

DOING COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN FRANCE IN 2017

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RESUMO: Apresentação do que os comparatistas fazem hoje na França, em resposta à pergunta que motivou este volume: “O que fazem os comparatistas ao redor do mundo?”

PALAVRAS CHAVES: Literatura Comparada; França

ABSTRACT: Presentation of “What Comparatists do in France today,” in response to the question that motivated the issue: “What do Comparatists around the world do?”

KEY WORDS: Comparative Literature; France

In our “globalized” world and in our age of “globalization”, comparative literature occupies a special position: as a field of study, research, and teaching, comparative literature is “globalized” insofar as it extends today to all parts of the world (from East to West, from South to North). While, historically, comparative literature may be “born” in Europe in the early 19th century, it is now present pretty much everywhere around the globe and it is probably flourishing and growing more today in the East and in the South than in Europe or the United States. This presence around the world is, however, not uniform: comparative practices vary greatly depending on local critical traditions and histories, and there are almost as many local specificities as there are places around the globe. Such a situation motivated Eugene Eoyang when, in 2013, he raised the question and decided to address it in a systematic way: “What do Comparatists around the world do?” In what follows, I will try to very partially answer the question by presenting what Comparatists do in France today, both in terms of teaching and in terms of research.

The history of French comparative literature and of its institutionalization is well-documented² and the point here is not to go over it again. However, at least two elements relating to this history need to be recalled because they help explain the status of comparative literature in France today in the curriculum and in terms of teaching:

The first element is the fact that French comparative literature originated as *foreign* literature (rather than *comparative*) – “foreign” meaning “not French”. Indeed, in the wake of German Romanticism calling into question the exclusively national approach to the study of literature (Friedrich Schlegel’s interest in a “European literary science” and Goethe’s notion of *Weltliteratur*), throughout the nineteenth century, the very Franco-centered academic institution gradually ceased considering French literature as constituting the whole of literature: at the university level, several chairs in “foreign literature” were created³. The expression “foreign literature” was most often used in the singular, more rarely in the plural (*littérature étrangère*

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² See, for example : Daniel-Henri Pageaux, *La Littérature générale et comparée*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1994 ; Pierre Brunel, Claude Pichois, André-Michel Rousseau, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature comparée?*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1996 ; Yves Chevrel, *La Littérature comparée* [1989], Paris: PU de France, coll. “Que sais-je?”, latest edition 2016.

³ See Michel Espagne, *Le Paradigme de l’étranger: les chaires de littérature étrangère au XIX^e siècle*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993

or *littératures étrangères*), so that French literature constituted one unified entity and “foreign literature”, i.e. all literatures outside of France, constituted another. As the institutional distinction became stronger between comparative literature and chairs in diversified and specialized foreign literatures (at the Collège de France, a chair in Slavic literature was created in 1840, the following year one in literature of Southern Europe and another in German literature were established; institutionally, the first chair in comparative literature was created in Lyon in 1896), the importance granted to the notion of “foreignness” (*l'étranger*) and to the confrontation with what is foreign, remained one of the defining elements of the discipline. This historical link between “foreign literature” and “comparative literature” is one of the reasons that explain the Franco-centeredness of the French comparative literature tradition: *comparative literature* programs are still conceived in France as the “comparison”/confrontation/ articulation between French texts and “other non-French” texts — from first year undergraduate level to doctoral level, programs and topics always include a French text, when they are not organized around it.

The second element to be stressed is that, in France, the development of comparative literature as an academic discipline cannot be dissociated from the emergence and the development of the concept of *lettres modernes*, i.e., the study of literature considered less from the point of view of its relations to classical literature (*lettres classiques*) than from the point of view of its relations to other modern languages. Historically speaking, what gave comparative literature a strong institutional status in the curriculum was the creation, in 1959, of the *agrégation de lettres modernes* with two examinations focusing specifically on comparative literature (as opposed to the *agrégation de lettres classiques*, with examinations in Greek and Latin). This explains the status of comparative literature as a discipline in the curriculum: because the *agrégation de lettres modernes* – the examination required to teach at the high school level and strongly recommended as a qualification for teaching at the university level – includes examinations in comparative literature and because the entire curriculum of studies in literature is conceived as a preparation for the *agrégation*, comparative literature is a mandatory component for French literature students throughout their studies. Courses in comparative literature at the undergraduate level can vary in terms of number and content depending on the institution, but in all French universities courses in comparative literature are a mandatory component for a degree in French literature (more precisely, a degree in *lettres modernes*).

