

Nobel Prize in Literature 1904



Frédéric Mistral



José Echegaray y Eizaguirre

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1904 was divided equally between Frédéric Mistral "*in recognition of the fresh originality and true inspiration of his poetic production, which faithfully reflects the natural scenery and native spirit of his people, and, in addition, his significant work as a Provençal philologist*" and José Echegaray y Eizaguirre "*in recognition of the numerous and brilliant compositions which, in an individual and original manner, have revived the great traditions of the Spanish drama*".

RESEARCH INFORMATION:

One sometimes hears it said that the Nobel Prizes should be awarded to authors still in the prime of life and consequently at the height of their development, in order to shelter them from material difficulties and assure them a wholly independent situation.

The institutions charged with awarding these Prizes should like to bear such striking witness to the value of a young genius; but the statutes of the Nobel Foundation stipulate that the works eligible for such a reward must be of exceptional importance and confirmed by experience. Thus there cannot be any hesitation in choosing between a talent in process of formation and a proven genius at the end of his development. The jury does not have the right to ignore a still active author of European fame, merely because he is old. The works of an old writer are often proof of a unique and youthful energy. The Swedish Academy therefore was right to render homage to [Mommsen](#) and [Bjørnson](#) in awarding

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them Nobel Prizes even at a time when both were past their prime. In making its choice among the candidates proposed this year for the Nobel Prize, the Academy has again given its attention to several literary veterans of recognized fame, and it has wished to renew its pledge to genius held in high esteem in the literary world.

The Academy has thought particularly of two authors who would both have been worthy of the whole Nobel Prize. Both have attained the final limits not only of the poetic art, but even of human life; one is seventy-four years old, the other two years younger. Therefore the Academy believes it should not wait longer to confer on them a distinction they both equally merit, although from different points of view, and it has awarded half the annual Prize to each. If the material value of the award is thus diminished for each of the laureates, the Academy nonetheless wishes to state publicly that, in this particular case, it considers each of these two Prizes as the equivalent of the whole Prize.

The Academy has given one of the awards to the poet Frédéric Mistral. In the freshness of his poetic inspiration this venerable old man is younger than most of the poets of our time. One of his principal works, *Lou pouèmo dóu rose* [*The Song of the Rhone*], was published not long ago, in 1897, and when the Provençal poets celebrated their fiftieth anniversary on May 31, 1904, Mistral tuned his lyre for a poetry that in verve and vigour does not yield to any of his previous works.

Mistral was born on September 8, 1830, in the village of Maiano (in French, Maillane), which is situated midway between Avignon and Arles in the Rhone Valley. He grew up in this magnificent natural setting among the countryfolk and soon became familiar with their work. His father, François Mistral, was a well-to-do farmer, devoted to the customs of his faith and of his ancestors. His mother nursed the soul of the child with the songs and traditions of his birthplace.

During his studies at the College of Avignon, the young boy learned the works of Homer and Virgil, which made a profound impression on him, and one of his professors, the poet Roumanille, inspired in him a deep love for his maternal language, Provençal.

According to the wish of his father, Frédéric Mistral took a law degree at Aix-en-Provence; after that he was left free to choose his career as he pleased. His choice was soon made. He devoted himself to poetry and painted the beauties of Provence in the idiom of the country, an idiom which he was the first to raise to the rank of a literary language.

His first attempt was a long poem about rustic life; then he published poems in a collection entitled *Li Prouvençalo* (1852). After that he spent seven consecutive years on the work that established his universal fame, *Mirèio* (1859).

The action of this poem is very simple. A good and attractive peasant girl cannot marry a poor young man whom she loves because her father refuses his consent. In despair she flees from the paternal home and goes to seek succour at the church on the site of the pilgrimage of the Three Saint Marys on the island of Camargue in the Rhone delta. The author recounts in charming fashion the youthful love of the young people and retraces with masterly hand how *Mirèio* rushes across the rocky plains of the Crau. Smitten by a sunstroke in the torrid Camargue, the unfortunate young girl crawls to the chapel of the pilgrimage site to die. There, in a vision, the three Marys appear to her at the very instant in which she breathes her last.

The value of this work is not in the subject nor in the imagination displayed in it, no matter how interesting the figure of *Mirèio* may be. It lies in the art of linking together the episodes of the story and of unreeling before our eyes all Provence with its scenery, its memories, its ancient customs, and the daily life of its inhabitants. Mistral says that he sings only for the shepherds and the country people; he does so with Homeric simplicity. He is, indeed, by his own admission, a student of the great Homer. But far from imitating him slavishly, he gives proof of a very personal originality in his descriptive technique. A breath of the Golden Age animates a number of his descriptions. How can one forget his paintings of the white horses of the Camargue? Galloping, with manes flying in the wind, they seem to have been touched by Neptune's trident and set free from the sea god's chariot. If you remove them from their beloved pastures at the edge of the sea, they always escape in the

end. Even after long years of absence, they return to the well-known plains which they salute with their joyous neighing as they hear again the breaking of the waves on the shore.

