

THE TALE OF THE ELOQUENT PEASANT

**a semiotic reverse engineering
(first draft)**

by

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JUST TO AVOID MISUNDERSTANDINGS

I take it for granted that the reader be already fairly acquainted with the text or, at least, have it at hand, with one or more translations, in order to evaluate how acceptable my interpretations may be. Although I usually try to sustain them with specific textual evidences, I am also aware that now and then I may get stuck in the quicksands of speculation, thus the comparison with others' views might be an appropriate method.

I do not submit literal translations, unless in a few circumstances, where difficult or ambiguous passages need punctual elucidations or when my interpretations are substantially divergent from the common ones. In my reverse engineering, intended to reconstruct the scribe's creative process, I try to give form to a possible model (just one of the many) of which the validity should be judged through the lens of the structural coherence of each one of its micro and macro-components.

One thing must be clear: being just a self-taught amateur, in many of my guesses I might have just reinvented the wheel, if only because there is such an amount of translations, books, essays and articles that, having consulted only a minimal part, I cannot know how much of what I say has not yet already been treated by more titled and illustrious scholars.

As regards the texts I have consulted I submit no bibliography since that would take time, patience and a precision which I do not possess. And there would be no fun. The only exception is Parkinson's outstanding Commentary, which I think is a must for any researcher. True that in a few instances I disagree with his views (O dare, O dare!), nonetheless, I repeat, it's indeed a guiding light and a luminous parter of ways.

In any case these are no more than personal and preliminary annotations; and, since I would not like to be considered a plagiarist, I declare that any brilliant (should they ever be present) or acceptable insights have been influenced by external sources. The rest (which should have been silence), my *felix culpa*.

A PLAYFUL FOREWORD

*A man there was: Nebkaura
his name, he was king of the Black Land...*

A little adjusted beginning of the tale: would it make any sense? Let us put it this way: the king is informed, by trusty followers of his, whom he sent around to feel the pulse of the country, that something is rotten in the state of Egypt. There is a despicable custom among many members of the higher ranks of oppressing and abusing, more or less openly, people of the lower classes without fear of being punished, in most cases thanks to the connivance of those who should control and guard the stability and lawful conduct of the land. That's a well known common practice, what modern jurists and sociologists call "the normative power of the factual." But that, of course, creates unease and unleashes more or less vigorous protests amongst the victims, basically workers, artisans, peasants, common traders who constitute the economic backbone of the country. Their frustrations entail serious consequences on its social cohesion and, most of all, on its wealth. And signs of that gradual disruption are already under everyone's eyes. That is not what a far-sighted and discerning monarch can ever stand. He must stop that hateful misconduct letting everyone know that any crime will be severely punished not taking into account the rank of the one who is guilty of it; so that the victim may obtain justice, no matter how low her or his status is. In other words making "effective" the *Maat* that for many has become no more than an "abstract term", despoiled of any functional implementation. That would be indeed a revolutionary act trying to modify in its deepest roots the world-view and the acquired contemptible habits of many members of the ruling class.

But the king knows that it will not be such an easy task and, moreover, that a conduct imposed by constraint is fated to be neglected in no time. It is a cultural process that must be put into action and a good way to do that is making recourse to teachings. Not, though, those of the maxims or instructions which would mostly go unread and amount to nothing.

A literary tale might be a means of persuasion of much more effect and impact, showing a rapacious high ranked villain who commits a crime against an industrious and productive peasant; and how a virtuous public official, whom the victim has asked for justice, does severely chastise the wrongdoer, disregarding the biased advices of his mean counsellors, who, for mere *esprit de corps*, would opt for a lenient attitude.

Now, the scribe whom the king has made recourse to, does obediently lay out a first draft which, in rough terms, corresponds to the prologue followed by the epilogue of the tale as it has come to us. With a virtuous High Steward who does not deign to reply to his counsellors (*n wšb =f n nn n srw*), but immediately acts in favour of the peasant (*wšb =f n šhtj pn*) setting things in their right track.

The scribe, though, knows better than that. He humbly observes that such a tale would hardly leave a mark on a disenchanted audience which would listen to it with a patronizing smile, if not with an annoyed mien like wanton boys at a sermon. The high ranked hearers must be made aware of the dangers that their unjust conduct may cause to the land and, by consequence, to them as well: both to their wealth and, for what it may be worth, to their reputation.

To do that one should expose the many and various arguments, through concepts, images and examples which, by a skilled disposition, might catch the attention of the audience and exhort it to give a thought at what passes before its eyes. So the scribe suggests to make use not of a plain narrative form, but of a theatrical one, putting before the audience real and concrete characters, no matter how fictional they in fact are. In making his series of appeals the peasant would address his spectators, of which the High Steward is the representative.

It goes without saying that many “not virtuous” hearers have already seen before them humble petitioners begging for justice whom they have not deigned to lend their ears to, reputing them annoying underdogs unworthy of any attention, if only because their complaints were like tales told by idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. But now the specific underdog is endowed with an outstanding eloquence, as if his speech would come out from the mouth of the sun god himself; enabled thus to take his arms against the slings and arrows of outrageous officials.

Needless to say that this *impossible* peasant would represent the king's political and moral views (and that explains Nebkaura's enthusiasm in hearing them read to him [B2 131-132], namely seeing his ideals taking concrete form); being in the meantime the spokesman of common people in a class action against the expanding corruption of public office. The High Steward's silence at the end of each appeal would thus be a sort of invitation to the audience to give a due thought to what it has just seen and heard; and come to proper conclusions.

Played this way this piece would be an ante litteram example of an epic theatre, à la Brecht. But, of course, interpreted from a totally reversed perspective. Whereas in the Brechtian intention (e.g. *The exception and the rule*) those who suffer wrongs are urged to think about the injustice of the laws of those who rule and to act so as to discard the oppressive regime; in this case it is the rulers who are urged to think about a radical modification of their accepted habits so as to avoid social disorders and maintain the preordained *status quo*. Quoting the prince of Salina from Tomasi di Lampedusa's "Il gattopardo" (The leopard):

"Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi."
(If we want that everything stay as it is, it must needs change all.)

If, from a liberal (not necessarily Marxist) view, this may be seen as a cynic conservative manoeuvre of a patronising system; from that of an ancient Egyptian that was probably considered as an instructive and praiseworthy example of enlightened government.

THE GENERAL OUTLINE

There is no need of much scrutiny to infer that the main core of the tale is composed of the nine petitions igniting variegated reflections about *Maat*, namely Righteousness, both in its ideal aspect (Truth) and in its practical implementation (Justice), this last having in our case the amplest attention. However these reflections are not exposed as abstract meditations or, let us say, maxims; they are instead situated inside a dramatic (theatrical) setting so as to let the protagonist, the peasant, express them making use of all the tricks and tools of a studied rhetorical strategy.

As a matter of fact he who speaks is the scribe who seems to have quite a knowledge of the not yet categorized *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio* (*actio* and *memoria*, hélas!, that's not for us to see). But this potentially impressive performance needs a proper scenic design; and that is given shape to by the narrative blocks (prologue and epilogue) which frame the nine petitions as the *major* premise and the *conclusion* of an ethical and legal syllogism of which the petitions, paradoxically, constitute the *minor* premise. In rough terms: (i) greedy officials commit crimes; (ii) he who commits a crime must be punished; (iii) greedy officials must be punished.

It goes without saying that the narrative blocks perform a much more effective function within the theatrical setting, since they introduce the *dramatis personae* of the play, depict the crime and its scenery and in a couple of instances (shrewdly placed inside the petitions) point out dangerous developments which may potentially arise. It's a way to create the right atmosphere for the peasant's speeches, each one announced in a narrative form (And this peasant came to appeal... for the nth time), like a Brechtian placard or board. All this said let us get to the point.

PROLOGUE

The prologue may be roughly divided into four separate sections:

- 1) The peasant's preparation for his voyage to Egypt,
- 2) The peasant's meeting with *Namtinakhta*,
- 3) The peasant's meeting with the High Steward *Rensi*,
- 4) The meeting of *Rensi* with his counsellors.

1

This first section is composed of two major scenes: (1) the introduction of the protagonist and (2) the loading of the donkeys. They do not provide just basic informations about the story, but tell a lot about the peasant and his many good qualities.

family and six for himself. That shows how far-seeing he is. Knowing in advance how much barley is left, he instructs his wife about the *daily* quantity she must use for the family's nourishment during his absence: just *two* heqats, which should suffice. As for himself he will do with his *six* heqats.

One might wonder why the scribe has been so meticulous in depicting such a scene. Why not a plain "and he asked his wife to prepare him bread and beer for his voyage"? As above suggested I think that the intention of the scribe was to present not just fictional characters, but "real" people, showing them in their daily domestic tasks. But, most of all, to underline the good traits of the peasant's personality.

In fact we see how he takes care first of his wife and children, now called "hers" (*hrdw =t*), whereas in the beginning he called them "his" (*hrdw =j*). Once again a tender touch: during his absence it is the wife, whom he trusts, who becomes the chief of the household. Then, after having thought about the good of his family, he may think about his own provisions. As a truly concerned father and husband.

[1.2] [B1 1-15]

Then we have a detailed description of the merchandise the donkeys are loaded with. Leaving aside the ordinary natron and salt, we can see it is not common ware; in fact from the very unusual terms used to describe the items we may deduce it consists of rare and refined goods mostly for medical and ritualistic service, either cultivated (plants) or raised (fowls) by the peasant himself or acquired from traders or from expeditions in specific regions. All this pointing out the peasant's industriousness and his professional abilities.

And I would not exclude that the few references regarding his itinerary towards Herakleopolis be meant to show that he took a relatively safe course (the public route explicitly mentioned a little bit later) in order to avoid unpleasant encounters (thieves and marauders), as an experienced trader would do.

In conclusion we can see how these first two scenes describe a good father, a loving husband, an industrious, conscientious and accomplished worker.

Hinting perhaps at the fact (more explicitly stated later on) that people like him are those who build the country's welfare.

2

This section is also composed of three separate scenes: (1) the presentation of Namtinakhta, the villain; (2) the robbery; (3) the peasant's lament and his unheard protests.

[2.1] [B1 16-24]

The first image of Namtinakhta is that of a man standing (erect) on the bank of a watercourse that, as very soon explained, runs along the public road the peasant is marching on. As far as we know he might be a predator or someone with dubious intentions. But we are immediately told (and the peasant might have guessed from the man's attire) that he is a person of high rank, thus we may infer that his presence is a sign of security. Wrong guess! In an aside to himself he states clearly that, having knowingly esteemed the value of the little caravan, he must put his hands on it. This is the first example of "betrayal of function" that is one of the basic themes repeatedly pointed out in the petitions: how those who should guard the right course of the country turn into wrongdoers.