From an institutional point of view, as long as the *agrégation de lettres modernes* remains (its continuation is, however, regularly called into question), the presence and the status of comparative literature in the curriculum of French literary studies is probably not going to be called into question. On the one hand, then, comparative literature has a rather secure status in the French curriculum.

The situation is, however, not that simple...and not very different, in that respect, from the situation described over ten years ago in the United States. Indeed, in his contribution to the 2006 report on the state of the discipline in the United States, written for the American Comparative Literature Association, Haun Saussy wrote: “Comparative literature [...] has never been better received in the American university. The premises and protocols characteristic of our discipline are now the daily currency of coursework, publishing, hiring, and coffee-shop discussion”⁴. Such a statement could not be truer in France today. Authors and critics who wrote in “foreign languages” (languages other than French) are indeed taught in departments of French; “interdisciplinarity” is a keyword in most projects and grant proposals. Comparative teaching is present in a number of courses in departments other than those wearing the label of “comparative literature.” In a context that is both that of globalization and of a general decrease in the number of students enrolling in literature departments, the very recent past has seen in

⁴ Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006, p. 3.

many universities the creation of world literature courses, meant to be courses in general education for students in literature but also in other disciplines (psychology, education, history...). At the same time, though, as Saussure pointed out, “this victory brings little in the way of tangible rewards to the discipline” (*id.* p. 4). Indeed, these world literature courses may be taught by teachers in comparative literature or they may not; and such courses are listed as “transdisciplinary courses” rather than as courses in comparative literature.

In fact, for comparative literature as a discipline, the difficulties and the dangers of such a paradoxical situation are high: they are institutional as well as intellectual, and could go as far as to call into question the specificity of the discipline and of comparative literature programs. They create the need for French Comparatists to rethink and restate the specificities of the discipline (in relation to inter- or trans-disciplinary studies). I submit that such rethinking involves at least two aspects:

First, systematic emphasis should be placed on the study of texts in *their original language*, as opposed to the systematic use of translations whenever texts written in languages other than French are studied outside of Comparative Literature – and also, of course, outside of Foreign Languages Departments.

Second, systematic emphasis should also be placed on the dynamics of an authentically *comparative* approach that does not merely consist in the juxtaposition of different texts/objects but in their confrontation, i.e., in the fact of *constructing* the grounds of their relation.

Moving from teaching to research in comparative literature in France and looking over the past half century, it is striking to note that academic research in comparative literature — but this would also be true for the Humanities in general — has become more and more structured as *collective* research through research centers that have become bigger and bigger in size, the general (and questionable) idea being that “the bigger the more visible” and “the more visible the better”. A research center may depend either exclusively on a given university (it is then called an “*unité de recherche*” – *a research unit*) or on the National Center for Scientific Research (“*Centre national de la recherche scientifique*”, CNRS) or else on both (and it is then called an “*unité mixte de recherche (UMR)*” – *a mixt research unit*). Comparative literature is not represented within the CNRS, which means that there is no specifically comparative UMR. In other words, academic research in comparative literature is conducted in research centers within the various universities. Most of them are not exclusively composed of faculty in comparative literature but, rather, gather specialists in comparative literature, as well as in French or foreign literatures. Only a rather limited number of research centers, at large institutions, are entirely devoted to comparative literature. The functioning of these research centers has greatly changed ever since the law, voted in 2007 and implemented gradually between 2008 and 2012, that has granted so-called “autonomy” to universities. Whereas research centers used to be funded directly by the Ministry of Higher Education, their funding now depends on university presidents and their boards (which, in a context of budget cuts, has led to a decrease in regular funding given to research centers whose members are strongly encouraged to apply for outside funding). The general tendency is towards a decrease in the regular funding given to research centers and an increase in the budgets devoted to specific projects and managed by special agencies (such as the National Agency for Research [“*Agence Nationale pour la Recherche*”, ANR] or, at the European level, such as the European Research Council).