The rhythm of this poem has beauty and harmony, and its artistic composition succeeds on all counts. The source from which Mistral has drawn is not psychology; it is nature. Man himself is treated purely as a child of nature. Let other poets sound the depths of the human soul! *Mirèio* is a half-opened rose, still all shining from the rosy light of dawn. This is the spontaneous work of an original spirit and not the fruit of purely reflective labour.

The poem was greeted with enthusiasm from its first appearance. Lamartine, worn out with personal cares but always smitten by beautiful poetic works, wrote «A great poet is born!» He compared Mistral's poem to one of the islands of an archipelago, to a floating Delos which must have detached itself from its group in order to join, in silence, the fragrant Provence. He applied to Mistral these words of Virgil: «Tu Marcellus eris!»

Seven years after the publication of *Mirèio*, Mistral published a second work of equal dimensions, *Calendau* (1867). It has been said that the action of this poem is too fantastic and improbable. But it matches its predecessor in the charm of its descriptions. How could one question the grandeur of its ideas about the ennoblement of man through trial? While *Mirèio* celebrates peasant life, *Calendau* presents a gripping picture of the sea and the forests. It is like a brilliant glistening of water in several remarkably precise scenes about the life of the fisherman.

Mistral is not only an epic poet; he is also a great lyricist. His collection, *Lis Isclo d'or* (1876) [*Islands of Gold*], contains some poems of an immortal beauty. Suffice it to recall the stanzas on the drum of Arcole, on the dying mower, on the chateau of Roumanin with its memories of the times of the troubadours that seem to evoke the splendour of the sunsets, or, again, the beautiful mystic chant that should be spoken in the veiled twilight of the evening, «la coumunioun di sant».

In other lyric poems Mistral insists with fervour on the rights of neo-Provençal to an independent existence and seeks to protect it against all attempts to neglect or discredit it.

The poem in the form of a short story, «Nerto» (1884), offers many beautiful pages for the reader's admiration. But the epic narrative, *Lou pouèmo dóu Rose*, is more profound. Composed by a poet of sixty-seven years, it is still full of life, and its numerous vignettes of the regions washed by the Rhone are most engaging. What a superb type is that proud and devout captain of the ship *Aprau*, who thinks that one must be a sailor to know how to pray! Another ravishing little scene shows us the pilot's daughter, Anglora, whose imagination has been fed on old legends. One night she imagines that she has seen Lou Dra, the god of the river, in the moonlit waves of the Rhone and that she has been touched by him. The very verses here seem to stream and sparkle in the moonlight.

In short, Mistral's works are all lofty monuments to the glory of his beloved Provence.

This year is a year of celebration for him. Fifty years ago on St. Estelle's day he founded, together with six literary friends, the Association of Provençal Poets, whose goal was to purify and give a definitive form to the Provençal language. The language which is spoken from St. Remy to Arles and, without significant differences, in all the Rhone Valley from Orange to Martigues, served as a basis for a new literary language, as earlier the Florentine dialect had served to form Italian. Experts such as Gaston Paris and Koschwitz tell us that this movement was not at all retrograde. It did not seek to restore to life the old Provençal, but on the basis of dialects in use among the people, it attempted to create a national language understood by all. The efforts of the Provençal poets have not been slow to be crowned with success. In his great neo-Provençal dictionary, *Tresor dóu Félibrige* (1879-1886), a giant work on which he has worked for more than twenty years, Mistral has recorded the wealth of the Provençal dialects and built an imperishable monument to the *lengo d'O*.

It goes without saying that a man like Mistral has received all kinds of honours. The French Academy has awarded him a prize four times. The Institute of France gave him the Reynaud prize of 10,000 francs for his dictionary. The universities of Halle and Bonn have conferred honorary doctorates on him. Several of his poems have been translated into

various foreign languages. Mirèio has been set to music by Gounod, and *Calendau* by the composer Maréchal.

One knows the motto given by Mistral to the Association of Provençal Poets: «Lou soulèu me fai canta» («The sun makes me sing»). His poems have, in effect, spread the light of the Provençal sun in many countries, even in Northern regions where they have made many hearts rejoice.

