his true domain,
Whence, if not seasonably met my laws, he
Usurps dominion over blood and brain;
On all the faculties soon laying paws, he
Grows rampant, breaks his bonds with might and main;
Does mischief round the country, burning, blazing,

Roars, rages, rends, in manner most amazing!

LXI.

“A Leonora!’ was our battle cry,

“A Leonora!’ be our dinner summon;

Let love and appetite together vie,

In vigor, and the viands and the woman,

But yield the first just now the mastery,

My hunger at this moment’s scarcely human,—

Eat, drink, the sages tell us, for to-morrow,

We die, and there’s an end to sauce and sorrow.”

LXII.

Keen glance the old knight set upon the face

Of his companion, as, with effort strong,

Subduing his own feeling, and all trace,

Of discontent, he led the way along,—

The blush upon the youth’s cheek, the grimace,

When Leonor’ was named, be token’d wrong,—

But smiling, smirking, like an ancient sinner,

He kept his wrath in cool—till after dinner.