On a less material and more substantial level, several more or less global assessments of the discipline have been published in the past twenty years⁵ and, to date, the French Comparative

⁵ Including Yves Chevrel in 1992 (“Douze ans de travaux français en littérature générale et comparée (1981-1992): esquisse d’un bilan”, *L’Information littéraire*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1992, pp. 3-12) and in 1997 (“Littérature (générale) et comparée: La situation de la France”, *Comparative Literature World Wide: Issues and Methods/La Littérature comparée dans le monde: Questions et méthodes*, ed. Tania Franco Carvalhal, Porto Alegre: L&PM Editores,

Literature Association (“Société Française de Littérature Générale et Comparée”, SFLGC) has published two reports, whose purpose was to describe as comprehensively as possible the state of the discipline — the first one in 1983⁶ and more recently but already ten years ago, a second one in 2007⁷. A recent update of this 2007 report has been made for a translation of the volume in Spanish, to be published in 2017 in the context of the France-Colombia Year⁸. The 2007 report, compared to the one in 1983, shows trends that have developed in 2017: next to certain territories, which have evolved but can be considered as “founding territories” of the discipline in France, others have, more or less slowly, emerged to expand the frontiers of French comparative literature. All these territories, whether older or more recent, define their specificity either in terms of their *object* of study (the objects of myth studies are literary myths, those of translation studies are literary translations...) or in terms of their *theoretical and methodological* approach (historical poetics or the study of relations between literature and philosophy, to take only these examples, designate a specific approach to texts rather than a given object). Obviously the two kinds of definitions cannot be separated and comparative approaches ought to reflect both on the construction of their objects and on their theoretical choices and assumptions.

With regard to the French tradition of comparative literature, three domains constitute the “founding grounds” of the discipline: myth studies, reception studies and image studies, which are well-known as the historical fields of French Comparative Literature. Myth studies have developed following Raymond Trousson's and Pierre Brunel's work, and have long been considered to be a prominent area of study in French-language comparative literature, which they certainly remain as exemplified by the current work on Greek and Roman myths of scholars such as Véronique Gély, Sylvie Ballestra-Puech, Evaghélia Stead, Ariane Eissen, and by the work on Biblical myths of Sylvie Parizet or Véronique Léonard Roques. Reception studies have developed in the wake of the longstanding tradition of studies of literary influences and have gradually replaced it (Yves Chevrel, Claude de Grève, and more recently Daniel Mortier and Anne-Rachel Hermetet, are among the most important figures in that field). Within reception studies, translation studies (*traductologie*) have become an autonomous field of investigation since the mid-1990s, developing in two directions: the investigation of the poetics of translation (be it the analysis of a number of different translations of a given text through time or the analysis of different translations of a text at a given moment in time) and the analysis of the works of specific translators or of the role played by translation in the works of specific writers. One of the most ambitious recent projects in that field is a global history of translations written in French, in four volumes, supervised by Yves Chevrel and Jean-Yves Masson⁹.

1997, pp. 53–79), the volumes edited by Sylvie Ballestra-Puech and Jean-Marc Moura in 1999 (*Le Comparatisme aujourd'hui*, Lille: Presses de l'Université Charles de Gaulle – Lille 3), by Jean Bessière and Daniel-Henri Pageaux, also in 1999 (*Perspectives comparatistes*, Paris: Honoré Champion), by Pascal Dethurens and Olivier Bonnerot in 2000 (*Fin d'un millénaire*, Strasbourg: PU de Strasbourg), the 2016 edition of Yves Chevrel's *La Littérature comparée* first published in 1989 (coll. “Que sais-je”, Paris: PU de France) or most recently, Bernard Franco's *La Littérature comparée : Histoire, Domaines, Méthodes*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2016.

⁶ Daniel-Henri Pageaux ed., *La Recherche en littérature générale et comparée en France: Aspects et problèmes*, Paris: SFLGC, 1983.

⁷ Anne Tomiche, ed. (with the help of Karl Zieger), *La Recherche en littérature générale et comparée en France en 2007: Bilans et perspectives*, Valenciennes: PU de Valenciennes, 2007.