Alfred Nobel demanded idealism from an author to be judged worthy of the Prize he established. Is it not amply found in a poet whose work, like that of Mistral, is distinguished by a healthy and flourishing artistic idealism; in a man who has devoted his entire life to an ideal, the restoration and development of the spiritual interests of his native country, its language and its literature

After the splendour of the Greek theatre, it is principally among the English and the Spanish that a national dramatic art has developed. To understand modern Spanish drama, it is necessary to know what conditions in the life of past periods lie behind it. For a long time Spanish drama has displayed sharp contrasts. On the one hand, there is the most luxurious flowering of fantasy; on the other, an extremely subtle and at times conventional casuistry. In one place, there is brilliant colouring, and in another, a great affection for rhetorical antithesis. Emphatic language is coupled with tangled intrigue. Striking effects are violent, the lyric order intense. Disharmonies are sharp, and conflicts almost always have a tragic resolution. Dialectic is vigorous. However, interior life is very rich, and the severe, inflexibly applied dictates of honour do not exclude the luxury of sudden expressions of fantasy. In Spanish drama the artificial has managed to become fused with a genuine originality.

The heir and continuator of these glorious and characteristic traditions is the writer who has been awarded half of the Nobel Prize this year. A son of the modern age and perfectly independent in his judgments, he has not the same conception of the world Calderón had. Loving liberty and having fought often for tolerance, he is no friend of despotism or of hierarchy, but still there is in him the same exotic ardour and the same

dignity which from oldest times have been the distinctive marks of Spanish dramatists. This writer is José de Echegaray. Like his forebears, he knows how to present conflict, is extremely moving and vitally interested in different temperaments and ideals, and like them he enjoys studying the most complicated cases of conscience. He is complete master of the art of producing in the audience pity and fear, the well-known fundamental effects of tragedy. Just as in the masters of the old Spanish drama, there is in him a striking union of the most lively imagination and the most refined artistic sense. For this it can be said of him - as a critic otherwise unsympathetic to him declared - «that he is of pure Spanish breed». However, his conception of the world is vast. His sense of duty has been purified, his fundamental conceptions are benevolent, and his moral heroism, while retaining a peculiar national character, has the features of a universal humanity.

José de Echegaray was born in Madrid in 1833 but spent his childhood years in Murcia, where his father held the chair of Greek Studies at the Institute. Receiving his bachelor's degree at fourteen, he soon entered the School of Civil Engineering, where he distinguished himself by his zealous application and his penetrating skill. Five years later, in 1853, he completed his engineering career after having compiled a most brilliant record. Mathematics and mechanics had been his favourite studies, and his singular understanding of these branches of learning enabled him, after one year, to be appointed a professor in the very school which he had so recently attended as a student. It appears that for some years his struggle for existence was quite hard, and he had to give private lessons in order to sustain the most modest way of life. In spite of everything, he soon became an eminent professor, distinguishing himself both in pure and applied mathematics, and became an outstanding engineer. At the same time he energetically studied political economy, embracing the ideas of free trade. Soon, that great talent, that vivacious engineer, was called to the highest and greatest tasks. Three times he has been a minister of his country's government. According to those who know him, whether they were adversaries or friends, he has always shown a singular skill in the administration of public finance and public works.

We can easily understand the general astonishment when this scholar, who had published treatises on analytic geometry, physics, and electricity, dedicated his indefatigable energy to writing for the theatre. It has been said that his creations for the stage had the form of equations and problems. If the new manifestation of his genius was enthusiastically acclaimed by numerous admirers, it also found severe critics. Nevertheless, no one could deny that his works were distinguished by a deep moral sense. In a way, the critics were not mistaken who maintained that in his dramas, following the example of some surgeons, he rarely used any other method than that of «urere et secare»; still, however, there is something to admire in this Muse of romantic exaltation and austere severity which condemns any compromise with duty.

Despising the transient approval of fashion and listening only to the inspirations of his genius, Echegaray pursued his triumphal career, demonstrating a dramatic fecundity which makes us think of Lope de Vega and Calderón.

Even in his youth, when he was attending the School of Civil Engineering, he was enthusiastic about drama and used his savings to obtain theatre tickets. In 1865 he wrote a play entitled *La hija natural* [The Illegitimate Daughter], which was followed by *El libro talonario* [Book of Accounts] in 1874. The playbill carried a pseudonym instead of the author's name, but it did not take the public long to guess that the acclaimed dramatist was Echegaray, then Spain's Minister of Finance. Some months later *La última noche* [The Last Night] was staged, and since then his fertile imagination has not stopped engendering ever-new creations. He works with such speed that in one year he has published three or four works. Since lack of time prohibits a complete review here of all of his productions, suffice it to make brief mention of some which have won general attention. Echegaray scored his first triumph in November, 1874, with the drama *La esposa del vengador* [The Avenger's Wife], in which his true genius was revealed and in which, side by side with certain exaggerations, the greatest beauties can be admired. The public could imagine that it had been taken back to the Golden Age of Spanish drama, and it saluted Echegaray as the regenerator of the most brilliant era of the nation's dramatic poetry. *En el puño de la espada*

