

## March's Poetry and National Identity in Nineteenth-century Catalonia

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**Alice E. Popowich,**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "March's Poetry and National Identity in Nineteenth-century Catalonia" Alice E. Popowich investigates the role Ausiàs March's (1397-1459) oeuvre played in the creation of a distinct national identity of nineteenth-century Catalonia. The sociopolitical implications of *renaixença* and the romantic notion of *Volksggeist* are employed to situate renewed interest in March's poetry, while the study of reprints from the period allow reflections on the manipulation of March's celebrity in order to move political agendas forward in the establishment of the identity and culture of Catalonia. Popowich postulates that March's poetry influenced nineteenth-century literary rhetoric and politics whereby a regional dialectic was formed and that stood apart from Castilian hegemonizing of culture in the period.

**Alice E. POPOWICH**

### **March's Poetry and National Identity in Nineteenth-century Catalonia**

One cannot visit either of Catalonia's two main cities València and Barcelona without learning about their most celebrated son, Ausiàs March (1397-1459): monuments, secondary schools and colleges, streets, and avenues have been named after him. A medieval troubadour and knight, March's poetry brought to life a distinct Catalan identity and language that would impact Catalan consciousness in the wake of the industrial revolution and he influenced also Castilian poetry such as by Boscan, Garcilaso, de Herrera, etc. As to the biography of March, his parents were Mossen Pere Ausiàs March and Na Lionor Ripoll, both from noble families recorded since the thirteenth century. His father published a collection of moral proverbs. March was married twice, first to Isabel Martorell — sister of the writer Joanot Martorell 1413-1468, author of *Tirant lo blanch*, a romance written in *vulgar llengua valenciana* and thus his interest in colloquial Catalan ran in the family, as it were. His second wife was Joana Escorna and they had a son, Pere Joan March. March had also three illegitimate children. In his youth March participated expeditions of the Mediterranean after which he engaged in writing literature (on the history of the March and related families and Ausiàs March, see, e.g., Hailstone).

Following the rediscovery of March's oeuvre in the nineteenth century, his poetry impacted *renaixença*, a movement that transformed Catalans' view of themselves, their history, and their language within the greater Spanish state (see, e.g., Bellveser). March could not have known that his poetry would play a large role in the creation of his people's identity a few hundred years later, but he must have known that his choice to write in Catalan rather than Castilian was unique among his peers and that his valuing of colloquial expressions in his poetry would gain him audience during his lifetime. March is considered one of the greatest Catalan poets of the "golden age" and a corpus of scholarship that explores the richness of his texts. March's survival is owing only in part to his creative abilities. Another important factor in his survival and celebrity is owing to the way in which Catalan regionalism would use his symbols as the inspiration for their movement and crown him as the savior of Catalan identity.

Catalonia has a long history of autonomy with governing institutions dating back to the twelfth century and a language that developed independently of Spanish proper isolated from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula (see, e.g., Brenan; Edles). Literature and the arts in general flourished in Catalonia until the fall of the Aragon kings when Catalonia became part of Spain. By the sixteenth century, the region had fallen into a period of artistic and literary decline known as the *decadència* and Catalan culture as a whole fell into disuse. In the late eighteenth century Catalonia began to organize a strategic resistance to the Spanish throne through a growing intellectual class whose members pressured the state for a program to support the philological, historical, and economic identity of Catalonia (see, e.g., Sanmartín; Sunyer). The group claimed that they had recently discovered Catalan medieval texts which showed that a Catalan identity existed that was distinct from that of Spain as a whole and that these texts showed that Catalonia had a literary history of its own and that it had developed independently of Spanish literature. At this point, the educated classes were still keen to gain support for Catalonia through mainstream channels rather than through rebellion as had been the case in the past. The region maintained allegiance to the Spanish crown and were not in search of a separate Catalan nation, but sought to bring pride to the people of Catalonia and gain respect within the greater Spanish community (see, e.g., Brenan; Edles).