Now, should one be punctilious, one might detect a logic inconsistency in the course of the events concerning the time and the place of the meeting. It is evident that the trap is laid out because Namtinakhta has already seen the caravan. But that would presuppose a previous encounter about which the text gives no hint. Sure, he might have been informed by his private "intelligence"; but the text clearly says that *he* has seen the goods, thus the remaining hypothesis is that he himself did spot the caravan, unnoticed by the peasant, while he was surveying his estate. And that would give the scene a sarcastic touch, showing the "petty lord" as a sort of thief in ambush; which, by the way, hits the bull's eye.

But honestly I am sure the scribe couldn't care less about such a narrative trifle. What did matter to him was to depict the moral meanness of a man of power who robs a harmless one, an honest worker, justifying his abuse under the mask of ridiculous and pathetic pseudo-legal arguments, as properly shown in the robbery scene that follows next.

[2.2] [B1 25-55]

The sequence of events turns around a thematic pivot which underlines the difference between a subject, the peasant, who respects laws and hierarchy and another one, the lordling, who disregards them. When Namtinakhta orders the peasant not to tread on his sheet he acts against the law, since the road is a public one and the peasant makes that clear (*nfr mtrw =j*). Thus we see his lawful right course juxtaposed to the unlawful one of the other that thwarts it.

Nonetheless the peasant, aware of his lesser rank, diplomatically obeys. And when the villain tries once again to hinder his passage he replies with firm and sound arguments, but once again with due respect. We have no idea what the other would have said, since at that precise moment the donkey fills its mouth with his barley [as if to make clear that talking with such a figure would be a waste of time?]. I don't know whether the scribe meant that, but surely Namtinakhta, being himself a beast, understands the donkey's sneer and takes it as a *crimen lesae majestatis*, for which the ass must pay (*mk sw hr hbt hr kn =f*: he will tread grain for his bravery!).

Now the peasant himself is convinced that there is no way of coming to terms with such a petty lord and warns him that he shall appeal to someone of still higher rank, the High Steward Rensi, renowned for his justice.

And here the villain shows all his disrespect for his master who, not being present, is in fact nothing [B1 50-52].

This underscores another basic theme of the text: the difference between what should be the "ideal conduct" and its practical implementation. The absence of him who represents Justice (Rensi) lets the villain act as he likes. In this case harshly beating the victim and seizing his belongings.

Here we may detect an interesting allusion. The rod Namtinakhta uses to beat all the peasant's limbs (*t =f nbt*) is a tamarisk branch. The term is "*jsr*" closely related to "*jsry*", the name of the villain's father (a chip off the old block?). But "*jsry*" is "he of the tamarisk", with evident allusions to Osiris, found by Isis in Byblos, wrapped up by a tamarisk tree. This might once again point to the theme of the already mentioned "betrayal

of function”: the pseudo-Osirian aspect (*jsry*) of Namtinakhta’s turning into a Sethian one; the peasant’s beating recalling the dismemberment of Osiris. Not forgetting that, in this specific instance, the donkeys that the villain carries away may hint at the fact that, in many images, the “ass” is a Sethian animal. All this subtly pointing out that Namtinakhta’s action is smeared with a foul and sacrilegious taint.

[2.3] [B1 56-63]

This perverted Osirian aspect is sarcastically underlined in the scene of the lamentation of the peasant, threatened with death by the villain who is ready to send him to the land of the lord of silence (Osiris, lord of the dead) should he not stop his protests.

This introduces another basic theme, namely the *passive acceptance of wrongdoings* that the elite feels entitled to expect from those of lower status. And this may also be an anticipation of a biting criticism regarding the concept of “silence”, which, according to shared convictions, should be a sign of profound wisdom.

3 [B1 64-73]

Being given no attention by Namtinakhta the peasant decides to be heard by the villain’s superior, the High Steward Rensi. This is the portrait of a trusty subject who is still confident that true Justice will stand at his side; who, aware and as yet respectful of hierarchical differences, shuns from bothering directly the lord, asking only to expose his case to a follower of his: a *trusty* one!

Rensi’s positive reply does not only show his commendable attention (as expected from a thorough official) but also his professional skill. In fact he wants his *trusty* follower to make a full investigation about the case (*hr mdt tn mj ks =s nb*) so that his verdict be based on solid proofs.

4 [B1 74-82]

At a cursory glance this section might appear just as a narrative expedient so as to prepare the entrance of the full shaped block of the nine petitions. Things are somewhat more relevant. We see first the difference between a

diligent official (the High Steward) who has full knowledge of the facts and a group of counsellors who, knowing nothing, take the side of the villain only because he is a member of a higher class. Right of hierarchy, right or wrong!

And this is the very point, since the *honest* High Steward himself, although knowing the facts, takes his time to give a verdict which should redress the peasant's suffered injustice through immediate punitive actions against the high ranked villain.

What are the reasons behind his hesitation? He has not yet been ordered by the king not to give an immediate verdict. Rensi is known for his firm stand against thieves, as the peasant has previously stated [B1 47-9]. We are probably entitled to think that his renown came from due actions against crimes committed inside the same class; or done by a lowly commoner against a member of higher rank. In other words: a higher rank oriented justice.

This seems the first case of a commoner who has the guts to appeal to him asking for redress against a higher ranked villain. A central theme that will be amply exposed in a passage of the eighth petition [B1 329-331]. Up to that moment fear and trembling did not allow that a commoner dare to make his protests heard. The elite would consider it as a lack of respect, marking indeed a reversal of perspective that could entail serious "constitutional" changes. A concrete modification of the "normative power of the factual".

This is the end of the prologue giving the start to the series of the peasant's petitions, criss-crossed at the beginning by a couple of narrative intrusions with specific intents that will be accordingly explained.

THE NINE PETITIONS

Less trenchant, perhaps, than Gardiner, who stated that "*the nine petitions are alike poverty-stricken as regards the ideas and clumsy and turgid in their expression*", not few modern interpreters share basically the same opinion, although trying to condone the deficiencies through historical, sociological or extra textual justifications.

As a matter of fact Gardiner had sound reasons since he looked at the petitions from a philosophical perspective and he could find no more than a couple of general arguments beaten about with annoying insistence (*the metaphors of the boat and of the balance are harped upon with nauseous insistency*). But in my humble opinion it was *his* perspective that was utterly distorted.

The petitions are not meant to be abstract philosophical lectures, but a rhetorical means of persuasion; discursive tools to be used in a very specific setting: a court of justice with a petitioner who must convince an (apparently) negligent judge to give a verdict. True, of course, that the petitions will teach a moral lesson; not, though, through well refined worked out series of intellectual reflections, but in *corpore vili*, the one of the abused peasant.

Looked from this angle their sentences are not vaguely picked out and randomly assembled to form an aesthetic body of linguistic virtuosity, with no regard to logic contradictions or hazardous juxtapositions. Unusual syntactic solutions or played up wordplays are not just meant to surprise and to please the ears of the audience, but to catch the High Steward's attention when pointing out specific facts or actions. What rhetoric calls "elocutio" (at least a sort of). We must never forget that the speeches of the peasant are not monologues, but parts of dialogues with a deuteragonist who replies with the language of silence. Repetitions of figures or images are not virtuoso variations, but ways of giving them different semantic weights inside dynamic readjustments.

Let us take for example the "boat and the balance" of which Gardiner speaks. They are not just abstract metaphors for Maat. The boat, with its right course, is the *ideal* Maat (Truth), the strategy. The balance is the *effective* Maat, (Justice), the tactics, the concrete actions that the helmsman must do, in specific circumstances, so as to avoid that the boat go adrift. These two images, sometimes by themselves, sometimes paired, are used by the peasant, throughout his petitions, to mark different states of things and to invite the High Steward either to readjust his course and reflect about his function and/or to get into action before reaching the point of no return, fatal both to the country and eventually to him himself. All this forming a part of a general strategy of persuasion.

Now this strategy should be scrutinized from two different perspectives: that of the omniscient scribe, who laid it out in a nine stations progress, knowing in advance what arguments and images to use (*inventio*) and how and where to place them (*dispositio*) so as to reach his intended conclusion. The other perspective is that of the peasant who, unaware of the result, must each time devise his own strategy using rhetorical tools which he deems fit, in the hope that his petition will succeed and be the last.

THE SCRIBE'S LAYOUT

It is possible to find in the nine petitions an Ariadne's thread that links them in accord with a logical sequence. We may start noting how the first and the last ones are not petitions in the strict sense of the term. True that in both of them the peasant asks that his wrong be redressed, but in the first one his request is exposed somewhat marginally and without any particular vehemence, as taking for granted that justice will be done as a matter of course. In the last one there is indeed much vehemence and emotional participation, but engulfed by the disheartening awareness that once again justice will be thrown aside. An initial *act of faith* and a final *declaration of mistrust*.

Inside this "idealistic" frame the remaining petitions may be grouped into two sections [2-3-4] ↔ [6-7-8] linked by a sort of hinge [5] marking the shifting from the first semantic field, centred around *social motives*, to the other, specifically concerned with *individual traits*. In any case the two sections share the same architectural structure marked by three semantic captions: **betrayal** [2/6], **connivance** [3/7] and **ruin** [4/8]. Let us give a cursory look (that will become much more close in the specific analyses).

BETRAYAL

[2] The High Steward's attitude underlines the non-fulfilment of the duties of his social function.

[6] The High Steward's attitude underlines a moral individual debasement from the nobleness of his rank.

CONNIVANCE

[3] The non-fulfilment of social duties results in more or less direct crime incentives.

[7] The moral debasement is a sign of indulgence towards one's own defects showing both meanness and total incompetence.

RUIN

[4] The explosion of crimes results in social disorder, with consequent ruin of the land.

[8] Meanness and incompetence cause loss of reputation, tainting of the name with consequent eradication from collective memory. An individual catastrophe.

If this working hypothesis makes some sense we may also infer what was the scribe's measures as regards the assessment of moral values. Although he starts describing the merits of social functions, these are less important than those of the individual, markedly underscored in the second section. This is exactly the mental and psychological itinerary of the peasant who, in the course of his way stations, gets gradually aware of his decreasing faith in the High Steward: first as a public official then as a person, an alleged nobleman fated to shame, disgrace and eternal oblivion.

This progressive comprehension works as a sort of dialectical sieve that the peasant uses in picking up right arguments for each petition. Which is indeed a mark of scribal skill. The story goes on "as if" it were the peasant who lays out his own strategy of persuasion; "as if" the author were just an external observer.

THE PEASANT'S PROGRESS

As already said we should look at the peasant's speeches not as abstract reflections. Even when they seem to be general maxims they are always situated inside his dramatic confrontation with the High Steward whom he

invites, more or less patently, not to lose sight of the specific crime he is appealed to judge and of the way of his conduct. This is evident from the very start.

THE FIRST PETITION [B1 83-102]

The peasant's address to the High Steward is not just a conventional homage. "*wr n wrw*" (great of the great ones → greatest one) underlines his superior state, he is the point of reference, the authority and arbiter (*sšmw*) of "*jwtt ntt*" (all that is not and that is). This expression is usually considered a conceptual description of totality, but the fact that it is the negative trait which comes first (the reverse of the common rendering) is probably an allusion to the legal cause under scrutiny. "*jwtt*" is "what should not be", namely the crime; and "*ntt*" "what should be", namely the state of justice.

