Although folklore was integral to the development of many European national identities, its place in nineteenth-century France was equivocal. While certain ‘picturesque’ regional traditions were validated early in the century, in general, the embrace of the folk came later and more sporadically in France than in other European countries. This paper examines one of France’s first regional ethnographic museums in order to reveal the evolving dynamic of regional culture and its fluid relation to the central administration’s efforts to circumscribe French national identity through the museum system. While the museum is, in some ways, symptomatic of the larger folklore movement that swept through Europe in the nineteenth century, its particularities reveal much about the political history and concomitant institutional structures that shaped both the discipline of folklore studies and the positioning of any regional revivals at the end of the century in France.¹

Mistral and the Provençal Revival

By the 1890s, Frédéric Mistral was well-known as the Provençal poet who had spearheaded a regional literary revival. In 1854, Mistral and six compatriots had founded a society called the Félibrige, a term they coined from the Provençal word félibres meaning doctor of laws, scribe or, in some

accounts, freethinker. The group promoted the growth of a literary movement written in the local tongue, often published in their yearly almanac, the *Armana Provençau*. The literature associated with the movement generally posited authenticity in a version of Provence that was unaffected by modernisation, devoutly Christian, decidedly rural, and that did not include outside influences. Although the Félibres looked back to the Middle Ages, they did not seek to revive the troubadour tradition, but rather to justify an ambitious, heroic poetry written in contemporary dialect.

Mistral’s epic poem *Mirèio* exemplifies the inherent contradictions in this programme. Published in 1859, the text was clearly modelled on works by both Virgil and Dante, who were not viewed as foreign and whose influence was instead construed as evidence of a direct link to the region’s classical heritage. Yet, arguably, the poem’s real significance was its attempt to record, model and stimulate authenticity through accounts that were almost ethnographic in their descriptive completeness. Written in Provençal, the poem included descriptions of behaviour from dances to agricultural activities, mythology and, of course, dress. Mistral drew on his own experience, still extant oral traditions, and the pre-existing Provençal literary tradition that dated back to the Middle Ages. As Rudolf Schenda has argued, Mistral crammed “the maximum possible number of distinctive Provençal words into his literary bundle” so that it would function as “a Provençal encyclopedia, a Provençal Bible, the universal Provençal text.” This effort at comprehensiveness, however, created an artificial language, spoken by no-one, and ridiculed by some in the region. The apparent inclusiveness was essential to the successful creation of a boundary that claimed to know the true essence of the region and defined authenticity.

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6 Ibid., pp. 367–368.

7 Another of its paradoxes remains that the work’s success derives in part from its translation into French and subsequent production as the opera *Mireille* by Gounod, who did