It is important to note that the main divisive issue between Catalonia and the rest of Spain was not cultural, but economic. By the mid 1800s Catalonia and the Basque Country had become the most industrialized areas of Spain (see Edles). Catalonia was at this point a highly industrialized region and its people held more modern, democratic values than those of the traditional and agrarian society governed by Madrid (see Woolard). The bourgeois class in Barcelona was gaining strength and wealth and hoped to enter into the Spanish elite society through the traditional channels (see Solé-Tura) and their main objective was to validate Catalonia's contributions to the Spain as a whole rather than separate themselves from it. In addition to the economic conditions, Romanticism was sweeping across Europe and fed into a new Catalan self-awareness, particularly

in Barcelona. The expansion of romanticism into Spain along with the interest in historiography in German-language scholarship placed value on regional identities and as a consequence a heightened interest in the histories and traditions of marginalized European communities developed (see Aurell). Of particular interest to scholars at the time were the histories of territorial communities within larger states, e.g., the Basque Country, Catalonia, Ireland, and Scotland. The theory of *Volksgeist* was central to the Romantic philosophy impacting Catalan culture at the time. *Volksgeist* has at its core the idea that the identity of each region is based on centuries of interaction between its people and their environment and being "faithful" to this identity is beneficial for the survival of the region (Storm, "Regionalism" 254). In a state of *Volksgeist*-driven culture, expressions of culture should be rooted in the traditional or genius of the people or they were considered to undermine the valuing of the *Volksgeist*: "The guiding principle behind the mode of thinking was the idea that each people had its own 'spirit,' 'soul,' or 'nature,' which could be distilled from cultural expressions. This idea — which was mostly labeled *Volksgeist* — became widely accepted during the romantic era" (Storm, "Regionalism" 254). Catalans began to look to their regional history and culture rather than to the super culture of Castilian Spain. Catalonia saw in the notion of *Volksgeist* a valuing of their longstanding distinctness and marginalization because through this new regionalist approach a strong Catalan identity could be created to solidify a language and culture that had lived in obscurity for centuries.

In this search of their own *Volksgeist*, Catalans began to uncover the literary history of their region by seeking out the authors from the past who could evidence a national literature of Catalonia. Texts were hard to come by as medieval editions were scarce and there had been few reprints of medieval texts during the period of *decadència*. However, as Barcelona became more industrialized, so did Catalonia's ability to bring medieval Catalan authors to a greater readership. This desire to seek out original sources of Catalan literary history was at the heart of the *renaixença* movement in Catalonia. Thus, the interest in the history of Catalonia and its people brought about a significant revival of the Catalan language and culture in the nineteenth century including the restoration of several cultural events such as the *sardana* and the troubadour literary festival *jochs florals* (interest in March's oeuvre extended in the nineteenth century beyond Catalonia and Spain, see, e.g., Hailstone; Smith). The regionalist sentiment of this period is epitomized by Buanaventura Carles Aribau's ode to his homeland, *La Patria*, published in 1833 and considered the official opening of the *renaixença* (see, e.g., Etherington). The poem is written in Catalan and was reserved mainly for colloquial use (see Sunyer 170) in much the same way Castilian and Catalan were employed in March's time. Catalan before the *renaixença* was considered a *patois* of Castilian (Sunyer 170), but through the efforts of philologists during this period the language was better understood and the relegation of it to *patois* was abandoned. After unearthing texts which spoke to the history of the regions language and literature, the *renaixença* sought to strengthen Catalan society's roots in traditional practices (Solé-Tura 68) as part of the development of a Catalan *Volksgeist*.

March was born in Gandia in the province of València in 1397 to a noble family with a literary heritage: both his uncle and his father were poets and March received a thorough humanist education focusing on the works of Petrarch, Dante, and the classical literature that had inspired them (see, e.g., Sobré). València in the fifteenth century was the capital of troubadour poetry and March belonged to this school. This group of poets wrote in *Lemosi*, a Valèncian adaptation of *Limousin*, the Occitan dialect of the earlier French troubadours (see, e.g., Brenan). The *Lemosi* were mainly imitators of Petrarch and followed a set style formula: starting in the thirteenth century, some of the *Lemosi* poets began using vernacular Catalan in their works while still following a strict troubadour style. Little by little the Catalan influence increased as troubadour limitations were relaxed until finally the transfer was complete with March, who wrote exclusively in Catalan (see Johnston). March's writings mark the end of this period known as the deprovençalization of the *Lemosi* style. March's choice of language and integration of Catalan themes gave his work originality that his predecessors lacked and ultimately saw him survive the *decadència* to become the summit of medieval Catalan lyric poetry (see Peyton).