Having the authority to redress the wrong, that is what the High Steward should do, but has not yet done. And that may explain the reason of the dubitative "*jr*" (if) which precedes the series of eight images [B1 86-91] describing the catastrophic results of not sailing along the safe route of Maat. A sort of remainder to Rensi who, not giving a prompt verdict, runs the risk of taking a dangerous devious course.

As for the lake of Maat one must not consider it as materially separated from that of falsehood. There is only one existential watercourse, with many possible routes. That of Maat is the true and safest one.

Now, we may note how this brief introductory section is built in accord with the above mentioned tripartite structure. In fact the High Steward's devious route (his delay) is the *betrayal* of his expected attitude; the description of the increasing ship damages may be a metaphor for the growth of crime caused by an implicit *connivance*; the final wreck an allusion to the *ruin* of the country: a waste land which is the opposite of the one marked by wealth and abundance, reached "if" following the rightful course, as shown in the next series of images [B1 92-93].

Once again we may find here a possible hidden meaning behind the literal description which tells about fish (*rmw*) caught (*šn^cyw*) in the nets, going towards the boat of Rensi (*jw n =k*), as if glad to be seized [?!]; and of his

In fact the subtly worked out line “*hzy hzz hzyw*” (praised one, whom the praised praise) follows the just said invitation to do justice (*jrj m3t*), as if highlighting the fact that he who does it is definitely “rare”, exactly as that highly sophisticated turn of phrase. A discreet linguistic brown-nosing.

Moreover this is the moment when the peasant makes an explicit reference to himself. Until now the centre of his attention has been Rensi, whom he has addressed in an apparent laudatory tone (but which probably did mask a hidden reprimand) so as to gain his benevolence. At this point he tries to touch his sense of humanity: he must be not only the High Steward who overcomes the state of need (*dr s3jr*), as his function commands, but a man who must look at him (*mk wj*) as a suffering human being (*3tp.kw*), who must be taken into due account (*jp wj*) since he has a human value (*mk wj*) which a villain has trodden upon, causing his loss (*m nhw*). Thrice “*wj*” to underline his personal weight. Thrice “*wj*” to underline his “plurality”: the spokesman of a wronged humanity.

This juxtaposition “public function / individual values” reflects the above mentioned basic themes around which revolve the two juxtaposed blocks of the petitions: [2-3-4] vs [6-7-8].

FIRST NARRATIVE ENTR’ACTE [B1, 102-118]

At this point the scribe inserts the first narrative intrusion: apparently it seems an instrumental intervention necessary to justify the peasant’s remaining petitions caused by Rensi’s forced inaction. But things are somewhat more subtle.

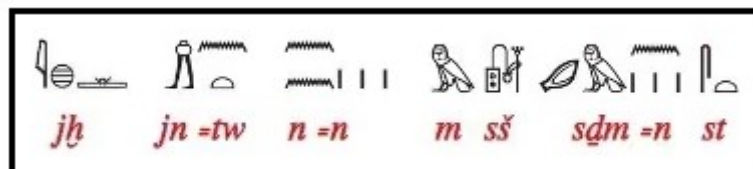
What are indeed the motives that urge the High Steward to meet the king? Is the peasant’s eloquence just a means of entertainment, a remedy to tediousness? Is *Nebkaura* such a fatuous monarch and Rensi his pander? I’d say no!

When the king decides that the peasant must keep on with his pleading, his immediate concern is about the nourishment first of the man’s family then of the man himself. And he is one who is informed of the ways of the common peasants: which says a lot about the king’s vigilant attitude towards his subjects, regardless of their rank. A caring sovereign.

The fact is that Rensi is aware of the importance of the case and how his verdict may modify, in a certain sense, the “constitutional asset”. That’s why he has to consult with the king. The peasant’s perfect speech (*mdt nfrt*) is not just a show of linguistic elegance, but a sound and coherent reflection about justice, its effective application and the social disruption which may result by devious conducts.

That’s what triggers the king’s attention. Since the peasant is endowed with the ability of expressing the complaints of the commoners (we will come to know that he is a sort of vocal medium of Ra himself [B1 350]), putting him under pressure may be a useful, although cynic, way to write down sincere lists of grievances and take the appropriate measures.

This may explain why the king addresses Rensi with a very peculiar “*m mrr =k m3 =j snb.kw*” (as you wish to see me in good health) [B1 109]. If we dismiss a possible idiomatic “Do me a big favour” we may interpret the king’s health as the health of the country, of which he is the symbolic representative. And this may also explain his use of the plural “*n*” (we) when he commands that the peasant’s speeches, written down, be brought for a public hearing [B1 101]:



not his *(=j), but ours (=n). They concern not just himself, but the land in its entirety.

Another interesting trait as regards the king’s wisdom is the fact that the peasant must not know that it is Rensi who provides for his sustenance. Otherwise there might be a conflict of interest and he could be less firm in his criticism.

Now, for what concerns the food there might be a punctilious question. We know that Rensi gives provisions to a “friend” who in his turn passes them to the peasant. But the text does not specify who this friend is: Rensi’s or the peasant’s? Personally I think that the scribe did not care a jot; in any case there might be several reconstructions. A couple of them, just for fun:

(1) Rensi asks a friend of his (thus a member of the elite) to send a servant to bring daily food to the peasant, telling him that *some good people* stand at his side.

(2) Rensi has an “anonymous” servant (not one of his own, so as not to be recognized) be sent to the peasant’s friend [who lodges him in his house?] telling him to pass to the peasant daily bread and beer provided by *good people* who stand at his side.

And it could not be excluded that the peasant might think that the food is coming from *people of his own class*, who see in him their spokesman. He would speak then as invested with social responsibility, even putting at risk his own safety for the general benefit.

Now, before leaving this entr’acte I think we should spend some words about a topic that, as far as I know, has not been taken into much account. What about the High Steward, compelled to be silent, thus to act against the righteousness which is the foundation of his name and renown? His reputation tainted by suspects of bribery and greed; his promptness and skill bogged down in the quicksands of negligence. He himself must play the role of a sacrificial victim, like that of the peasant, although from a different view. True that the audience knows what is all about, but in his confrontation with the abused petitioner he must suffer, from a personal stand, the scourge of collective moral disdain. He has to accept the burden of becoming the scapegoat of a debased, degraded, outrageous elite. All that for the wealth of the country!

THE SECOND PETITION [B1, 119-170]

Since his first petition has obtained no results the peasant must modify his rhetorical approach. This time he leaves aside abstract concepts and gets to the heart of the matter. The case must be handled in its raw materiality. This is manifest from the very exordium [B1 119-123].

The “*wr n wrw*” (great of the great ones) of his initial greeting is totally different from the same words of the first petition, where greatness was

a sign of glorious superiority; in this case it refers to Rensi's power and authority, backed by his superior wealth. Concrete *factual* evidences.

The boat that was a poetic metaphor for the righteous course of Maat here becomes the material "rudder" which then morphs into a "*s3w*" that may be the support-beam of the flat table on which lies the earth (Egypt), but more probably the "shaft" of a real, solid balance which must measure the weight of the evidences placed on its pans; the plumb-line (*f3y*) of the following verse hinting at the necessity of an unbiased standing. That is the professional instrument of the High Steward, who must act in accord with his official function, thus *not* against his duty. Here we have the first clear evidence of the concept of "betrayal" which constitutes, as explained above, one of the components of the triadic structure of all the petitions.

It seems evident that this introduction is a veiled reprimand of Rensi's inaction. And the peasant thinks important to have him recall the facts, namely that a member of the elite has robbed a helpless worker, who, having no master, is without defence [B1 123-24].

What comes next [B1 124-26] it's somewhat puzzling: a severe attack against greed which seems addressed to Rensi, since the peasant uses the second suffix pronoun (*=k*). But that can hardly make sense. If, later on, there may be some hints about possible hidden collusions, such a suspect, at least at this moment, is indeed premature. However if we put these lines inside a theatrical setting, things will take their proper place.

The peasant recreates, in front of the High Steward, a virtual Namtinakhta, who becomes the target of his attacks that depict him as a mean figure, who not only robs defenceless honest workers (like the peasant), but pays his own dependants with minimum supplies of bread and beer, although his storerooms are filled with every good provision. Thus a despicable subject, an ignoble lordling who debases nobility.

Now comes the attack against Rensi [B1 127-134]. Leaving, as yet, such a villain unpunished is a sign of his carelessness in securing justice and in not taking measures against the crimes of most public officials whom he should supervise. A *betrayal* of his function, which lets malfeasance grow (expressed by a series of four censurable conducts), thus *connivance*, although indirect. A negligence that creates suffering (*ruin*) in the victims

of such wrongs. A negligence which is itself a deplorable, condemnable wrong.

This criticism causes Rensi's harsh reaction [B1 134-35]. He warns the peasant not to trespass the limits of respect lest he be severely punished. But that triggers in its turn the peasant's bitter reply [B1 136-39]. It is not *he* who trespasses the rules, but those (and here comes a new series of bad examples) who have been appointed to be their guards: *this* should be the High Steward's concern; whereas his slackness (**betrayal** of function) lets malfeasance grow (**connivance**).

But the peasant has still hope that Rensi go back to his former rightness (*jw bjz r st -f nt sf*: may the good deed come back to its place of yesterday) and stand at the side of industrious people, who constitute the wealth of the country [B1 140-42]. A series of three images of productive workers juxtaposed to the just seen high-ranked parasites, who are the cause of the **ruin** of the land, made tangible by a sequence of gloom and disheartening views [B1 142-45]. All made possible by Rensi's carelessness.

At this point the peasant makes a marked turn of perspective, temporarily setting aside the High Steward functional aspect (*public* official) so as to put under scrutiny the *personal* one [B1 146-170]. The relevance of this change is marked by the use of a puzzling hapax-legomenon (*nb*) entangled by wordplay with an ambiguous rendering of a verbal form (*nb*).



This has been a topic of scholarly lengthy discussions, which I will not enter into. What I wish to point out is how an unconventional syntactic solution is used to capture the audience's attention when introducing a significant discursive change.



At any rate, should someone be curious about my interpretation, I submit some notes written down while I was working on my amateurish vocal rendering.