⁸ Anne Tomiche, ed., *La Investigación en Literatura general y comparada en Francia hoy*, transl. and ed. Pauline Voisinne, Juan Sebastián Rojas, Santiago de Cali, coll. “Literatura Comparada”, Cali (Colombia): Programa editorial Universidad del Valle, 2017.

⁹ Three volumes have already been published: *Histoire des traductions en langue française XV^e et XVI^e siècles*, ed. Véronique Duché, Lagrasse: Verdier, 2015; *Histoire des traductions en langue française XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles (1610-1815)*, ed. Yves Chevrel, Annie Cointre and Yen-Mai Tran-Gervat, Lagrasse: Verdier, 2014; *Histoire des traductions en langue française XIX^e siècle (1815-1914)*, ed. Yves Chevrel, Lieven D'hulst and Christine Lombez,

Third “founding field” of the discipline in France, image studies (*imagologie*), first developed by Jean-Marie Carré, Marius-François Guyard, and then Michel Cadot and Daniel-Henri Pageaux, are defined as the study of representations (originally: textual ones exclusively; later: also visual ones) of “the foreign”. While until recently image studies in France focused on relations in the West or within Europe (the image of Germany in 18th century France...), at the end of the 1990s Jean-Marc Moura opened the field to new geographic horizons, especially the image of the “third world” in French contemporary literature and exoticism in Western literature. More recently, research programs focusing on relations East/West and on “Orientalisms” have developed (see Yves Clavaron on modern and contemporary literature¹⁰; Anne Duprat on pre-18th century¹¹). This work is relevant with regard to postcolonial studies, a field of research that already has a long history in the United States, where it has developed since the late 1970s, but that started only more recently to develop in France, in the late 1990s, especially in the context of Francophone studies. Due to its history and to its political origins, the context of Francophone studies did not coincide with that of postcolonial studies as they developed in the United States — which explains, at least in part, why postcolonial studies took so long to reach France. The term “francophone” is historically part of the colonial enterprise: it was created by Onésime Reclus in 1880, at a time when the French Empire was expanding and when the *Alliance française* was created in order to increase French populations in the colonies and to spread the language. *Francophonie*, as an institutionalized notion, appeared later, during the period of de-colonization, in the 1960s and it can be interpreted as a means for France to compensate for the loss of its Empire. The political and ideological assumptions that govern the notion of *francophonie* rely on the mythical idea that French is a universal language and that it is the language of human rights and of freedom. Francophone studies have thus often been seen as an ultimate neo-colonial enterprise, and all the more so because they insist on a specificity of the colonial relation linked to France, because they focus the definition of *francophonie* on the question of language and because they consequently encompass very dissimilar areas (North Africa and the Caribbean) rather than thinking historically of the effects of colonialism and its discursive power beyond linguistic and regional specificities of European colonization. Recent research is nevertheless developing in order to think through the possible relations between Francophone studies and postcolonial theory.

Fields of studies that have developed more recently include the exploration of the relations among the various arts: relations between literature and music¹², literature and opera¹³, literature

Lagrasse: Verdier, 2012 ; *Histoire des traductions en langue française XX^e siècle*, ed. Bernard Banoun, Jean-Yves Masson and Isabelle Poulin, Lagrasse: Verdier, forthcoming.

¹⁰ See, for example : *Poétique du roman postcolonial*, Saint-Étienne: PU de Saint-Étienne, 2011 ; avec Émilie Picherot et Zoé Schweitzer, *Orientalisme et Comparatisme*, Saint-Étienne: PU de Saint-Étienne, 2014.

¹¹ See, for example : Anne Duprat and Émilie Picherot, eds., *Récits d'Orient dans les littératures d'Europe (XVI^e-XVII^e siècles)*, Paris: PU de Paris Sorbonne, 2008 ; Anne Duprat and Hédia Khadhar, eds., *Orient baroque/Orient classique: Variations du motif oriental dans les littératures d'Europe (XVI^e-XVIII^e s.)*, Paris: Éditions Bouchène, 2010.

