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Nārada: Epic Narrator and Nārāyaṇa's devotee

Nārada is one of those epic characters in whom different textual functions converge. He appears as a character in different narrative frameworks established in the epic and is connected to the epic's ideological discourse through his status as a divine seer. The paper will discuss the following different functions and analyse their impact on the narrative structure of the epic: (1) Nārada is introduced in the epic as being the seer who recites the *bhārata* to the gods and is thus accorded the function of an epic reciter. (2) He is an epic character who is connected to the epic plot through episodes that are of special importance for the Pāṇḍavas and which show him in the role of a brahmanical advisor. (3) Nārada is one of the *ṛṣis* who occasionally join other epic characters in order to tell didactic stories. In addition to this, he connects different narrative settings, temporal and special frameworks by disclosing or passing on important information. (4) He is regarded by other epic characters as being involved in spreading theological messages and disclosing divine and semi-divine identities. Most renowned in this regard is the identification of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa with the two *ṛṣis* Nara and Nārāyaṇa, who are in turn embodiments of the god Nārāyaṇa. This identification has been considered by some scholars to be most important for understanding the "structural unity" of the epic, by others a "late interpolation" launched by those epic authors/redactors who have included the Nārāyaṇīya section in the epic. (5) Nārada stands centre-stage in the propagation of the mythology and theology of the god Nārāyaṇa, in particular in the Nārāyaṇīya section of the Śāntiparvan. In this text he is depicted as the master devotee of the god and is depicted in a role comparable to Arjuna's with regard to Kṛṣṇa as presented in the BhG and elsewhere in the epic.

Irrespective of one's position with regard to the position of the Nārāyaṇīya section in the composition of the epic, the figure of Nārada can be regarded as a "nodal point" in which different narrative levels and ideological or theological intentions converge. The analysis of the different functions accorded to Nārada will demonstrate how this epic character is connected not only to the recitation and narration of the epic, but also to the dissemination of certain ideological messages in the epic.