An *ḥnbrwnian* excursion

The term “*ḥnbrw*”

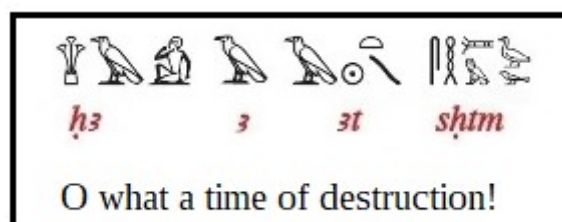


at the beginning of column 146 of the Berlin papyrus (B1) has always posed a lot of problems and many scholars have preferred and prefer to leave it alone considering it an untranslatable *hapax legomenon*. Many others opt for a vague “basket” due to the V19 determinative, often used with such “containers” and also to the fact that “*ḥnb*” may refer to a reed-stalk and “*ḥnbyt*” to a “measure” for it:

 *ḥnb* reed-stalk for matting, Urk. IV, 1124, 7 (det. taken from *ḥnbyt* below).
 *ḥnbyt* measure for the above, Barns, Kam. pl. 24, 20.

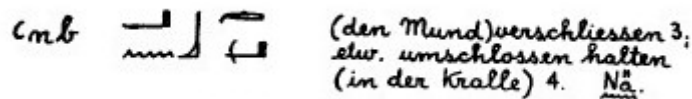
Considering that the High Steward is the official who should “measure” the righteousness of people’s conduct that may be a legitimate guess, although somewhat far-fetched. Thus one cannot help asking: why did the scribe make use of such a “fabricated” word? If the idea was that of “measuring” why didn’t he choose a more common term? The fact is that a lexematic “creation” is intended to express, within a unified image, an amount of meanings that would otherwise require a more ample use of sentences and paraphrases. But such an “idiolectic” word-formation possesses value only inside a very specific context and in accord with the “unorthodox” intentions of its author.

In our case the peasant expresses his discontent for the High Steward’s silence. Since he does not give a verdict and does not punish the wrongdoing that a person of “high rank” has committed against a commoner he contributes, with his guilty negligence, to the decay of the social order, about which the peasant has just given a disconsolate view:



Thus the peasant makes use of an imaginative and mordant term to point out the High Steward's "muteness". At least that is my highly questionable working hypothesis.

I have chosen to split the term into "nb rw", where "nb"



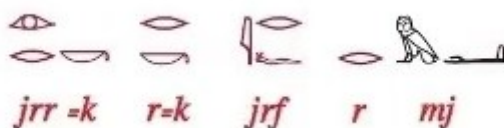
might be read as "to shut, to lock, to close up" (is it a coincidence WB's allusion to the mouth [*den Mund*]?) One might say that in our case the two determinatives are missing, but inside the "lexematic creative process" that might be permitted, since the new word expects the reader's reverse engineering.

The same applies to my reading of "rw". There are two possible views. It may be a "constructed" plural form of "r/r3" (mouth, speech), although the normal graphic rendering should be



But there is a more interesting interpretation if we read "nb-r(3)" as a participle (he who shuts the mouth/speech), with "w"(G43) being a suffix that transforms the participle into a noun (lexicalization). As regards the determinative, the V19 (hobble for cattle) would stress the general image of "enclosure" and hindrance. In conclusion that would be a sort of sarcastic *new title* that the peasant does forge for the neglectful Rensi.

Sarcastic touch made even more evident by the studied cacophony of the line that follows:



where the multiple "r"s may indeed echo the "r3" (mouth/speech) of the previous line.

Thus in my tentative translation I myself made use of what I think may be a *hapax legomenon*, namely “*speech-lock*”, with an evident ironic subtext. The High Steward is not the one who “shuts up” the peasant’s speech, but his own!

I am aware that my “not educated guess” may be even more far-fetched than those who are more prone to the “basket”. Nonetheless I ventured to advance my reading hypothesis, following Master Gardiner’s saying:

“Even a wrong idea is better than no idea at all, and progress in translation can only come by presenting to the critics some definite objective to tilt at.”

End of the ‘*nbrwnian* excursion

Getting back to our discourse we see how the peasant opts for a change of tactic, putting at stake the High Steward’s reputation, his personal traits. His hermetic silence is the sign of a total disregard of others’ rights, but that is something that will finally turn against himself, tainting his name. Having forsaken any trait of human compassion he turns his strength and authority into a display of arrogance [B1 146-156], as if implying that he cannot waste his time on petty trifles. But that is the Folly of Power. In fact the peasant identifies him with two divine evil figures: *Khety* the crocodile and the *Lady of Pestilence*: what depth psychology calls *positive psychic inflation*, namely a megalomaniac arrogation of god-like powers.

But I wonder whether the identification (vividly described via a triplet of capricious snapshots) with the Lady of Pestilence [B1 151-52] hide more subtle and sarcastic meanings, recalling what Adlerian psychology defines “emasculatation”, that is the debasement of man’s masculinity. Thus the morphing from ultra-virility (*Khety*) into fickle femininity.

That is what *Rensi*’s name and his reputation would be likened to, should he not get back to the earthly level he belongs to and take actions against the villain. He has still time to set things in order, distancing himself from those who commit wrongdoings [B1 152-55].

And once again the peasant does focus Rensi's attention on the heinous robbery (not just a moral example, but a material fact) which has no justification since it has been committed by a wealthy person; and only out of greed, not out of need, deserving thus to be punished. Once again not abstract morals, but factual evidence.

Unfortunately there is no sign of answer; so the peasant keeps on with his attack [B1 156-160] pointing out how *shallow* the High Steward is, content and gratified by his luxurious life, betraying both his noble status and in the meantime the social function which the king bestowed on him, namely helmsman of the country that his negligence lets go adrift. And he should know that his ambiguous attitude does concern not only the direct victim, but it is in the mouth of public opinion that condemns it as unacceptable.

Nonetheless the peasant keeps hoping that the High Steward have still the fierceness of pronouncing a right verdict, distinguishing himself from the squalid mob of high ranked malefactors who surround him and make falsehood grow [B1 165-70]. And, aware that his criticism has been very caustic and biting, the peasant ends his petition [B1 160-65] trying to smooth the rough edges off, in retrieving and praising the positive traits of which Rensi's immaculate fame has been, up to then, adorned.

THE THIRD PETITION [B1, 170-224]

Since the High Steward keeps being silent the peasant must find out a new strategy of persuasion. It is not a question of topics, since he has already used the best at his disposal: **betrayal** of official function, direct or indirect **connivance** with general malfeasance; with consequent social disorder and final **ruin** of the country. As regards the personal figure: vicious tainting of one's own reputation. Thus what he has to do is to expose these arguments with more figurative impact.

As for the official function he highlights its "sacral aspect" [B1 170-79]. It is not just a social instrument, but the mirror of divine intervention for the land's benefit. While in the previous petition Rensi has been equalled to a pair of disrupting gods (Khety and the Lady of Pestilence) here he represents the beneficial sun-god (*Ra*) and the fertilizing Nile (*Hapi*), whom he must not disfigure through improper conduct that would stain

his reputation and erase his name from the memory of the posterity. Acting against Maat is sacrilege. That's why the peasant points out the specific crime, of which he has been victim, asking that the villain be punished (as divine Maat expects).

Then he starts with an expanded description of a balance [B1 179-185], which we know is the practical implementation of the ideal Maat; but its tilting is also a clear reference to the High Steward's sacrilegious misconduct (tampering with the instrument of the impartial Thoth) that will unleash an explosion of negative criticism (rendered with an image of multiplying reeking weeds), namely the abused people's reply to his inadmissible negligence and from which he cannot escape, compelled to smell its stench.

We should note how this is an amplification of the worried *vox populi* of the previous petition, when public opinion could not understand why Rensi acted that way (*jšst pw ntj jm* : What's all about?) [B1 160]. That unanswered question gets here its foul smelling (reeking weeds) reply.

And once again the peasant points out how Rensi's improper conduct in that specific instance (Namtinakhta's crime) does let malfeasance grow, since, thrice implored to act, for three times he has refused to [B1 185-87].

This gives the start to a syntagmatic image of an oscillating balance: the contraposition of sentences with contrasting ethical weight [B1 187-195], as if placed on the parallel pans of a virtual scale.

The just seen "watering" of the field of falsehood is counteracted by a series of *four* figures of straightforward sailing, recalling, but in more practical terms, the navigation through the lake of Maat of the first petition.

A positive trait counterbalanced by *four* negative imperatives, warning Rensi not to betray his good nature, letting it be prey of falsehood.

There are then two figures that explicitly refer to a balance, itself explicitly referred to the High Steward, merging them into a unique character (*mk tw m tp wꜥ ḥnꜥ jwsꜥ* : look, you are one with the balance), so as to underline Rensi's concrete duty.

Then, once again, the “oscillation” theme: a naval route which must not be deviated (strategy); and a subtle reconstruction of “alteration of measures” (tactics). This needs a little elucidation.

The text says: “*m j̄t jr rk r j̄tw*” (Do not take, but act against he who takes). At first sight an exhortation not to rob, with a vague hint at connivance. However inside this figurative context (the balance) I would not exclude that “*j̄t*” (take, seize) be referred to the subtraction (of weight) from one of the two pans. And in fact what comes next [B1 196-198] is, once again, a detailed description of the balance where “plummet, weight and arms” are equalled to Rensi’s “tongue, heart and lips”.

As already suggested the figure of the balance refers to the effective implementation of the abstract Maat: “theoretical” Justice put into practice. That is why the peasant has given voice to this plethora of “balanced” images, entreating the High Steward to be faithful to his “holy office”. Should he not do that [B1 199], should he betray his function he would also betray his “noble” nature becoming the worst of the scum.

And the peasant does juxtapose to the previous amount of images a new one composed of 8 portraits of mean and despicable characters, to whom Rensi would be compared [B1 199-210], should he not perform his duty.

It is possible that number “8” be not just a coincidence. That is the number of Thoth, patron of *hmnw* (Hermopolis) : *hmnw* = 8. And Thoth is the god who controls the “weighing of the heart”, that is the balance. Being like such “hateful eight” Rensi would play indeed the role of a blasphemous *Anti-Thoth*.

Unfortunately for the peasant the High Steward pays no attention and turns his back to him, going we’ll soon see where. This dismissive indifference triggers a resentful reaction [B1 211-15]: at this point the peasant is sure that Rensi’s inertia does not come from carelessness, but in force of personal profit. And he warns him to stay on alert, since truth will come to light and he will not get away with it.

As a matter of fact his last admonition [B1 214-15] looks like a threat:



“Do not make plans for a morrow which has not come, yet. One cannot know what evil be in it!” A possible allusion to social revolts against a despicable governance.

As it is this petition might end here, having coherently fulfilled its task. But the scribe appends to it a second narrative mini-block which gives rise to a few interesting observations.

SECOND NARRATIVE ENTR'ACTE [B1, 216-224]

First of all the readers/hearers/spectators are informed that the petition has not taken place in the courthouse, or in a room of the palace where the High Steward carries out his office (*ʿrryt*); but in front of it.

There are scholars who assert that petitions were in fact held in open spaces. But why then the scribe felt the need of highlighting it? It's more probable that the peasant had planned to make his case widely known to a public audience, whose presence might perhaps be a stimulus to Rensi's inaction. In a certain sense a sort of legal ambush; masked, though, by the glorious address to the forthcoming High Steward escorted by his noble entourage [B1 171]. As a matter of fact behind his laudatory praises the peasant might hide his sarcastic view of a bunch of parasites drawing near, aboard what does look like a parody of the boat of the sun.