[The Sword's Handle], presented the following year, was received with the same applause. The sublime power that is manifest in this noble conception so moved the many spectators that the applause did not stop with the performance, and, after the last act, Echegaray had to appear on stage seven times to receive the acclaim of the audience. But great controversies arose in 1878 when, in *En el pilar y en la cruz* [The Stake and the Cross], the poet showed himself the defender of free thought against intolerance, of humanity against fanaticism. Typical of Echegaray, as he himself has observed, is his *Conflicto entre dos deberes* [Conflict of Duties], which was presented in 1882. A conflict of duties is found in almost all of his dramas, but rarely has the conflict been pushed to such an extreme as in this piece. Two other dramas have made his name famous. These two inspired, excellent plays are *O locura ó santidad* [Madman or Saint] and *El gran Galeoto* [Great Galeoto], the former presented in January, 1877, and the latter in March, 1881. In *O locura ó santidad* there is a great wealth of ideas and profound genius. It shows a man who, moved by his righteousness to sacrifice his prosperity and worldly goods, is considered crazy and treated as such by his friends and by the world at large. Lorenzo de Avendano renounces a name and a fortune when he learns unexpectedly but undeniably that they do not legally belong to him, and he persists in his resolution when the one indisputable proof of his illegitimacy has disappeared. Such idealism is judged madness by his family, and Lorenzo is looked upon by everybody as a Don Quixote, stubborn and simple-minded. The structure of the drama is firm and solid, demonstrating that it is the work of an engineer who calculates precisely all the elements that have gone into it, but it shows us to a still greater degree the poet of mature creative genius. More than an external collision, it treats the internal conflict of an extremely sad figure. It consists of a struggle between duty and opportunism, and Lorenzo in following the dictate of his conscience reaches martyrdom. Experience has always shown that very frequently he who faithfully obeys his conscience must be prepared to bear the fate of a martyr.

El gran Galeoto made an even greater impression. In the first month after it opened, it went through no fewer than five editions and inspired a national subscription to honour

its author. Because of the masterful portrayal of the psychology of the characters the play has a lasting value. It shows the power of slander. The most innocent trait is disfigured and scandalously deformed by the gossip of people. Ernesto and Teodora have nothing for which to reproach themselves, but the world believes them guilty, and at last, abandoned by everyone, they end by throwing themselves into one another's arms. Subtlety of psychological analysis is revealed with such masterly detail of observation that those two noble spirits, in no way desirous of stealing the right of their neighbour, become mutually enamoured without suspecting it. They discover the fact of their love only by means of the persecution to which they see themselves exposed. Romanticism triumphs in this drama whose poetic beauty is clearly perceptible, whose lyric details possess a dazzling colouring, and whose structure is without a flaw.

Echegaray goes on working as a dramatist. This year (1904) he has published a new play, *La desequilibrada* [The Disturbed Woman], whose first act is a genuine masterpiece of exposition and individualization, and which in its entirety reveals no weakening of poetic inspiration. In this play, we are shown Don Mauricio de Vargas, a clear type of that chivalry so dear to Echegaray, that chivalry which does not want to buy even its own happiness at the cost of compromising duty.

Thus it is just that the Nobel Prize be awarded to this great poet, whose production is distinguished by its virile energy and whose mode of seeing is impregnated with such high ideals that with abundant reason an eminent German critic has been able to say of him: «Er verlangt Recht und Pflichterfüllung unter allen Umständen.»

Echegaray has put in the mouth of one of the characters of *El gran Galeoto* the most pessimistic words about the world, which «never recognizes the subtleties of the genius until three centuries after his death».

No doubt this can happen. But against the general application of the above thesis we can offer the justified admiration which the work of Echegaray has aroused. To those tributes of appreciation the Swedish Academy has agreed to add still one more, awarding

the Nobel Prize in homage to the celebrated poet, the honour and glory of the Spanish Academy, José de Echegaray.

At the banquet, C.D. af Wirsén pointed out that sharing in the Prize did not diminish in any way the value of the laureates. He recalled to mind the works - pure, limpid, and fresh - of Frédéric Mistral, naming the principal ones and asking the Minister of France, Mr. Marchand, to convey to the famous Provençal poet the homage which the Swedish Academy and all those assembled took pleasure in rendering him. The speaker then reviewed the imposing work of Echegaray and expressed regrets for his state of health and explained that the Minister of Spain had been prevented from attending this banquet and from receiving the congratulations for his famous countryman.

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