



**Tatelman, Joel.** *The Glorious Deeds of Pūrṇa: A Translation and Study of the Pūrṇāvadāna.* Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, xii + 228 pages, ISBN 0–7007–1082–5 (cloth).

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**T***he Glorious Deeds of Pūrṇa* represents a significant contribution to the literary study of Buddhist texts, both by making available Tatelman’s original translation of this important but little-known Sanskrit story of *arahant* Pūrṇa (Pāli: Puṇṇa) and by opening up a provocative discussion of it, and of the study of Buddhist literature more generally.

The core of the book is Tatelman’s careful translation of Vaidya’s edition of the Sanskrit text of *Pūrṇāvadāna* (pp. 46–95), which is found in both the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* and in the *Divyāvadāna* (whence this version), together with supplemental translations of four parallel but by no means identical versions of the story of Pūrṇa, which exist in Sanskrit (*Pūrṇāvadāna* of the *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā*, pp. 192–199), Pāli (*Puṇṇovāda-sutta-vaṇṇanā* and *Puṇṇa-theragāthā-vaṇṇanā*, pp. 180–191), and Chinese (excerpts from the *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya*, translated by Mark Dennis and Joseph Dennis, pp. 200–205). Especially because the rich and diverse *avadāna* genre of Buddhist literature, of which *Pūrṇāvadāna* is a stellar example, remains so underrepresented in Western libraries and scholarship, the translation alone recommends this book to all individuals and institutions concerned with Buddhist Studies from any perspective. The literary flow, which Tatelman has captured in his attempt at translating not only meaning but also style (p. 169), makes this a particularly beautiful

translation, a characteristic whose rarity among Western translations of Buddhist texts bespeaks our comparative neglect of Buddhist literature as art, an underlying theme in Tatelman's book. Though we are blessed with an incredibly rich literary corpus, one would hardly know it reading many of the available translations.

But this book is also much more than a translation. Though not intended to be a philological exercise as such, the footnotes competently indicate alternate readings, parallels in primary and secondary sources, and other points that, like the translated but largely unstudied parallel texts in Sanskrit, Pāli, and Chinese, will be of interest to specialists pursuing further work on this text or the biography of Pūrṇa. What is more important, the introduction (pp. 1–45) and concluding remarks (pp. 169–179) raise generic and methodological issues, while an especially strong, lengthy third chapter (pp. 96–168) provides a roughly blow-by-blow “Study of the Pūrṇāvadāna,” which Tatelman approaches “first and foremost as a work of literary art, not unlike a literary critic might study a novel by Conrad or Woolf, [and] much as many scholars now study Biblical narrative” (p. 3).

Tatelman's main goal here is to demonstrate the validity of such an approach to Buddhist texts (pp. 169, 173, 176; cf. p. 162). Toward this end, his study lays out a smorgasbord of literary treats: names and narrative structures are interpreted allegorically (pp. 96–101); literary techniques like parallelism (pp. 103–104), symbolism (for example, pp. 114–117) and even humor (pp. 119, 153–155) are shown to be operative in establishing basic themes of Pūrṇa's superiority and the value of family unity (the latter representing no small feat in the biography of a Buddhist monk, see especially pp. 101–110); Tatelman fleshes out internal hints about audience (mercantile classes, p. 115), purpose (glorification of *Śūrpāraka*/ cult of Pūrṇa, pp. 134–140, 142, 156; entertainment, pp. 118, 131, 141), performative context (see, for example, the interesting discussion of the impact of Buddhist poetry, pp. 116–118) and intertextual relationships (notably with the early *Mahāyāna sūtras*, pp. 140, 151, 152), relating his takes on these points to other Buddhist texts, Buddhist Studies scholarship, and hard evidence like inscriptions; he highlights the subtle ways in which rather typical features of the *avadāna* genre become in the hands of this author creative avenues for dramatic character development or subtle reflection upon the nature of speech, and so forth.

It seems to me that this literary feast, based on “just eighteen pages of Sanskrit text” (p. 175), nicely achieves Tatelman's goal. His commentary certainly made me see a lot of nuance, cleverness, and texture in the *Pūrṇāvadāna* that I would otherwise have missed (p. 175: “[i]ndeed, it is the ease with which the reader follows narrative that may lead him or her to

overlook its richness”). Tatelman’s analysis drew me as reader into the narrative world of the text (pp. 175–176) and left me feeling that I really had confronted a significant work of literary art. This is especially true because Tatelman’s prose is full of insight and is eminently literary in its own right, loaded with wonderful turns of phrase and analogies (p. 14: as fully enlightened “spiritual hero” of *Śūrpāraka*, Pūrṇa is for its inhabitants “the Buddha, as it were, writ small”; pp. 104–105: as lay merchant before his conversion, the “Cinderella-like” Pūrṇa is viewed by his sisters-in-law as “a low-caste bastard who makes everything unbearable by being so exasperatingly capable”; p. 149: the former-life Pūrṇa revealed by the Buddha near the end of the narrative was like “a sort of irascible faculty dean, preoccupied with scrupulous preservation of the scriptural tradition and punctilious adherence to rules and regulations”).

