

## Foreword

In recent years there has been great interest internationally in exploring the problems of categorizing and defining academic disciplines. Key words used by many scholars in the field of comparative literary studies include in-betweenness, liminality and hybridity. Increasingly metaphors of mapping and journeying are used in literary research, and the idea of thresholds, frontiers, borders and boundaries is repeated in writings around the world.

Comparative literature has moved on a long way in the last three decades from the eurocentrism of the immediate post-war years. Postmodernist theory and in particular postcolonial studies have helped bring about this transformation. It has not always been a comfortable process, but today what is explored under the general heading of 'comparative literature' are complex questions of power relations, reading and writing strategies, and issues of contextualization. This is a long way from the formalist approach, or from the tracking of imagined influence of one text upon another that was the dominant approach when I wrote my own dissertation some years ago.

The collection of papers in this issue of the *Bulletin of SOAS* aptly illustrates the changes in the field. Scholars from a range of different disciplines and different cultural backgrounds explore questions of the inter-relationship between texts within a framework that examines different critical discourses and different ideologies.

Gayati Chakravorty Spivak has recently proclaimed the death of comparative literature in her book *Death of a discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). There is, of course, a case to be made for the demise of comparative literature but the energy and diversity of the essays assembled in this present collection suggests not so much a death, but a revitalized comparative literature. What is perhaps in its terminal stages is the phrase 'Comparative Literature', for it has never been a term that had much meaning and, as critics from Matthew Arnold to Benedetto Croce have pointed out, comparing literatures is an inevitable part of any process of reading. The terminology though is the least important question here. What matters is that inter-disciplinary work that examines texts produced in all kinds of different contexts is alive and well. How texts are transferred is of less importance than the fact that they are transferred. Traditional boundaries have disappeared and what we have, today, is a concept of literary production that reflects a continual process of exploration and re-assessment.

These essays testify to exciting new trends in comparative literary studies that promise well for the future.

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