The Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum (1877–1888) from the Perspective of its British Collaborators

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Abstract

Within a contemporary Hungarian literary discourse that emphasized national values, the first international journal of comparative literature, Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum (ACLU) proved quite incomprehensible. I therefore argue that ACLU’s aims and constant struggles are better understood from the viewpoint of its authors originating from beyond Hungary, such as that held by the English collaborator, E. D. Butler. A librarian at the British Museum whose interest in antiquarianism and orientalism may have fueled his involvement in ACLU’s translation projects, Butler can be considered one of the most important channels for propagating Hungarian literature in England. A comparison of Hungarian and English perspectives reveals how differently ACLU’s goals were interpreted, how comparative literature and Hungarian Studies/Hungarology were balanced according to the project proposed by the journal’s editors, Meltzl and Brassai. This analysis further examines how this negotiation surrounding the journal’s interpretation came to determine the early period of institutional comparative literature. Similarly, the Hungarian and English press’s reactions to this project reveal the paradoxical position ACLU occupied; for Hungarians, ACLU was not “Hungarian” enough, while it was precisely this “Hungarianess” that attracted the English. My paper discusses the underlying reasons for this situation by examining how Hungarians, the English and ACLU addressed questions in folklore, Hungarian and comparative literature studies, thereby providing additional insight into the journal’s concept of world literature and its anthropological approach.

Keywords

Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum, Hungarian Studies, folklore studies, anthropological approaches to literature, cultural mediation, E. D. Butler

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The Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum was intended to set this situation right, both by its radical mixing of languages and also by its broad literary strategies. Meltzl and Brassai developed a two-pronged approach, as is indicated by Meltzl's double evocation of Chinese and Hungarian 'Lieder': first, to compare masterpieces of global world literature (mostly composed in large countries with highly developed literary cultures), and secondly, to promote the study of oral and folk materials. Publishing his work as he moved from the inner to the outer margins of the British Empire, Posnett saw clearly the dangers of an imperial cosmopolitanism. ** How successful were Posnett and Meltzl in achieving their ambitious goals?