March's choice of language and motifs reflect the socio-political milieu in Catalonia in the period in which he wrote and when poetry was the genre of the nobility: it was written in Castilian and for

their consumption (see Sobré). A new class of bourgeoisie was rising to power in Catalonia in this period and it wanted its own language and traditions reflected in the arts. March chose to move from the traditional language and motifs of the troubadours to a poetry written for the new elite in the bourgeois tongue (i.e., Catalan). J.M. Sobré argues that this could have only been a conscious decision. However, in my opinion March's move from Castilian to Catalan was not based purely on his voice being linked with his native tongue as some suggest, but on his desire to expand his audience beyond his aristocratic public. The instauration of the *Trastamaras* is one influencing factor along with an economic crisis in Catalonia. March began to enrich his texts with Catalan motifs and colloquialisms including imagery taken from sermons (see Sobré). Beyond the political reasons for his originality, there were artistic motivations as well. March was not satisfied to work within the constraints of troubadour poetry, which had become tired and overworked. In order to stand out and attract an audience, he would need to be different. His break with traditional forms and conventions of the *Lemosi* group he belonged to were necessary to distinguish himself from his competitors. March's most obvious deviation from the pack was the language he chose, but it was not only the form of his poetry that was new: it was also the imagery and references he chose to enliven it. March pulled symbols and expressions from colloquial Catalan to use in his poetry, weaving through his poems a common experience with the bourgeois culture of Catalonia of the time.

It might appear that March's choice to include Catalan terms in his poetry was an artistic preference, but his use of Catalan signals a political affiliation as well since it implies that his intended audience would shift from Castilian-speaking nobility to a Catalan readership based in the new mercantile bourgeoisie (see Archer, "Tradition"). Robert Archer explores March's controversial use of the traditional troubadour *maldit* and how he contradicts literary ethics at the time by naming the subject of his *maldit*-s ("Tradition" 379). March uses the *maldit* to attack the mercantile class of Barcelona by attacking the lover of Joan Junyents who was one of the four big cloth merchants during this period in Barcelona and March would have come into contact with him (see Archer, *The Pervasive*). Although it has been suggested that this attack on Junyents shows that March was positioning himself on the side of the nobility against the bourgeoisie, the references to Junyents are used in ways that bring the dynamic scenes of bourgeois Catalonia to life in March's poetry (Archer, "Tradition"). March also replaces a noble subject in his *maldit* for a bourgeois one within the context of a traditional *maldit*, a transfer that epitomizes the shift of power and importance between these two groups at the time. Archer points out that the Aragon court had long been inactive when March wrote his *maldit*-s and the nobility had no weight within the *consells* and *jurats* of València, now dominated by the bourgeois classes ("Tradition"). March was therefore reinterpreting traditional troubadour elements for his new bourgeois audience.

Catalan identity is depicted in March's poetry through his intense moral code, the most important trait of March's value system being that of *seny* (common sense). *seny* also implies a practicality and rationality that is a source of pride for Catalans and is a characteristic that Catalans feel sets them apart from the more fiery and impulsive national identity of Spain. Wendy L. Rolph discusses how March integrates the Catalan *seny* in his treatment of love and concludes that March's amorous discourse as a whole seeks to find balance between "contemplative love based in enteniment or seny" and the earthly love of the flesh (72; see also Cuenca i Almenar). The battle between the body and the mind is based in a medieval rhetoric (Rolph 71), but far from simply imitating previous discourse, March defines a unique Catalan perspective on the mind-body debate based on the preeminence of *seny* and the attainment of good through the physical world (see Lluadó-Guillem). In March's view of the mind-body battle, love had to be ruled by reason and he praised the woman whom he called *plena de seny* in his poetry as the emblem of this Catalan characteristic (Rolph 71).

Themes of loneliness and isolation are prevalent in March's poetry, as well as the power of *seny* and reason to overcome these emotions and sentiments which came to the forefront of the nationalist movement of the nineteenth century. March's idea that rebelling against one's obscurity and marginality is the only way to defend autonomy and liberty came to form the basis of emerging Catalan cultural identity (see Sanmartín). March needed only name the key symbols of Catalan identity in their native language and bring them into the light through his canto and thus his new

readership full of romantic philosophy ready to embrace Catalan literature and culture. Another important figure in March's poetry is the natural landscape of Catalonia, an element closely linked to the forming of nationalist sentiment. Significant documentation exists which shows a link between the national identity in Catalonia and its geography, whereby the relationship between a people and their territory over the course of centuries forms their defining characteristics. Artists of the *renaixença* used Catalan geography as a way to unite their nation through common experiences. Mountains, the sea and other geographical elements are meant to idealize the beauty of the Catalan landscape and build a connection with regional pride to the land (see Etherington; see also Palacios González <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1905>>). The Catalan landscape is integral to March's poetry, in particular the sea and the harsh coastline and he used geographic elements to represent his inner feelings: "the setting in which he saw his inner turmoil expressed in his natural surroundings" (Archer, *The Pervasive* 102). In nationalist Catalan literature in particular the tree came to symbolic importance and this initiated with March's poetry (Brady <<http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=2751463>>; Leveroni). In one poem, March describes a starving man who must choose between two apples on the branch of a tree and seeing his pitiful situation must choose the closest to him or die (*Poesia* 32). The poem is focused on a love triangle, but within the context of the *renaixença*, it takes on new meaning whereby the famine in the poem now reads as Catalan culture starved for recognition and the choice to remain living relates to Catalonia as a region within the nation of Spain or as a distinct country of its own. It is in this way that March's use of geographic elements suggests that the relationship between the Catalan people and their territory was a long standing tradition in the poetry of their nation.