But the reason of this narrative intrusion into an already accustomed petitionary setting, causing the audience to modify the perspective of its receptive approach, comes probably from the menace hidden behind the above mentioned last admonition. The scribe wants to make his audience lend an attentive ear; to give the coming scene a closer look.

In itself the story is plain: feeling outraged in his office the High Steward commands that the peasant be whipped. He cannot loose his face in front of his subjects. But the audience sees and realizes how the peasant suffers the same pain that the villain did inflict on him. He certainly did show a lack of respect, but amply motivated by an unjust treatment, masked by

hypocritical pretexts. The possibility that verbal protests might turn into violent riots must be taken into account since the results might indeed be unpredictable. And an occasional whipping would not settle the question.

Thus, the vehement and furious invectives of the abused peasant [B1 218-24], although apparently against Rensi, are in fact hurled at the attending elite (readers, hearers, spectators) of which the High Steward is the symbol and which the scribe has invited, through a literary sleight of hand, to readjust its point of view.

As regards the images that the peasant uses in his bitter censure, once again they may be divided into two groups. The first series (four of them) describes the social disruption within a community without a guide. Thus the “betrayal” of social function. The second group is composed of three portraits of corrupted public officials (personal debasement) of increasing social status: a sheriff, a mayor, an overseer of a district, probably hinting at Rensi, whom the peasant obliquely accuses of betraying his father’s good example. In fact he addresses him not by his name (which he has evidently lost) or by his title, but by his parental lineage: “son of Meru”.

At this point having ascertained, at his own painful expenses, the High Steward’s reticence in redressing his wrong, one might expect that the peasant give up and disconsolately come to terms with the rotten state of things of which Rensi is the representative. But the peasant is made of tougher stuff. Now it is not only his own destiny which is at stake, but that of the collective whole. He refuses to abandon the battlefield where civic and moral values run the risk of being wiped out.

THE FOURTH PETITION [B1, 225-256]

The beginning of this petition is different from the others. In fact we are immediately told (as a micro narrative queue to the previous entr’acte) where it takes place: in front of the temple of *Heryshef*, patron god of Herakleopolis. Once again a sort of ambush, but, being in a sacred space, it is possible that the peasant might feel relatively safe.

A second and more relevant difference is his way of addressing Rensi. There is no “High Steward” (loss of title) and no “my lord” (loss of authority), but a sardonic “*ḥzw ḥz tw ḥry-š =f*” (O praised one, Heryshef will praise you), as a sarcastic parody of the sincerely felt “*ḥzj ḥzz ḥzyw*” (O praised one, whom the praised praise) of the first petition [B1 100], when he had still faith in the High Steward. A mocking praise the god bestows on Rensi, who has been so pious [sarcasm] in paying him a visit.

Contrary to the common reading “from whose house you have come” (*jj.n =k m pr =f*) I interpret “*m*” as “in”. The basic idea is that, according to the peasant, Heryshef praises (sarcastically) Rensi because he has come (*jj.n =f*) in (*m*) his temple (*pr =f*). Probably implying that he comes not so often, showing his unconcern about religion (and consequently about good conduct). In fact that visit might be a hypocritical homage balancing his profanation of the sanctity of the scales of Maat described in the previous petition.

One might object that the regular visit to Heryshef’s temple is a specific duty of the High Steward. But that would not change the basic meaning. Regular visits might just be annoying routine for an “unfaithful” official.

What comes next [B1 228-36] might be even imagined as the god’s reproach to the High Steward, whose negligence is causing the ruin and waste of the land, devastated by social disorder and increasing pain.

This disheartening vision is followed, without an apparent logical nexus, by two semantic blocks, themselves apparently alien to each other. There is first the description of a hunting scene of which Rensi is the main actor. Then a series of reflections about the damages that may come from too hasty decisions.

As a matter of fact there is a logic and solid link which fits everything together if we look at these images from a sarcastic perspective. The exciting hunting scene [B1 236-38] juxtaposed to the just shown social decay is the evidence of the carelessness of the High Steward’s, who puts his personal pleasures before his social duties and prefers catching animals instead of criminal beasts.

As regards the reflections about inconsiderate and too hasty decisions [B1 239-43], that looks like a series of ludicrous arguments for excusing his slackness and his guilty inaction. The most sarcastic maxim being perhaps the one that exhorts to learn from the “silent man” (silence was in fact considered the very mark of wisdom). At least this is my interpretation of



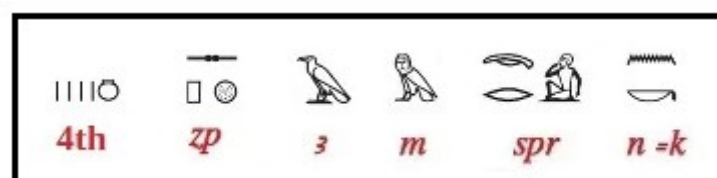
(Direct your choice towards the good that the silent man transmits.)

After this sour and sarcastic block, hoping it did hit the mark, the peasant gets back to seriousness [B1 244-45] in his desperate attempt of redeeming the devious Rensi, pointing out again how his misconduct lets malfeasance grow, causing to humble subjects unbearable sufferances [B1 246-50].

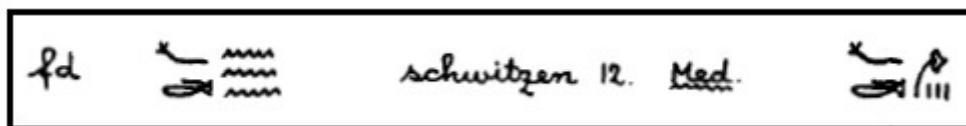
A misconduct that is already under everyone’s eyes [B1 250-51], shown by three images of mean and contemptible figures looked (*mk tw*) at the moment of their chastisement. However a misconduct from which he has still time to get free, recollecting his former virtues (helmsman, life giver, defender, shelter, protector) that he has guiltily betrayed [B1 252-55].

The end of this fourth petition [B1 256] hints at multiple meanings. The peasant asks Rensi if he must keep on pleading all day along. In it we may pick up either a disconsolate sorrow for a hard to come verdict; or again bitter sarcasm, making clear that he will not stop with his insistent, demanding and sacrosanct appeals.

And I wonder whether the reference to number 4



may hide a subtle nuance. Its vocal rendering comes from “*jfdw / fdw*”. There is, though, a verb “*fd*” meaning “to sweat”



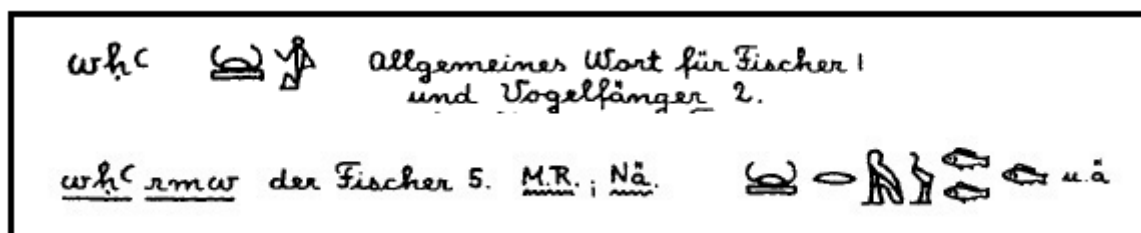
Might it be an allusion to the peasant who will keep with his petitions no matter how tiresome and sweaty may they be? That would in fact explain the peculiarity of his next appeal.

THE FIFTH PETITION [B1, 256-270]

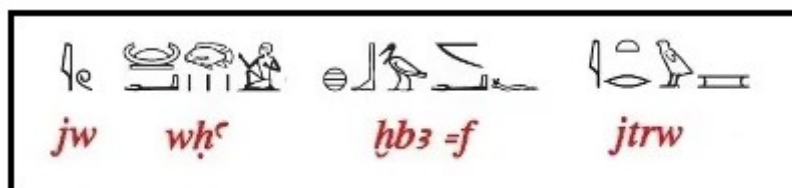
What comes first to one's attention is its peculiar beginning if compared with the other petitions. They in fact start either with a direct and varied address to the High Steward (regarding both his moral and his official aspect) or with abstract reflections about righteousness and justice. Here, on the contrary, we are directly plunged into a detailed scene describing fishermen who catch specific kinds of fish using appropriate, professional techniques. A visual documentary.

Now, the previous meeting took place in front of the temple of Heryshef, on which premises, as far as we know, was located a sacred lake. Thus we may imagine that the peasant, having once again received no answer, stubbornly keeps on with his pleading. And, inspired by the sacred lake, appends this petition, without solution of continuity, to the previous one, which ended with the image of a threatening crocodile. A sort of tail which might thus justify its relative brevity, the few lines of its composition.

As said above it begins with a series of *five* (resonating with the *fifth* petition) fishing "snapshots" [B1 258-62]. The first four are characterized by a one to one correspondence between the fisher and his specific fish, each one indicated by its identifying term. The fifth snapshot shows instead a vague figure expressed by a not specialised word (*wh^c*),



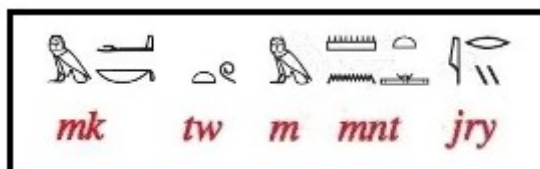
which, according to its determinative, may be applied either to a fisherman (Fischer) or to a bird-catcher (Vogelfaenger). Thus a generic hunter, who, not by a coincidence, is a ravager (*hb3*) of the fishing environment (*jtrw*):



This division is made even more evident by the use of the particle “*jw*”, which precedes the first group of four and is mirrored in the last line:

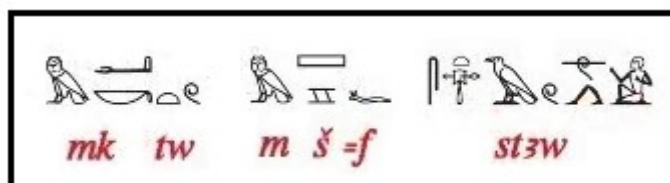
jw hwdw hr hc m mhyt
 nyw hr sm3 jy
 st-rmw hr h3h wbbw
 d3bh w r p3krw
jw whc hb3 =f jtrw

The first four might be considered as an ideal company of professional fishermen juxtaposed to the unscrupulous profiteer (*whc*) concerned only with his own advantage, regardless of the damages which he can cause to the water fauna. This last one is the figure whom Rensi is compared to:



A compound image that blends together “betrayal, connivance and ruin”. Triadic structure re-exposed in reverse order, in the last part [B1 262-64]. We see first the image of humble people, in fact the productive layer, starving to death (**ruin**) because of his complicity with the predators, described by a second series of images (**connivance**) [B1 265-67]; all that caused by his conscious distortion of his social duties (**betrayal**) [B1 268-69].

