

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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On the Origins of Allegory in Sanskrit Literature: The Story of Purañjana

It is often noted in the study of Sanskrit literature that allegory, although often used by Indian authors, was not recognized as a distinct genre and it was in a sense “invented” by the famed Kṛṣṇamiśra in his drama Prabodha-candrodaya. In this presentation, I want to problematize both claims by analyzing an episode from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa that may be called “The Story of Purañjana” (Purañjanopakhyāna). Not only does the Bhāgavata weave most allegorical tropes from Upaniṣadic and related literature into a coherent story by way of personification that is commonly identified as the defining feature of allegory, it explicitly represents itself as allegorical – that is, as an adhyātma-pārokṣyam – and uses most of the markers of the genre that will become common in the later dramas. The purpose of the paper, then, is to bring the story to light as one that played a transformational role for the genre, facilitating its growth from allegorical tropes into full-fledged allegories.