¹² See Jean-Louis Backès, *Musique et littérature: Essai de poétique comparée*, Paris: PU de France, 1994; Francis Claudon, *La Musique des Romantiques*, Paris: PU de France, 1992; Anne Faivre-Dupaigre, *Poètes-musiciens: Cendrars, Mandelstam, Pasternak*, Rennes: PU de Rennes, 2006 ; Aude Locatelli, *Littérature et musique au XX^e siècle*, Paris: PU de France, 2001 and *Musique et littérature: Rencontres Sainte Cécile*, Aix-en-Provence: PU de Provence, 2011.

¹³ See Francis Claudon, *Dictionnaire de l'opéra comique français*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1995; Timothée Picard, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Wagner*, Arles: Actes Sud, 2010 and *La Civilisation de l'Opéra: sur les traces d'un fantôme*, Paris: Fayard, 2016; Elisabeth Rallo-Ditche, *Opéras, Passions*, Paris: PU de France, 2007.

and painting or text and image¹⁴, literature and cinema¹⁵, literature and dance¹⁶, and literature and architecture¹⁷. Studies concerned with “literature and the other arts” have gradually taken more and more importance in France, especially since the 1986 Congress of the French Comparative Literature Association (SFLGC – “Société Française de Littérature Générale et Comparée”) which was devoted to the theme “Art and Literature”. They are not exclusive to comparative approaches since they are also explored by other disciplines such as visual arts, film studies, music studies, media studies, or studies in foreign literatures. The issue is, thus, that of the specifically comparative dimension brought to the study of these questions: such a dimension stems both from the corpus chosen (with the presence of several linguistic and cultural traditions) and from the method(s) used (with privilege given to broad spaces and long duration in order to confront diachronically, in large cultural and linguistic areas, the relations among the different forms of artistic expression). The fact that an interdisciplinary approach of the interactions between the arts may not be the exclusive territory of institutionally labeled “comparatist” scholars testifies to the importance of discussing and re-defining the borders of the various territories that constitute the Humanities in France — territories that are institutionally very rigidly delineated — and of re-thinking the relation between the “general”, indeed “global”, dimension of such studies (be they comparative or not) and their more specialized dimension (whether it is comparatist or pertains to the study of French literatures or of other national literatures).

Another area of study that has greatly developed in the last ten years is the theoretical investigation of the articulations between literature and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences including philosophy, history, (cultural) anthropology, etc. Beyond the question of the philosophical or ideological dimension of a text or of a literary movement – a question which bears on the history of ideas (*histoire des idées* and *histoire des mentalités*) and that has a long tradition in French comparative literature, research has developed to explore relations between literature and philosophy, in at least two complementary directions: the confrontation between philosophical systems and literary representations and constructions;¹⁸ and the investigation of the literary dimension of philosophical writings or of the stakes of a philosopher's discourse on literature.¹⁹ If, owing to structuralism's rejection of the historical dimension of textuality, research on the articulations between literature and history had not constituted an important field of research until the beginning of the 1980s, it has since then considerably developed²⁰, in at least three directions: the investigation of the poetics of history (i.e., the investigation of the specifically literary means used to write history in relation and as

¹⁴ See Emmanuelle Hénin, *Ut pictura theatrum de la Renaissance italienne au classicisme*, Genève: Droz, 2003; Judith Labarthe-Postel, *Littérature et peinture dans le roman moderne*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002; Lise Wajeman, *La Parole d'Adam, le corps d'Eve*, Genève: Droz, 2007.

¹⁵ See Claude Murcia, *Nouveau roman, nouveau cinéma*, Bruxelles: Nathan, 1998 ; Jean Cléder ed., “Ce que le cinéma fait à la littérature (et réciproquement)”, *Fabula: Littérature, Histoire, Théorie*, no. 2, 2006.

¹⁶ See Guy Ducrey, *Corps et graphies: Poétique de la danse et de la danseuse à la fin du XIX^e siècle*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996; Alain Montandon ed., *Sociopoétique de la danse*, Paris: Anthropos, 1998 and *Écrire la danse*, Clermont-Ferrand: PU Blaise Pascal, 1999.

¹⁷ See Joëlle Prunnaud, *Figures littéraires de la cathédrale 1880–1918*, Lille: PU du Septentrion, 2008.

