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Āsvaghoṣa and the History of Allegorical Literature in India

Even though the Sanskrit literary tradition has no term for allegory, the phenomenon itself is not unknown. For instance, in Mūndaka Upaniṣad 1.2.6-10 a satirical passage is found on the inefficacy of sacrifice, which is put into the mouth of the offerings personified. In the Anugītā in the fourteenth parvan of the Mahābhārata abstract concepts like pṛāṇa and āpāṇa are presented speaking in 14.23; in 14.30 the five sense organs, the nose, tongue, skin, ear and mind, are personified.

If we turn to bellettristic literature, mention may be made of the Upanitihavaprapaṇitā Kathā. The main characters in this didactic Jaina work, dating from the tenth century, are personifications of concepts like passions and sins. Another example, in which all appearing characters are personifications, in particular personifications of abstractions of Vedānta, is Kṛṣṇamīśra’s Prabodhacandrodaya. This eleventh-century play has spawned a great number of epigones. Other examples of allegory from drama concern mainly minor scenes. They are found in the so-called Trivandrum plays, namely in the Dhītavākyā and Bāḷacarita, in which, among other things, Viṣṇu’s weapons make an appearance on stage. As the thirteen Trivandrum plays as a group can no longer with certainty be attributed to the pre-Gupta playwright

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1 The term rūpāṇuka, as in rūpāṇukakathā, “allegorical tale” is a learned neologism, used only by modern scholars writing in, for instance, Hindi; see Balbir 1994: 260.
2 My source for this passage is Oelivelle 1993: 63.
3 In a certain sense the majority of the so-called Mahākāvya texts are allegorical. Thus, the divine couple Śiva and Pārvatī in Kālidāsa’s Kumārasambhava could be interpreted as standing for the royal couple which patronized Kālidāsa, and Kārttikeya, who, we are made to believe, is engendered during the couple’s lovemaking, might refer to the heir-apparent. The same could be argued for the epic heroes depicted in, for instance, the Raghuvaṃśa or the Śīlavatadha. However, the possibility of retrospective allegorical interpretation should be distinguished from allegorical composition, which seems to be a relatively rare and late phenomenon in Sanskrit Kāvya literature. For this distinction, see Whitman 1987.
4 For a description of this text, in the context of a short history of allegorical literature in India, see Kirfel 1966. For an attempt to establish a genre of allegory in Indian literature, see Osier 1994. Osler recognizes a connection between allegory and propaganda (p. 284). According to him one of the functions of allegory was to live up the long lists of terms typical of Indian religious doctrines and philosophical systems (p. 276).
6 See Gail 1981. Other allegorical characters in the Bāḷacarita are consciousness and a curse.
Bhāsa, none of the texts mentioned here seem to be very early. This state of affairs underlines the exceptional position of the allegorical scene found among the fragments of early Buddhist dramatic literature from the first century A.D. As Lüders, who, however, is writing before the discovery of the Trivandrum plays and the Upamitabhavaprāṇa Kathā, notes: "Wir müssen bis ins 11. Jahrhundert, bis zu Kṛṣṇa-miśra's Prabodhacandrodaya hinabsteigen, ehe wir wieder auf indischen Boden ein Drama finden, in dem allegorische Gestalten, wie die Buddhī, die Dhṛti und die Kirtī sind, auftreten".  

As noted, Lüders puts the Buddhist fragment on a par with the Prabodhacandrodaya, which is a completely allegorical play. Indeed, in the scholarly literature about Sanskrit drama the Buddhist fragment has come to be identified as a part of a full-length allegorical play. That is to say, the manuscript fragments brought together and investigated by Lüders and his wife are supposed to contain altogether three separate plays, namely the so-called Śārīputrapraśkarana, a play involving a courteous, and an allegorical play. It should be noted that only of the Śārīputrapraśkaraṇa the colophon has survived, in which the play is attributed to Aśvaghosa, the author of the Buddhacarita and Saundarananda. However, on closer consideration the identification of the fragment as a part of a separate, full-length allegorical play, is not as self-evident as that. For, as I will try to show we could instead well be dealing with a part of a so-called interlude, the allegorical nature of which need not automatically apply to the play to which it belonged as well. In this connection the question arises if we may not be dealing with an interlude from one of the other two plays found among the fragments.

Of the supposedly allegorical play only one leaf has been preserved (fragments 1 and 2). As the script is slightly more compact than that in the other available leaves and as the leaf is a little bit darker than the other leaves, it was assumed by Lüders that it originally was not part of either the Śārīputrapraśkaraṇa or the courteous' play. The leaf would have been added to the bundle later. At the same time, however, Lüders left open the possibility that the discoloring of the leaf might have taken place only later, that is, after it had already become part of the bundle. In any case, the leaf had been corrected by the same hand which had corrected the other

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7 Lüders 1911a: 25. Compare Keith, who wrote “We cannot say whether Kṛṣṇa-miśra's Prabodhacandrodaya was a revival of a form of drama, which had been practised regularly if on a small scale since Aśvaghosa or whether it was a new creation, as may easily have been the case” (1924: 251).  
8 At the same time, however, Lüders qualifies the parallelism. For while in the Prabodhacandrodaya all characters are personifications, in the Buddhist fragment, beside the personifications, we meet the “historical” figure of the Buddha himself (Lüders 1922: 25). See on this point also Osier 1994: 282. For this reason Keith prefers to compare the Buddhist fragment, rather than the prabodhacandrodaya, to Kavikṣapaṭāka's Caitanyakandrodaya and the Jain Mārājāparājaya (Keith 1924: 84). This comparison, in its turn, could be qualified as well, for in the Prabodhacandrodaya Cārvāka appears, who could be taken as a historical figure, like the Buddha.  
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leaves.\textsuperscript{10} In this connection it should also be noted that, apart from these corrections, the manuscript bundle also shows traces of repair. Thus, it contains a palimpsest, a text written in a Central Asian script over partly the same text in an Indian script.\textsuperscript{11} As to our leaf containing the allegorical fragment, it cannot be ruled out that it actually is a newly written copy of a leaf which had somehow become difficult to read and for this reason had been replaced by a fresh copy. This might explain the different handwriting and the different colour.

