

National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: Provençal (questionnaire)

Literary culture: Provençal (Occitan)

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1. Which individual poet (male or female) is generally considered to be the greatest poet in your literary tradition? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.)

Frédéric Mistral (1830–1914)

2. Are there other poets that come near or even reach such a status? If yes, name up to two, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the greatest poet (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).

Jasmin (a.k.a. Jacques Boé; 1798–1864) [3]

Victor Gelu (1806–1885) [3]

3. Is there a (single) poet that is considered the “national” poet? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.) Is the notion of “national poet” (NP) widespread in your literary culture? (Assess on a scale of 1–5; 1 = “irrelevant,” 5 = “very common.”)
4. Were there many rival poets to the position of national poet during the canonization process that were later marginalized? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess the decade of their utmost presence in the canonization processes (e.g., 1880s). (If there is no NP, answer for the “greatest” poet.)
5. Which period of canonization of the NP (or the greatest poet in case of no NP) was most important? (State the year or decade.) Name up to five of the most important canonization events (state the year and type; e.g., 1860: crucial textual edition; 1905: unveiling of an important memorial). Assess the current stature of the national (or greatest) poet compared to the most intense period (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).

1859: Publication of *Mirèio*; it transformed Mistral into one of the best-known authors of his time and drew the attention of the French literary public to the activities of the *Félibrige* (Pupil) association, transforming Mistral into the undisputed leader of the Provençal movement;

1904: Nobel Prize for literature;

1909: Fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Mirèio*;

1930: Centenary of his birth;

1959: Centenary of *Mirèio*.

The current stature of Mistral can be assessed as [2].

6. Who were the individuals, institutions, and interest groups (cultural factions, political parties) that played major roles in the promotion of the canonization process? State the names and assess the most active decade(s).

Félibrige (1854–1871);

Société pour l'étude des Langues Romanes (Society for the Study of the Romance Languages; 1870s);

Jocs Florals (Floral Games) of Barcelona (e.g., in 1862, Mistral's poem *I troubaire Catalan* 'The Catalan Troubadour' was solemnly greeted by Victor Balaguer, a Catalan poet, historian and liberal politician; in 1868, the French *félibres* 'pupils', and Mistral in particular, were celebrated by the Catalans);

1874: On the occasion of the festivities to celebrate the fifth centenary of Petrarch's death, held in Avignon, Mistral was celebrated as the "poetic embodiment of the genius of the Latin race";

Alphonse de Lamartine, who met Mistral in Paris in 1858 and 1859, made his work known to a wider French audience. Lamartine devoted eighty pages of his *Quarantième Entretien* 'Fortieth Discourse' to *Mirèio*, in which he acclaimed Mistral as the "Provençal Homer."

7. *When were the works of the national (or greatest) poet fully integrated into the education system? (Name the decade; e.g., 1910s.) Assess the overall presence of the national (or greatest) poet and his or her works in education (scale 1–5; 5 = "excessive," 3 = "not particularly strong," 1 = "marginal"). If there were unusual shifts or breaks (due to politics, etc.), add a brief comment.*

Mistral's works are not integrated into the French education system.

8. *Are there other literary writers (prose writers or playwrights) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If so, name up to three, give their information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = "much more important," 5 = "equally important," 1 = "marginal in comparison to").*

None.

9. *Are there other artists (composers, musicians, painters, architects, etc.) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = "much more important," 5 = "equally important," 1 = "marginal in comparison to").*

None.

10. *Name up to three other individuals (in politics, military, scholarship, etc.) that were most venerated in the nation-building context and remain highly canonized today. Give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death) and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = "much more important," 5 = "equally important," 1 = "marginal in comparison to").*

None.

11. *Briefly describe the main reason why the chosen poet was considered "national" (or greatest in the case of no NP).*

A popular poet, Mistral wrote his poems in Provençal (one of the seven varieties of *langue d'oc*, or Occitan). He was one of the founding members of the *Félibrige* (1854), a literary association of young Provençal poets, which heralded the Occitan cultural revival. His literature was an expression of the ardor of the "small literary nations"; that is, the countries that strengthened their national consciousness and identity through historical and epic literature. As well as writing in the vernacular, the "national" dimension of his work was expressed through poetry; namely, the epic poem *Calendau* (1867), which contains references to medieval Provence and its linguistic and cultural autonomy.

12. *Speculate briefly on reasons why the concept of NP did (or did not) gain ground in your literary culture.*

In the context of the Provençal/Occitan literary culture, it is quite difficult to define who can be labeled a “national poet.” Indeed, today Mistral is considered a French poet that wrote in Occitan.

13. *Speculate briefly on the reasons why the position of a national (or greatest) poet was either occupied by a single poet or shared by a number of poets.*

In addition to representing the only literary reality of some value in the Occitan territories, Mistral had a “national” consciousness that Jasmin and Gelu did not express. Indeed, even though Mistral and the other *félibres* considered Jasmin the “greatest popular and southern poet” that showed them that they could revive the Occitan language through popular poetry, Jasmin simply wanted to write for the people and made no claims of linguistic revival. As for Victor Gelu, who wrote in Provençal from Marseilles, he had no intention of working for the Provençal “cause.” On the contrary, he was interested in real life, and the lives of the people of Marseille, which was why his characters—who belonged to the popular classes—could only express themselves in Provençal. Gelu depicted the people of the *le Midi* (the South of France), and their lives and temperament, and wanted to revive their culture. Unlike the *félibres*, he believed that Provençal could not be a standard language. Nonetheless, Gelu was to be celebrated as the most renowned poet prior to Mistral.

14. *Do you notice any interesting connotations regarding the canonization of a national (or greatest) poet that resemble the veneration and cults of religious saints? What about other artists? Specify briefly.*

Not particularly. Some final remarks: despite his success at the national (given the double meaning that the term *nation* could still evoke at that time: Provençal/Occitan and French) and international levels, Mistral did not succeed in altering the misconception that surrounded his work in Paris, which was the center of the cultural life of the country as well as his own French literary fortune. In Paris, in fact, admiration for his literary works and immense lexicological work met with suspicion of separatism following the publication of all his books. In Paris, Mistral was regarded as a “noble savage” that embodied the “popular genius,” whereas his lexicological work on the language only acquired value as the classification and “monumentalization” of the vestiges of the past, which was advocated by various French governments throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, in the Occitan territories, Mistral did not succeed in winning the hearts of the people, even though his purpose was to revive Provençal “national culture.” The language that Mistral aimed at revitalizing—and that the *Félibrige* had worked hard to disseminate—was very far from the sociolinguistic reality of that period. Although the *Félibrige*, whose main representative was Mistral himself, considered itself the custodian of the heritage of the people, its principal aim was to make the Provençal language “eternal,” actually distancing it from the people of Provence and their way of speaking. Indeed, the people whom the *Félibres* invoked as the sole “custodians of the genius of the language” were ultimately considered responsible for its decline and decadence, and for this reason they were despised and blamed.

Moreover, Provençal, Mistral’s language, was just one of the seven varieties of *langue d’oc* (Occitan) spoken in the Occitan territories. This implied that there were different concepts of the language according to the region and, consequently, any attempts at saving the linguistic varieties of each region had to measure up to the growing success of Provençal in the second half of the nineteenth century. That said, Mistral can genuinely be considered the “greatest poet” because he embodied the only literary reality that was valorized to a certain degree in the Occitan territories. Moreover, he is the only one that Occitans, regardless of the language variety they speak, generally accept as the “greatest poet.”