¹⁸ For example Nietzsche and Artaud (Camille Dumoulié, *Nietzsche et Artaud: Pour une éthique de la cruauté*, Paris: PU de France, 1992), De Quincey and Kant (Eric Dayre, *Les Proses du temps: Thomas De Quincey et la philosophie kantienne*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000) or Nietzsche in France (Jacques Le Rider, *Nietzsche en France, de la fin du XIX^e siècle au temps présent*, Paris: PU de France, 1999).

¹⁹ See, for example: Anne Tomiche and Philippe Zard eds, *Littérature et Philosophie*, Arras, Artois PU, 2002 ; Camille Dumoulié, *Littérature et philosophie: Le gai savoir de la philosophie*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2002.

²⁰ See Jean-Pierre Morel, *Le Roman insupportable: L'Internationale littéraire et la France, 1920–1932*, Paris: Gallimard, 1986; Emmanuel Bouju ed., *L'Engagement littéraire*, Rennes: PU de Rennes, 2005; Catherine Coquio ed., *L'Histoire trouée: Négation et témoignage*, Nantes: Atalante, 2003 and Catherine Coquio, *Le Mal de vérité ou l'utopie de la mémoire*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2015.

opposed to the means of historiography), the confrontation between the way literary history constructs literary periods and the way general historiography divides history in periods, and a more sociological investigation of the inscription of literature within the historicized social field (i.e., the investigation of the relations between the symbolic field of literature and historical temporality and the investigation of the possibilities, for the actors of the literary field, to act upon history with specifically literary means). Recently, the articulations between literature and science have drawn the interest and attention of a number of scholars in comparative literature and research programs have developed in that area²¹.

What is striking in the evolution of comparative literature in France in the recent past is that while approaches such as postcolonial studies, gender studies, and cultural studies already have a long history in Anglophone scholarship, they have only recently started becoming part of the French horizon. The ironical paradox lies in the importance that so-called “French theory” had in the early developments of postcolonial and gender studies in the Anglophone world. But postcolonial approaches had to find their way in relation to Francophone studies; gender studies, if they have been very present in disciplines such as sociology since the end of the 1960s, have only slowly integrated literature departments; and cultural studies have met resistance from those arguing for the specificity of literary objects and for the need that literature departments study literature and only literature. However, these different approaches are now clearly involved in the current disciplinary reconfiguration of comparative literature in general. The longstanding tradition of image studies has opened up its objects and its questionings to postcolonial concerns and approaches²². Questions of gender construction and representation are being raised in a dialogue with US-American gender studies²³. Creating a dialogue between the French traditions of historical investigation (embodied by the *École des Annales*) and of historical and cultural anthropology on the one hand and Anglophone cultural studies on the other, French comparative literature is defining its own specific territory of *études culturelles*. One of the specificities of French approaches to postcolonial, gender or cultural studies remains, at this point, an emphasis on the study of literature proper and the assumption of the specificity of literary objects within the cultural field. Finally, in the double context of the growth of the European Union and of the development of a globalized world, one of the issues at stake — politically and ideologically — within French comparative studies today is the articulation between the concept of world literature, a concept that such French comparative literature specialists as René Étiemble already promoted in the early 1970s before it was promoted and discussed in the United States by David Damrosch, Rey Chow or Franco Moretti, and the concept of European literature in the context of comparative literature.

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²¹ See Anne-Gaëlle Weber ed., *Panthéons littéraires et savants XIX^e – XX^e siècles*, Arras, Artois PU, 2012 ; Laurence Dahan-Gaida is the general editor of the online journal *Epistémocritique*, whose focus is on the articulations between literature and science.

²² See Jean-Marc Moura, *Littératures francophones et théories postcoloniales*, Paris: PU de France, 1999 ; Yves Clavaron ed., *Études postcoloniales*, Nîmes: Lucie Éditions pour SFLGC, 2011 (the publication is part of the official collection of the French Comparative Literature Association).

²³ See Anne Tomiche and Pierre Zoberman, *Littérature et identités sexuelles*, Nîmes: Lucie Éditions pour SFLGC, 2007 (the publication is part of the official collection of the French Comparative Literature Association) ; and more recently : Anne Tomiche ed., *Genre et signature*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017.