Whatever is exactly the case here, it should be noted that the identification of the allegorical scene as a part of a complete allegorical play was made in a highly casual and implicit manner. Thus, where Lüders in his first publication on the topic speaks of a “scene”,\textsuperscript{12} in his next publication he switches without any further explanation from “scene” to “drama”.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, we might indeed well be dealing with no more than a scene, more in particular a prelude or an interlude.

The scene\textsuperscript{14} consists of a conversation between three figures, who are named Buddha, Dhiṭṭi and Kirtti. The conversation, or at least the fragment of it that we have, begins with establishing the special relationship which exists between Buddha and Dhiṭṭi: yatra hi buddhir avatārṣate tatra dhṛṣṭiḥ sthānam labhate yatra dhūṭir adhiṣṭhate tatra buddhiḥ visṭṛṣyate. After this, Kirtti seems to ask where she comes in. Buddha’s answer has only partly been preserved: “he who has no buddhi is as it were constantly sleeping, he who has no dhiṭṭi is as it were constantly drunk, and he who has no kirtti is ...”\textsuperscript{15} Next, with reference to a figure presumably mentioned in the preceding passage, Kirtti asks where (this) personified Dharma is at the moment. Buddha replies that one had better ask where (he clearly the Buddha is meant here) is not, for he goes wherever he likes: he roams about in the sky (vyomante) and enters the earth (gāṁ). Dhiṭṭi concludes that all three of them should immediately go to him (the Buddha), or rather, make him their vāsarṇa. At the same time she is able to tell the others that the Buddha is residing in the park of the town of Magadha. After this follows a stage direction indicating the entrance of the Buddha.

Especially the way in which at the end of the scene the focus shifts to the protagonist’s entrance is reminiscent of the many interludes in Sanskrit plays. Often these scenes feature servants, or at least secondary characters. If we are indeed dealing with an interlude one may ask if the scene could not belong to one of the other plays included in the manuscript bundle. In this connection I would like to refer to a sloka found in the Śāriputraaparākaraṇa, which describes the Buddha accompanied by the eternal pair Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, on the one hand, and a third monk, Kaundinya, on the other:

\textsuperscript{10} See Lüders 1911a: 16-17.
\textsuperscript{11} See Lüders 1911b/1940.
\textsuperscript{12} See Lüders 1911a: 17: “Es [das Blatt] enthält eine Scene, in der drei allegorische Gestalten, Buddhis, die Weisheit, Dhiṭṭi, die Standhaftigkeit, und Kirtti, der Ruhm, im Gespräch miteinander auftreten” (my italics).
\textsuperscript{13} See Lüders 1911b/1940: 204: “Für den Nachweis, daß dies aus einer allegorischen Drama stammen, verweise ich auf meine frühere Abhandlung”.
\textsuperscript{14} For the text of the passage, see Lüders 1911a: 66-67.
\textsuperscript{15} nītyāṇaṁ sa suptaṁ iśvaṁ na buddhir asti nītyāṇaṁ sa mattaṁ iśvaṁ yad dhūṭiprahaṇaḥ ... sa ca iśvaṁ na kirttiṁ ... aśṭhaṁ iśvaṁ kirttiṁ.
Could it not be that the scene under discussion is part of this particular play and that the special relationship between Buddha and Dhiṭi in the scene is meant to mirror the one between the Buddha’s disciples Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana in the play, and the relationship between the Buddha and Dhīti, on the one hand, and Kirti, on the other, that between Śāriputra-Maudgalyāyana and Kauṇḍinya? Another question which arises is if the expression vāsavyāṣikurmanah is to be taken literally or metaphorically. In the former case we would be dealing with three birds or rather three flying beings (e.g. vidyādharīs)\(^{17}\) with names in accordance with their characters, flocking to the tree in which their “leader” is sitting.

Whatever is exactly the case here, it should be clear that there is no evidence of a complete allegorical play among these fragments of early Buddhist drama. The allegory is restricted to a short scene, which could well be part of a prelude or interlude and which as such would tell little about the nature of the play to which it belonged. If so, it is difficult for the allegorical compositions Upamitibhavaprāparicā Kathā and Prabodhacandrodaya to refer to specific earlier examples in Indian Kavya literature itself. In the latter two cases we might therefore have to do with a completely new development here, a possibility already suggested by Keith.\(^{18}\) This is not to say that the notion of allegory did not exist in India. The point is that within the Kavya tradition the idea to compose a text which is allegorical in its totality may well have arisen relatively late.

REFERENCES


\(^{16}\) Lüders 1911b/1940: 199 and 209.

\(^{17}\) Note the three vidyādharas in the Abhijñākathā (one of the so-called Trivandrum plays) describing from above the duel going on between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. For the interpretation of this and other such sets of three figures in the Trivandrum plays, see Tieken 1997.

\(^{18}\) See above, n. 8.
Osier 1994


Tieken 1993


Tieken 1997


Whitman 1987