As the interest in March's writings grew in the *renaixença*, so did the need for editions of his work to be republished. The last editions of March's poetry was published in the sixteenth century and so there was a demand for revised versions of his poems, and the first reprint was in Barcelona in 1864, followed by another in 1884, and then another in 1888 which would be the last publication of March's works before the close of the century (see Peyton). It was in the writing of their literary history that Catalans developed their national identity and so it is important to understand the role that March's works would play in collective memory: "What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their times and which have not depends on who noticed them and chose to record their notice" (Bernikow 3). The publication of March's works in the nineteenth century would serve other purposes than simply to give greater readership to a medieval poet. The nation building that was taking place within Catalonia now used literary historiography to prove that Catalonia had developed independently of the Spanish (see Brenan 7; see also Rodríguez González <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1913>>) and thus March became a key figure in the history of Catalan literature and culture.

The first edition of March's oeuvre was by Francesch Pelayo Briz in 1864 in Barcelona entitled *Obras de aquest poeta publicadas, tenant al deviant las edicions de 1543, 1545, 1555 y 1560* (on a detailed printing history of March's oeuvre, see Lloret). The edition opens with a poem to the reader, followed by a dedication in which he explains that it was the recent renewal of the *jochs florals* that led him to publish March's poems. Briz gives another reason for his collection, namely that he has no intention to diminish the glory of Spain, but to relieve the shame of being Catalan: "My desire is none other than to enhance the prestige of the country and, without taking anything away from Spain, to not be ashamed of being Catalan and to instead consider it an honor" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("Mon anhel no es allie que lo de donar mes gloria al pais que, sens dei- xar de ser espanyol, no si avergonyeix de ésser català; al con- trari, ho tè com auna Gloria" [v]). There is also a letter of reply by a government official after the dedication, in which the official gives Briz permission to publish March's work and requests fifteen copies of the book which will be given out to winners of the *jochs florals*. The paratextual texts of the volume also suggest that March's should inspire young poets who were now building Catalan literature in his legacy.

In the biography of the poet that follows the dedication, we can find other indications of March's role in the political environment in Catalonia at the time. Diego de Fuentes, the author of the biography, writes that March's family was from Barcelona originally and much is made of the fact that the city was the principle residence of the March family and that the family's move to

València are of lesser importance in this account and through these remarks it is insinuated that March is not a Valencian at heart, but that his family and literary heritage come from Barcelona and that the family left their "homeland" for València (Fuentes vii). It is obvious that Fuentes intends for the two Catalan cities to be separated in terms of their place in Catalonian history, with Barcelona being the historical center of all cultural and literary glories of Catalonia. A second biography is then placed after that of Fuentes, in order to provide more details of March's life. The author of this biography, Francesch Pelayo Briz, states that March's home was in València and Briz clarifies this later, when one of the authors of dedicatory sonnets to March calls him Catalan writing that March was Valencian and not Catalan (xix). The confusion surrounding who was Catalan and who was not at the time is evident from this remark: in Briz's mind Barcelona was the capital of Catalonia and València was a separate region. More contradictory remarks are found in a series of dedicatory poems to March which follow the two biographies. One example is a dedicatory poem in which familiarity with March within the nineteenth-century literary culture of Barcelona and where the passing of the guard from March to the new Catalan poets is explored. The poet bemoans the fact that the grave of their celebrated poet has been lost making it impossible for the new generation of Catalan authors to pay their respects to March's oeuvre. This is indication that the recognition of March's legacy is equated with the recognition of the entire Catalan nation. Thus, the impact March and his poetry was having on the *renaixença* movement in Barcelona is evident.