The last line of this petition [B1 270] adding a further nuance:



The most common translations render it as: “Look, you are his lake – you who drag (under)!” Where “=f” is referred to the wretched whom the High Steward should protect, as a dam against the flood [B1 268].

But I am tempted to read “*m š =f*” as “(j)m(j) š =f” (*Yamyshef*: he who is inside his lake), namely he who hides in the water (as a crocodile) with predatory intent.

That would be a direct juxtaposition with “*hrj-š =f*” (he who is over his lake), namely *Heryshef*, the benevolent god of the previous appeal. Thus the betrayal would not be only an offence against justice in its earthly and social aspect, but a blasphemous action which turns divine Goodness into demonic Evil.

The reverse order of the triadic structure, ending thus with “betrayal”, is probably a way to underline the passage from the High Steward’s social function to his individual figure which, in the second group of petitions (6-7-8), plays the main role, becoming the target of a new rhetorical strategy which the peasant will make recourse to.

THE SIXTH PETITION [B1, 270-298]

This change of perspective is made evident from the very beginning, describing not just the beneficial effects of a righteous conduct, but more particularly the glory that adorns the figure of a virtuous leader [B1 272-278].

The first lines [B1 272-73] show a subtle stylistic nuance worthy of note.

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>nb sjs =f grg</i> | a lord debases Falsehood, |
| 2 | <i>shpr m3't</i> | (being) he who delivers Truth, |
| 3 | <i>shpr bw nb nfr</i> | he who delivers perfect Goodness, |
| 4 | <i>shtm bw-[dw]</i> | he who destroys Evil |

We see two “evil images” [1,4] embracing two “good ones” [2,3] which are “delivered” (made come to light) from the unwholesome womb by the virtuous man.

The giving (*jn =k*), in fact the High Steward's *inclination*, should be in favour of his fellow (*sn-nw*), namely a "human being"; not in favour of someone who is a voracious animal (*wgyt* : he who keeps chewing) that follows no rightful course.

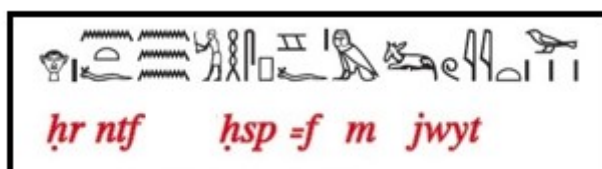
That might even hide a subtle subtext. "*sn-nw =k*" may be the *authentic* Rensi (his twin), momentarily disfigured by his misconduct, whom the *distorted* Rensi should bring back to his former shape, preferring him to the greedy beast (*wgyt*) that is trying to gulp him down.

The next block of lines [B1 285-288] shows how an improper and devious conduct may lead to disastrous results. But more than the economic ruin it is the moral and the social decay which is highlighted. People loose faith (ethical separation) in the institutional asset, compared to a ship fated to wreck because its captain has chosen a deviating course for reasons totally unknown (*n rh.n =tw wnnt m jb*). Which might be indeed an ironic scribal wink to the audience, showing how the unaware peasant can hardly find a motive that goads the High Steward to act in such an inconceivable way.

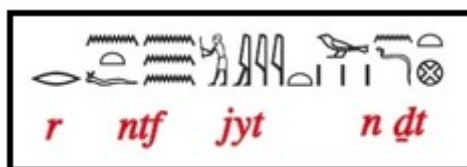
To describe the institutional breakdown the peasant makes use of a series of nautical images [B1 289-291], as he has already done in other petitions. But in this case there is a more detailed description of the ship falling apart and of its goods scattered everywhere or robbed by predators. The metaphor for a nation going to pieces, prey of aggressive neighbours. And all that because of an unworthy captain/leader. And it is this *unworthiness* that the peasant underlines, in the hope that this taint of his name might put Rensi again on the right track.

There's in fact a series of images [B1 292-93] that show his former good traits (wisdom and skilful practice) which he betrays, debasing his nobleness to the level of the lowliest of the common people and becoming a guide to crookedness.

The final lines [B1 294-96] depict a scene of "watering of evil" (*ntf jyt/jwyt*), already used in the third petition [B1 185-86]; but here it is given a more ample and, in a certain sense, metaphysical treatment. The garden (*hsp*) may be seen as the one of universal values contaminated by evil (*m jwyt*):



Although not specifically expressed, we may get this sense from the concluding sentence (its *jyt* mirroring the other's *jwyt*)



where “*dt*” may refer not just to an earthly estate [Faulkner, C.D.], but also to eternity. In fact the unorthodox O49 determinative (city) instead of the common N16



may have been used on purpose in order to mark the passage from an earthly to a higher level, showing the watered evil expanding throughout the universe, hinted at by the O49 determinative where the city may allude to the eternal (*dt*) domain.

A further complementarity is given by the preposition “*n*”, which may be legitimately read both as a genitive (the evil of the estate/eternity) and a dative (the evil [transmitted] to the estate/eternity).

In both cases, no doubt, a hyperbolic image, but functional to the peasant who makes use of it in order to show Rensi the enormity of his misconduct that would stamp on his name the brand of *damnatio memoriae*, or even worse, its total erasure from the memory of the posterity.

THE SEVENTH PETITION [B1, 297-320]

The peasant keeps working around the figure of the virtuous leader, briefly shown, in a sort of remainder, as helmsman of the country and dispenser of

Justice, pointing out his social function [B1 298-9]. But when combined with Thoht as his twin (*sn-nw*) it seems evident that it is Rensi's personality that treads on the fore-stage.

The peasant first describes the difference between a broad-minded virtuous leader (*ʒw-hr*) who listens with due attention to the claims of those who ask for justice and the narrow-mindedness (*hw^c-jb*) of the one (i.e. Rensi) who acts with hostility (*šnt-jb*) and guilty prejudice [B1 301-02].

This is the way I interpret the last two sentences of this block [B1 302-03]. Let us see why. The first one says:



The verb “*w3*” does basically point to “bad thoughts”, which may be read as “making evil plans” or “brooding”. A hostile attitude (prejudice) that comes before the manifestation of the “event”: in this context the petition, with its uncomfortable traits (alluded by the pun *jjt* [come] / *jyt* [evil]). A preventive dismissal of an annoying disturbance.

As regards the second sentence



“Do not rejoice about what has not yet come into being”, in this context it seems definitely puzzling. There is in fact a possible explanation if we consider it the parallel member of a binary sentence, since both parts share the same basic meaning: an undiscerning preconceived conclusion.

But I would not exclude an allusion to Rensi's wishful thinking (his rejoicing) that the peasant give up. What has not yet happened (*ntt n hpri*) would hint at the end of the petitions, which would be indeed a relief for the sullen High Steward.

And this could also explain the next three lines [B1 303-04] which, taken at face value, would be just an abstract maxim without a logic link with the preceding sentence. Let us have a look at them:



Forbearance prolongs friendship,
crossing out a misdeed that has happened
without knowing what was in the mind (the reason why).

Inside the peasant's rhetorical strategy this utterance acquires an important significance. Assuming a friendly attitude the peasant tells Rensi that he is ready to let bygones be bygones, considering his questionable conduct as a momentary weakness caused by inscrutable reasons. Provided that he take, of course, the right actions against villains, whose violence lets no humble man survive [B1 305-06].

Thus he would do that Justice of which he is the earthly representative, winning back his reputation. That's a way to tell the High Steward that he has not yet reached the point of no return, although he is on the verge of it.

And in fact what comes after [B1 307-12] is the explosion of the peasant's frustrations (shown as a devastating flood caused by a breach in a dam) spread out in front of Rensi who, at this point, cannot come up with vague and untenable excuses.

He must think [B1 312-15] about the nefarious consequences of his negligent attitude, a clear sign of connivance with his own defects. His blameworthy tolerance of wrongdoings will create him enemies. And he should not expect that they be like the peasant who expresses his protests through harmless speech; or chicken hearted malcontents who have not even the guts to speak in front of him, uttering their dissent from the safe door of their houses. Implying that dissatisfaction might unleash violent revolts.

He must think about the fiery brand of ineptitude stamped on his name, shown by a series of six images [B1 316-318] depicting how virtuous leaders do correct defects. Capability that Rensi does not seem to possess!

A lessening of personal values repeated in the final lines [B1 319-20] that describe the extraordinary deeds of authentic public officials; from whom Rensi, with his incompetence, stands miles apart.

THE EIGHTH PETITION [B1, 321-357]

The central theme of this petition is the juxtaposed contrast between “Greed” and “Justice”, the first one leading to the ruin of one’s name and to eternal oblivion; the other to glory and everlasting blessedness. These are the two arguments of which the peasant makes use in order to show Rensi the catastrophic consequences that will fall on him and on his name in force of his misconduct.

This contrast is present from the very beginning [B1 322-24] where are mentioned from one side *avidity*, fated to failure; and, from the other, the rightful conduct of him who should render *justice* to the victim of wrongdoings. This is a sort of abstract that is then expanded on.

There is first a reference to the excess of Rensi’s wealth, followed by the description of the malfeasance of the public officials who should guard law and order [B1 325-29]. A not so implicit way to state that the High Steward is colluded with them.

But the peasant makes clear [B1 329-31] that he will not put up with that and will keep defending his rights although his insistence might be considered a lack of respect and turned against him; and no brother of his (one of his class, one of the market place) be allowed to come to sustain him.

Now I am perfectly aware that this interpretation is highly questionable; and this is one of those cases where its degree of validity must be verified through a close linguistic scrutiny. Thus I submit the hieroglyphic text with my tentative translation (pardon my English) and subtextual paraphrases.

n rd .n snd -k spr n -k

The fear that you inspire would not let making appeal to you?
Do you think I'd be afraid to speak with you?

n sj3 .n -k jb =j

You cannot read my mind!
You do not know me!

gr 'nn sw r jrt tswt n -k

The humble man who turns back to raise his complaint to you
He who'd better be silent, but has instead the guts to keep coming back asking for justice

n snd .n -f n tw3 n -f st

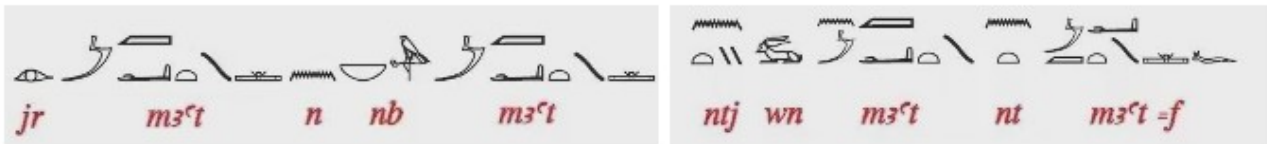
he is not afraid that this act may be retorted against him
he does not mind to be considered a pest and treated accordingly

n jn sn =f r =k m hnw mrri

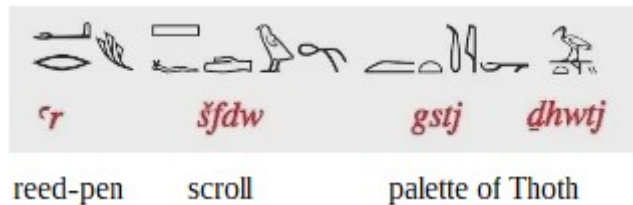
although no brother of his will be brought in front of you out of the street
although no one of his rank is allowed to come to his help

That's indeed a surge of pride that puts the peasant's dauntless personality in front of the High Steward's corrupted one, portrayed through a series of images [B1 331-334] showing his unrestrained desire to increase his already enormous wealth through the help of devious means.