Tatelman’s generic and methodological discussions are directed primarily at an unnamed mass of Western scholars who do not take *avadānas* and similar texts as seriously as this study would suggest they ought to be taken (pp. 31, 32–33, 39 n. 41, 45 n. 162, 162–163), betraying a defensiveness felt by many of us who have worked with these sorts of texts, at once so palpably central in the tradition and yet so thoroughly marginalized by previous generations of scholars. Because “the Buddha was not merely an early philosopher whose sober, rational message was later ‘mythologized,’ but a religious teacher for whom logic and legend, analysis and narrative, were equally valid modes of discourse ...” (p. 33), Tatelman argues (correctly, I think) that literary (intrinsic, bottom-up) analysis is a necessary complement to philosophical, historical, or other excavative (extrinsic, top-down) analyses (see especially pp. 28–32, 37), and, in places, he seems to suggest that such literary studies may be even more important than studies in those other modes (p. 33: “One of polemical spirit might even ask: will our understanding of Indian Buddhism be advanced more by the next five publications on Nāgārjuna or by the next five publications on the *avadāna* literature?”) Tatelman’s perception of “scholarly devaluation of narrative sources” (p. 31), and of the value potentially to be gained from its reversal, shapes his substantive thesis (which consequently is couched as an argument that these literary texts are crucial to the project of understanding Buddhist thought and practice, that a literature cannot be reduced to its generic structures, that doing literary analysis at all is worthwhile) and his methodological and generic suggestions (which consequently remain very preliminary).

Scholars primarily concerned with historical, philosophical, philological, and other excavated Buddhist Studies knowledges (which Tatelman sometimes juxtaposes too sharply, I think, with literary analyses)

already have developed (ever-changing and much debated) standards for judgment, sophisticated methodological discussions and perspectives, canons and the anthologies that support them, and other mainstays of sustained intellectual dialogue. The certainly still nascent, strictly literary approach championed by Tatelman—which will eventually produce its own excavated knowledges including literary methods applicable to all Buddhist texts, more holistic studies of the story of Pūrṇa and other individual Buddhist narratives, and a more mature understanding of the role played by narrative art in the rise, spread, and development of Buddhist thought and practice in general—will likely develop along similar, quasi-institutional lines. As it begins thereby to attain self-consciousness, the literary study of Buddhist texts will be able to make itself felt more widely, such that as Tatelman hopes “scholars ... begin to routinely apply the methods of literary understanding to the immense Indian Buddhist textual tradition as a whole, that which, together with architectural and epigraphic evidence, constitute[s] the foundation for all our investigations” (p. 177). This would clearly benefit all of us working with Buddhist texts, not only those who want to pursue literary studies as such, but also those whose answers to extrinsic questions about doctrine, history, genre, and so forth will be that much better for heightened literary sensitivity and nuance.

This book is based upon the author’s 1988 M.A. thesis (for McMaster University), and since that time the literary study of Buddhist texts already has exploded, with numerous scholars (who it turns out were developing their approaches at the same time Tatelman was developing his) now giving their attention to narrative as such, in a wide variety of ways. Twelve years after Tatelman wrote “that there exists no developed model or precedent for a literary (‘intrinsic’) approach to the study of Buddhist narrative texts” (p. 30), that is happily no longer the case. Tatelman indicates this fact in a long footnote added to the introduction (p. 44 n. 56) and in a long paragraph in the conclusion (p. 171—note how the list has grown here, though it still contains numerous curious omissions). Despite this suturing, the thrust of the methodological argument, obviously composed in that earlier situation, will appear a bit dated to some readers. Although there no doubt remain others who even today still need to learn the lesson taught so well by this book that they “risk oversimplified, even distorted conclusions if they are content to extract doctrinal or historical data [from Buddhist texts] without taking into account the narrative context, for very often it is this context which determines the broader implications—and therefore the true import—of a given statement or passage” (p. 173), those who are already engaged in forms of literary interpretation will immediately want to push such general perspectives further. It seems to me that the issue today is not so much

whether we need improved literary approaches to Buddhist texts, but rather just what that means in practice, which approaches are most likely to prove helpful, concomitantly how to adjudicate the range of possible approaches (and the interpretations they produce), and so forth.

Such developed methodological questions, understandably enough, are begged more than addressed in the book. The brief generalization the author makes about the relationship of his own approach to all of these others—that he focuses on a single work whereas they focus “on some historical reality or set of attitudes outside it” (p. 44 n. 146)—neither holds up under close scrutiny nor does justice to the rich diversity of literary studies of Buddhist texts that have already appeared. Likewise, a certain hesitation here to make conclusive statements—about the *avadāna* genre, about the status of narrative vis-à-vis other sorts of Buddhist prose, about the historical cult of Pūrṇa—will likely give way to bolder sorts of arguments as we come to know more about and thereby feel more comfortable dealing with *avadānas*, and Buddhist textual production and reception more generally, and pan-Buddhist narratives of the legends of saints like Pūrṇa. Indeed, sparking such progress is the whole point. Tatelman does not claim to have made a “virtuoso interpretive performance,” but “merely” to have shown “that there are many worlds and many works left to discover” (pp. 176–177). And that is a great service indeed. Even if his generic and methodological arguments do not prove as long-lived as his translation and study of *Pūrṇāvadāna* surely will be, just to have raised them in so straightforward a way will help catalyze future discussions. Toward this end, my sense is that this book would prove especially useful in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses where, again, it could both exemplify a literary approach to Buddhist texts and provoke the sorts of discussions that now need to occur.