

HERMAN TIEKEN

Aśvaghoṣa 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.¹ For instance, in *Muṇḍaka 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.² In the *Anugītā* in the fourteenth *parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* abstract concepts like *prāṇa* and *apāna* 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 belletristic literature,³ mention may be made of the *Upamitibhavaprapañcā Kathā*. The main characters in this didactic Jaina work, dating from the tenth century, are personifications of concepts like passions and sins.⁴ Another example, in which all appearing characters are personifications, in particular personifications of abstractions of Vedānta, is Kṛṣṇamiśra's *Prabodhacandrodaya*. This eleventh-century play has spawned a great number of epigones.⁵ Other examples of allegory from drama concern mainly minor scenes. They are found in the so-called Trivandrum plays, namely in the *Dūtavākya* and *Bālacarita*, in which, among other things, Viṣṇu's weapons make an appearance on stage.⁶ As the thirteen Trivandrum plays as a group can no longer with certainty be attributed to the pre-Gupta playwright

¹ The term *rūpātmaka*, as in *rūpātmakakathā*, "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 Olivelle 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 *Raghuvamśa* or the *Śiśupālavadhā*. 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. Osier recognizes a connection between allegory and propaganda (p. 284). According to him one of the functions of allegory was to liven up the long lists of terms typical of Indian religious doctrines and philosophical systems (p. 276).

⁵ See Konow 1920: 92-96 and Keith 1924: 251-256.

⁶ See Gail 1981. Other allegorical characters in the *Bālacarita* are consciousness and a curse.

Bhāsa,⁷ 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 *Upamitibhavaprapaṅca Kathā*, notes: “Wir müssen bis ins 11. Jahrhundert, bis zu Kṛṣṇamiśra’s *Prabodhacandrodaya* hinabsteigen, ehe wir wieder auf indischen Boden ein Drama finden, in den allegorische Gestalten, wie die Buddhī, die Dhṛti und die Kīrti sind, auftreten”.⁸

As noted, Lüders puts the Buddhist fragment on a par with the *Prabodhacandrodaya*, which is a completely allegorical play.⁹ 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 *Śāriputraprakaraṇa*, a play involving a courtesan, and an allegorical play. It should be noted that only of the *Śāriputraprakaraṇa* the colophon has survived, in which the play is attributed to Aśvaghōṣa, 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 *Śāriputraprakaraṇa* or the courtesan’s play. The leaf would have been added to the bundle later. At the same time, however, Lüders left open the possibility that the discolouring 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

⁷ Tieken 1993 and 1997.

⁸ Lüders 1911a: 25. Compare Keith, who wrote “We cannot say whether Kṛṣṇamiśra’s *Prabodhacandrodaya* was a revival of a form of drama, which had been practised regularly if on a small scale since Aśvaghōṣa or whether it was a new creation, as may easily have been the case” (1924: 251).

⁹ 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 Kavikarṇapūra’s *Caitanyacandrodaya* and the Jaina *Moharājaparājaya* (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.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.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",¹² in his next publication he switches without any further explanation from "scene" to "drama".¹³ In fact, we might indeed well be dealing with no more than a scene, more in particular a prelude or an interlude.

The scene¹⁴ consists of a conversation between three figures, who are named *Buddhi*, *Dhṛti* and *Kīrti*. The conversation, or at least the fragment of it that we have, begins with establishing the special relationship which exists between *Buddhi* and *Dhṛti*: *yatra hi buddhir avatiṣṭhate tatra dhṛtiḥ sthānam labhate yatra dhṛtir ādhīyate tatra buddhiḥ vistīryate*. After this, *Kīrti* seems to ask where she comes in. *Buddhi*'s answer has only partly been preserved: "he who has no *buddhi* is as it were constantly sleeping, he who has no *dhṛti* is as it were constantly drunk, and he who has no *kīrti* is ...".¹⁵ Next, with reference to a figure presumably mentioned in the preceding passage, *Kīrti* asks where (this) personified *Dharma* is at the moment. *Buddhi* 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 (*vyomni*) and enters the earth (*gām*). *Dhṛti* concludes that all three of them should immediately go to him (the *Buddha*), or rather, make him their *vāsavṛkṣa*. 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 *śloka* found in the *Śāriputraprakaraṇa*, which describes the *Buddha* accompanied by the eternal pair *Śāriputra* and *Maudgalyāyana*, on the one hand, and a third monk, *Kauṇḍinya*, on the other:

¹⁰ See Lüders 1911a: 16-17.

¹¹ See Lüders 1911b/1940.

¹² See Lüders 1911a: 17: "Es [das Blatt] enthält *eine Szene*, in der drei allegorische Gestalten, *Buddhi*, die Weisheit, *Dhṛti*, die Standhaftigkeit, und *Kīrti*, der Ruhm, im Gespräch miteinander auftreten" (my italics).

¹³ See Lüders 1911b/1940: 204: "Für den Nachweis, daß dies aus eine allegorischen Drama stammen, verweise ich auf meine frühere Abhandlung".

¹⁴ For the text of the passage, see Lüders 1911a: 66-67.

¹⁵ *nityam sa supta iva yasya na buddhir asti nityam sa matta iva yo dhṛtiprahṇa ... sa ca yasya na kīrtiḥ ... tiṣṭhati yasya kīrtiḥ*.

tribhiḥ śiṣyairi parivṛtaḥ śobhate mūnicandramāḥ
 . . . n . tri yukta iva candramāḥ

“Von den drei Schülern umgeben glänzt der mondgleiche Weise wie der Mond umgeben
 ...”¹⁶

Could it not be that the scene under discussion is part of this particular play and that the special relationship between Buddhi and Dhṛti 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 Buddhi and Dhṛti, on the one hand, and Kīrti, on the other, that between Śāriputra-Maudgalyāyana and Kauṇḍinya? Another question which arises is if the expression *vāsavṛkṣīkurmaḥ* 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. *vidyādhārīs*)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 *Upamitibhavaprapaṅcā Kathā* and *Prabodhacandrodaya* to refer to specific earlier examples in Indian Kāvya 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 Kāvya tradition the idea to compose a text which is allegorical in its totality may well have arisen relatively late.

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¹⁶ Lüders 1911b/1940: 199 and 209.

¹⁷ Note the three *vidyādhāras* in the *Abhiṣekanātaka* (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.

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