In accord with the above mentioned pattern (greed/justice), to this avidity are juxtaposed a series of images [B1 334-337] centred around the figure of Thoth, who is seen as the *effective* manifestation of the *abstract* concept of Maat. This is in fact my interpretation of these lines.



Rensi is exhorted to do (*jr*) the justice of the lord of Justice (*nb n m3't*), who is (*ntj wn*) [namely] the (effective) justice (*m3't*) of his (ideal) Justice (*m3't=f*). No matter how grammatically questionable the basic meaning of my translation is that the High Steward is urged to act in accord with the teachings of Thoth : the god who, presiding the weighing of the heart, is the effective manifestation of the metaphysical ideal of Truth and Justice. And Rensi, in his function, is that god's representative:



[By the way: Thoth is the patron god of *hmnw* (Hermopolis) and *hmnw* is number 8 and this is the eighth (*hmnw*) petition!]

But what is more important is the personal benefit that his just acting will bestow on him, namely everlasting good memory, after his earthly demise. All this through a series of triumphal images [B1 337-342] describing death, safe descent in the realm of the dead and good remembrance on earth. In other words the blessedness of eternal Maat juxtaposed to the caducity of mundane pleasures.

Once again this is my interpretation of a very thorny passage [B1 337] liable to multifarious fireworks of translations. Here it is:



I read "*nfr r=f*" as an active participle, thus "he who is good with respect to himself", namely one who selfishly act for his own good. So the good (*nfrt*) that comes as the result of selfish actions, is indeed good (*nfr*). In conclusion: "Good is the goodness of him who is good for himself."

But this is of course the momentary pleasure fated to dust. Juxtaposed to it [B1 338] is the eternal Maat (*m3ʿt r nhh*).

So the peasant gets back to the point with two images [B1 343-44] of a *balanced* balance, metaphor for the correct and unbiased application of justice; but implying that, at that moment, Rensi does not act in accord with it.

In fact he asks him [B1 345-47] what should be the right attitude of a judge towards any petitioner: dutiful hearing, negligent silence, open hostility?

It is evident that, at the time being [B1 347-50], Rensi follows the last two items, showing no human concern for one who has been wronged. The fact that he has not been the material author of the crime does not make him less guilty, since knowing that the victim's words are true and clear, as coming from the mouth of the sun god himself, he has not taken the due and right measures, thus showing himself as a blasphemous brute. Once again a fierce attack against his personality, followed by an exhortation [B1 351-53] to turn back to the domain of the sacred Maat, prerequisite for blessedness.

And in fact the final lines [B1 356-57] make clear allusions, masked by rhetorical questions that condemn biased judgment, to the High Steward's compromised position which will lead him to ruin, whereas he who bears *momentarily* "the unbearable sorrows" (read: the peasant) will eventually reach his goal, implying Maat's ineluctable victory against misconduct.

THE NINTH PETITION [B2, 91-115]

Although apparently built in accord with the structure of the common petitions, this one is very different since it lacks their basic aim, the hope of being redressed from the suffered wrong. It is instead a sort of summary, the denunciation of Rensi's misconduct, through the repetition of images already used in previous pleadings, as a disheartened remainder. At this point the peasant has lost any faith and he has no other resource left than taking his leave, but not before having shown to the High Steward both his meanness and his predictable ruin in what looks like a bitter parody of the literary genre of wise teachings.

In the very beginning [B2 92-94] we have the balance, equated to the tongue of people (*vox populi*), which will weigh Rensi's conduct. That is a very similar image to the one exposed in the middle of the third appeal [B1 196-8], where "plummet, weight and arms" are equalled to Rensi's "tongue, heart and lips". Of course from a reversed perspective, since now it is the judge who is under scrutiny.

The next section [B2 95-99], describing Maat that intervenes as soon as Falsehood starts rising so as to clamp down on it, is a remainder of the concept expressed also in the third petition [B1 213-14] (The secret of Truth will be found and Falsehood pinned down to the ground) and at the end of the fourth one [B1 250-52] (Ill-advise, look, you are reached! Know-nothing, look, you are questioned! Water-bailer, look, you leak!)

Following this comes in fact [B2 100-103] a series of images showing the inevitable ruin of the official who, for greed, adheres to falsehood. That expands with more impact the concept expressed at the end of the previous petition [B1 356-57] (A mean conduct won't reach the haven), stressing, though, the existential void and the sterility of rapaciousness. It works as the opening bracket of an ethical slot that engulfs cross references to the High Steward's contemptible behaviour.

There are then three images [B2 103-5] recalling the sarcastic considerations of the peasant about the gravity, the calm and the pondered reflection an official must make use of before giving an answer, described in the fourth petition [B1 239-43]. Pathetic arguments for excusing the inexcusable delay.

Then comes a section [B2 105-07] enlarging the theme expressed in the third petition [B1 199] (If you cover your face in front of the violent one who will ever castigate evil?) condemning willing blindness before wrongdoings.

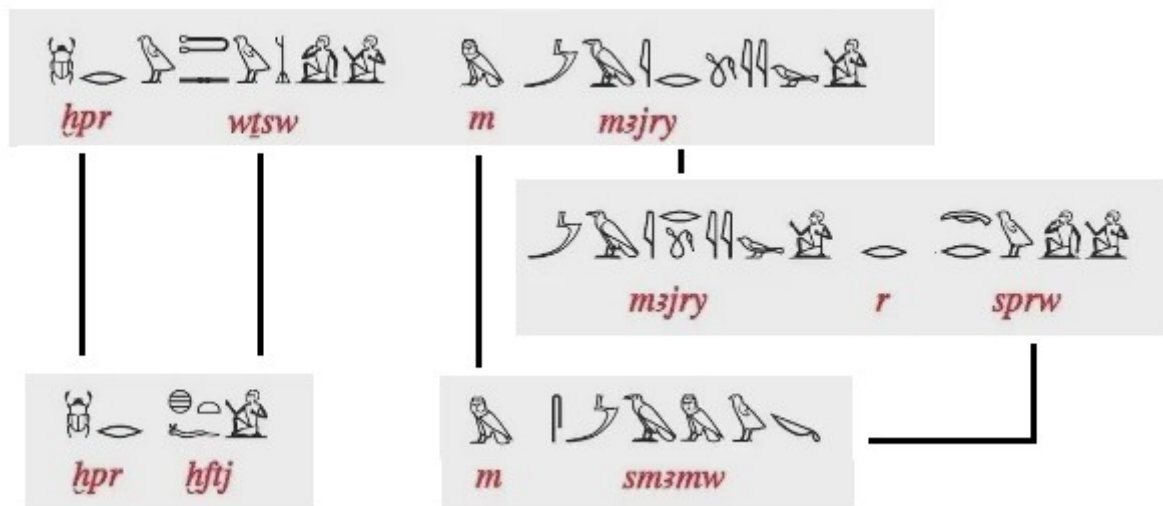
And then [B2 108-109] images reminding those of the second petition [B1 142-5] pointing out how officials should protect and stand at the side of industrious people. Followed by the urging to let a man defend his right cause as already expressed in the eighth petition [B1 324].

Sequence ending with the warning [B2 109-11] that greed, primal cause of misconduct, does not bring any advantage to him who is led by it, but only

nauseous contempt, ghastly loneliness and an endless state of anguish. Stressing once again the theme of personal ruin and closing, thus, the bracket above opened in [B2 100-103].

At this point [B2 111-115] the peasant has nothing more to say except drawing bitter conclusions, which however allow concomitant, but contrasting readings.

They are composed of two groups of images. The first one [B2 111-113] is particularly sophisticated in its exposition as if inviting the reader to give it a particularly attentive look; or the audience to lend an attentive ear to the speaker's intonations stressing syntactic parallelisms.



A first interpretation may describe the peasant's acknowledgement of his own defeat. When he who accuses (*wtsw*) becomes a wretch (*m3jry*) [since he has been ill-treated] and the wretch [is compelled to become → "r"] a petitioner [who asks for justice], then he turns into [is considered] an open enemy (*hftj*) [because of his disrespectful insistence] and treated as a beast that must be sacrificed (passive *sm3mw/sm3w*).

But the last line might be seen from a different angle: the exasperated petitioner, turned into an enemy by the wrongdoings he has suffered, may become a murderer (active *sm3mw/sm3w*) [either by making his own justice against the villain, or becoming a rebel against the state].

The other group of images [B2 113-115], that ends the petition, may as well be read from two different standpoints. The literal meaning poses no problem: since Rensi does not want to hear him, the peasant makes clear

that he'll go plead to Anubis telling him about the High Steward's hateful misconduct.

Now, a good many scholars agree in reading it as a manifest allusion to suicide. That might have some plausibility were it not for what takes place as soon as the peasant has gone away for good [B2 115-118].

He sees two guards (probably the same who gave him a harsh beating in the third petition) coming after him and he is deadly afraid thinking that they will castigate him, once again, for the speeches he has dared to utter. The objection that his fear comes from the fact that Rensi, getting him back, would prevent him from committing suicide is hardly tenable. That would be, at the most, a temporary hindering.

Thus I am of the idea that his allusion to Anubis be a way for the peasant to assert his total lack of faith on earthly justice and that at the moment of the weighing of the heart, from which of course Rensi cannot escape, he [his neglected case] will be a witness for prosecution.