In 1884 the *Obras del poeta Valencia Ausiàs March publicadas tenint al devant las edicions de 1539, 1545, 1555 y 1560* was published in Barcelona edited by Francesch Fayos y Antony. The dedication by Fayos y Antony is nearly an exact copy of the 1864 edition both in its wording and its format, but with all the terms relating to Barcelona are converted to Valencia. Twenty years after the first reprint of March's works in Barcelona, València wanted to set up their own *joch florals* to bring the center of cultural Catalonia to the city. Rather than being dedicated to a government official, the Valencian edition is dedicated to Rat Penat, a society that supported the cultural heritage of València. Fayos y Antony states the motivation to publish the collection is in order to give glory to the country (*país*) from which March's poetry was born. We can see how this prologue was used to discuss much more than the poetic works of March in order to enter into discussions on what it meant to be Spanish, Basque, Catalan, and Valencian. As Catalan identity began to take shape both Barcelona and València began positioning themselves to be the capital of the region. Relevant is that we can see in these paratexts to the various editions of March's oeuvre that the ownership of March was at the heart of the debate. In the 1884 edition, the response letter from Rat Penat is included and places the publication of March's poems within a larger political agenda. Fayos y Antony defends a more national endeavor writing that they intend to bring glory to all without trying to maintain the vanity of a particular province (9). What is unclear is whether the nation they are referring to is Spain or Catalonia and thus their text serves as a lesson to Barcelona to put the Catalonian identity and pride before their own. At the end of the prologue Fayos y Antony unveils the goal to see a monument erected to March in València (27).

The last edition of March's oeuvre in the nineteenth century was published in 1888 in Barcelona entitled *Les obras del valeros cavaller y elegantísim poeta Ausiàs March*. This edition has no editor, preface, introduction, or dedication but a series of five poems by other authors dedicated to March. The final pages indicate that the book was published in honor of the Catalan language in Barcelona. I think that the politics of publishing with regard to this last edition was in the context that the *renaixença* movement was concerning itself more with the cultural and linguistic renewal of Catalonia and less with the literary history of the region. With regard to the text proper there is little editorial work and therefore little to draw from in terms of the motivations and agendas of the publisher. March's place in the cultural revival can be found in other publications of the time and a key example is Víctor Balaguer's *Historia de Cataluña y de la Corona de Aragón* (1860-1863) and that has a lengthy digression about March claiming he was not only a great poet, but a valiant horseman and intrepid in battle (351-52). The tone is reverential and March is shown to be a member of the Aragon court. While this was not the case because March was of minor nobility, the desire to connect him with the Catalano-Aragonese royal dynasty is based on nationalist sentiment which viewed the fall of Catalan culture in the fifteenth century and the beginning of the period of *decadència* in the sixteenth century as a direct consequence of the fall from power of the kings of

Aragon (see Woolard 17-18). Thus the literary decline is paired with the political and March is a perfect figure to illustrate both.

March's influence in the nineteenth century can be found also in the visual arts. At the end of the century, the elite classes required greater support to move the nationalist movement forward and they saw the inclusion of the lower classes as essential to the movement's success because the visual arts were a way to incite nationalist feeling among a wider audience than could be reached through literature (Storm, "Painting" 558). Thus, the notion of the Catalan *Volksgeist* found its way into the visual arts with painters taking inspiration from the landscapes of Catalonia and the relationship between the people and their surroundings and this was used for political purposes: "the pictures of these artists also had a clear ideological message. More than with the aggressive and exalted gospel of the new nationalist prophets, their works should be associated with a new, more widely supported phase in the nation-building process (Storm, "Painting" 570-80). For example, Joaquín Sorolla y Bástida (1863-1923) was one of the central painters to embrace the regionalist movement and being Valencian, he knew of March's oeuvre and painted a portrait of him. We can see referencing to one of March's better-known poems, "Veles e vents," and in many of Sorolla's paintings we find windswept seascapes and ships' sails tossed in the wind. Further, the poem was referenced by the singer Raimon (aka Ramon Pelegrero Sanchis) and most recently in València unveiled an architectural homage to March called "Veles e vents." Sorolla's use of March's motives in his paintings shows that the poet's influence transcended media and class. More evidence of March's impact on Catalan identity exists of course beyond the nineteenth century and shows that he remains the most important figure of the region's cultural, literary, and linguistic heritage.

In conclusion, March represents Catalan identity because his personal story and his oeuvre mirror the changes which occurred in Catalonia in the wake of the industrial revolution. The language, style, and content which made March an original in his own time allowed future generations to relate to him more than his peers and the use of his oeuvre for political means in order to create a separate cultural identity is located in the contexts of similar situations of nineteenth-century European multi-ethnic states where regional and ethnic identities were developed against central governments which, in turn, intended to homogenize. Thus — whether identity formation within nation states is considered negatively or positively — such situations suggest the social relevance of literature and culture which is an important factor with regard to the position of the arts in the past or present.

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