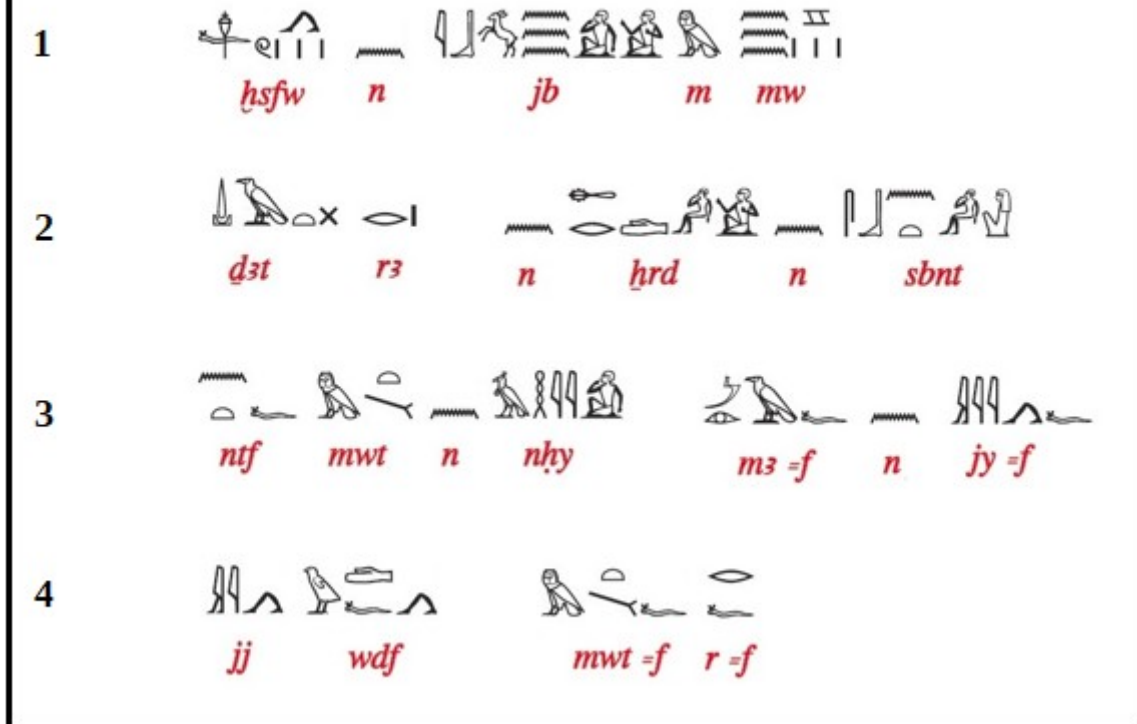
Now, these two different views jump once again on the stage in a very ambiguous passage of the epilogue, which we'll presently put under scrutiny.

THE EPILOGUE [B2, 115-140]

Here we go back again to the narrative level. Convinced that the peasant will not keep on with his pleadings, Rensi decides that the game is ended. And, as above anticipated, he sends two of his guards to fetch him back so as to explain to him what was it all about [B2 115-116].

But the peasant is afraid of an incoming chastisement [B2 117-118].

And here we come to our difficult passage [B2 118-122], which can be read either as an aside or as a bitter reflection in front of Rensi.



Now, the first two images (a thirsty man yearning for water; a nursling yearning for milk) are clear references to a wished-for “saviour” and pose no problems. The same cannot be said for the last two lines that give vent to a lot of translations. In any case I think that most, if not all, interpreters agree that the basic idea is that of a wished-for “death” seen as a rescuer, but delayed in its coming: in accord with the suicide theme.

As Miriam Lichtheim renders it (just to have the general idea): “thus is a longed-for death seen coming, thus does his death arrive at last.” In other words the peasant accuses the High Steward of delaying his proposed suicide, that is: his existential liberation.

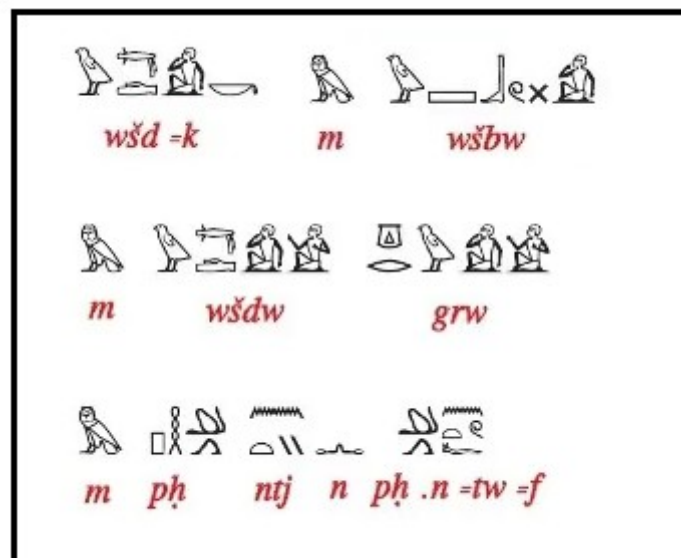
However, unless the peasant had already thought about a possible suicide (but there are no textual evidences sustaining this hypothesis) it seems to me that this *irresistible* wish to put an *immediate* end to his life be at least somewhat exaggerated. And in any case it would not be much impaired by a little time wasted in a further talk with Rensi. Adding that there are two textual evidences depicting the peasant’s fear. The first one when he sees the two guards, the second retrieved by the High Steward’s assurance that he should have no fear (*m snd shtj* : Do not be afraid, peasant!)

Needless to say that my interpretation is totally different from the most common ones; but it can have some sense only if my translation of the third and fourth lines be grammatically acceptable.

In my view, “*ntf*” (the *comfort* of the first two lines) is like death (*mwt*) for him who is expecting (*n nhy*) to see it (the comfort) coming (*m3 =f n jy =f*); but, instead of that comfort, what comes (*jj*) is the “delay” (*wdf*), which, in the meantime, is indeed his “physical” death (*mwt =f*) coming against him (*r =f*). An allusion perhaps to the *enemy* put to death at the end of the ninth petition [B2 113].

Interpreting the metaphor: the comfort is the “ideal” Rensi, whom the peasant hopes to see coming at his side as a saviour. But, on the contrary, he who comes is the “crooked” Rensi (the delay / delayer) who is indeed his death: the end of his hopes for justice and probably of his life too. That is why he is afraid.

This would also mirror a passage of the eighth petition [B1, 345-7]

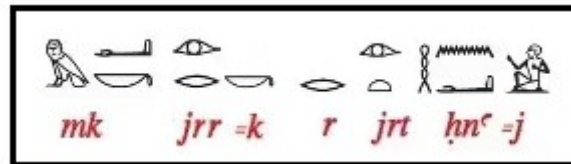


where, in my interpretation, Rensi is asked how he should be addressed:

- (1) as one who gives answers (*m wšbw*);
- (2) as one who, addressed, remains silent (*grw*);
- (3) as one who attacks (*pḥ*) someone who should not be attacked [e. g. the petitioner];

which is exactly the situation the peasant is presently in, where (1) *He* who should have given the just verdict, **betraying** his function (2) has preferred not to, showing thus his guilty **connivance** and (3), worst of all, after having punished him (at the end of the third petition) is now ready to **ruin** him, putting an end to his life.

But of course that is not Rensi's intention. Having given the peasant the assurance about his safety he continues with a sentence that may hide multiple nuances.

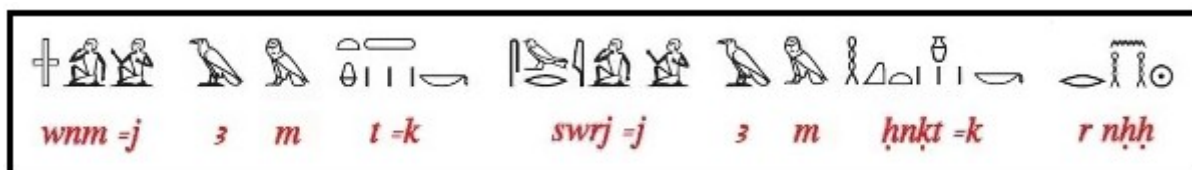


As J. Allen elucidates: “It is to act with me that you should act.” A sort of invitation (if not an explicit order) to settle the question with him, not with Anubis, as stated at the end of the ninth petition. With a little imagination we might hear the peasant's answer: “What else have I done up to now?”

But that probably might be Rensi's appeal to the peasant to act (*jrr =k*) following (*r*) combined directives (*jrt hn^c =j*), to work together with him not just as a servant, but as an assistant. An official promotion, that triggers, though, the peasant's harsh reaction, introduced by an oath:



It might be interpreted either as an apotropaic gesture (“God forbid!” or a more vulgar “Touch wood!”) or a solemn promise. What comes after might in fact be viewed either from a *soft* or from a *hard* perspective:



In the first case there are possible, plausible nuances:

- (1) Am I asked to be forever a client/underling of yours, bought with some bread and beer?
- (2) Shall I bear forever your crookedness? (Sarcastic metaphoric use of bread and beer as stuff of malfeasance.)

But the *hard* view has a definitely greater impact and works out a splendid setting for the peasant's exit, since these are *his last words*.

After having been used as the "corpus vile" (worthless body) of the king's design (to teach right conducts to a corrupted elite) he is put aside, being no more than a passive spectator, a silent presence, as if non-existent. Like the Shakespearean poor player "that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."

Getting back to the text I am tempted to read "𐤆" as the substitute of the "w" of negation, although not all scholars accept this possibility, which remains a debated question.

Thus the firm peasant's surge of pride, his valiant retort would be: "I will *not* eat your bread, I will *not* drink your beer! Never! (→ *r nhh*)." As if stating that he won't espouse the High Steward's crookedness (his bread and bear). He may well be deprived of his goods, or of his life, but not of his uprightness.

This insolent statement causes a furious reaction from Rensi, who shuts the peasant up, ordering him not to move. And then, patronizingly, has him hear his own petitions, written down in their sequence, word for word, in a brand new scroll of papyrus, showing him with how much care they have been taken into consideration [B2 126-129].

The scribe does not mind to depict the peasant's surprise. As said above, at this point his game is over. It is much more important to let the audience know the king's enthusiastic response. For him these speeches are more valuable than anything else in the entire land [B2 130-32].

One might judge that an exaggeration, were it not that those words "of great pitch and moment" represent his moral and political world-view expressed with an eloquence of powerful emotional impact. As already anticipated in the foreword and in the first narrative entr'acte they form

the basis of a new constitutional asset that, as regards the structure of the state, will let things stay as they are. In perfect order!

Another theme already underlined was Rensi's "forced silence" causing him a great loss of reputation. That is why the king gives him licence to judge the villain as he deems fit [B2 132-133] so that he may take a sort of dutiful revenge.

At this point the highly refined and sophisticated embroideries of the peasant's speech are set aside. The narration sticks to the raw facts which of course may hide metaphorical meanings, but are basically intended to show the virtuous master and the expected chastisement of the villain [B2 134-140], starting with his summon to court followed by the precise inventory of his possessions, mirroring the loading of the peasant's donkeys in the first part of the prologue [B1 1-15].

A further "*parallelismus scaenarum*" is given by what may be read as a Dantesque *contrappasso* of the punishment. Although the final lines of the text are severely damaged it is nonetheless possible to work out a fairly acceptable reconstruction where the villain, who seized all the peasant's goods as a compensation for an *insignificant* damage (a wisp of barley), is in his turn despoiled of all his possessions, given to the peasant as a due compensation for the "insignificant" (according to Rensi's counsellors) wrong he had suffered. Followed by the hard beating that recalls the one that *Namtinakhta* inflicted on the peasant with his tamarisk rod. All this alluding to one of the basic images of the peasant's speeches: *Maat's* rightly balanced scale.

CURTAIN