

THE TALE OF THE ELOQUENT PEASANT

This text, dating from the Middle Kingdom, combines the format of the short story with that of a poetic meditation on the need for justice. The narrative of the text is straightforward: a peasant, robbed of his goods, makes appeal to the Chief Steward of the crown. He makes nine separate petitions which constitute the poetic section of the composition. After his first appeal, the Chief Steward is so impressed with the eloquence of the peasant that, following the order of the king, he refuses to help the petitioner. The peasant is thus forced to return time and again, demonstrating each time his ability with rhetoric, and each time his words are recorded for the entertainment of the king. Eventually the peasant receives justice and, in recompense, is given the property of the rich man who had robbed him. The appeal of the text is not so much in its actual content as in the artistic manner in which that content is expressed, for it says nothing new or significant on its subject. The subject of the peasant's speeches is the Egyptian concept of Ma'at. This in itself presents a problem of translation: should we understand the peasant to be speaking about Ma'at, the personalized goddess and abstract concept of order and righteousness? Or is he speaking simply in terms of practical justice? For the purpose of the present translation, I have preferred to retain the Egyptian "Ma'at," as this term, I believe, conveys a better impression of the Egyptian original. The text has been published several times, but the most recent and most convenient edition is:

R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, (Oxford, 1991). *It is this edition which I have used for the preparation of the present translation. However, for the convenience of readers who may wish to make comparison with other translations, I have retained the older system of line numbering. Other modern translations may be found in M. Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature, vol. 1 (Berkeley, 1973), 169–84, and R. B. Parkinson, The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940–1640 BC (Oxford, 1997), 54–88. The translation of R. O. Faulkner in the earlier edition of this book should also be noted as it shows a number of variations in the interpretation of various passages of the text.*

V.A.T.

R1 There was once a man whose name was Khunanup. He was a peasant
of Sekhet-Hemat,¹ and he had a wife named Merit. Now this peasant said to
his wife, “Behold, I am going down to Egypt in order to bring provisions
from there for my children. Go and measure for me the barley which is in
the storehouse, that which remains from last year’s barley.” (His wife did as
R5 he had requested),² and then he set out for her six measures of barley. /
Then the peasant said to his wife, “Behold, (there are) twenty measures
of barley as food (for you) and your children. Now make these six mea-
sures of barley into bread and beer for me as daily rations, that I may live
on them.”

So the peasant then set out for Egypt, having loaded his donkeys with³
R10 reeds, herbs, / natron, salt, wood from [...] tyu,⁴ staves of Ta-Menment,⁵ /
R15 leopard skins, jackal hides, *nesba*-plants, *anu*-plants, *tenem*-plants, *kebeprur*-
R20 plants, / *sabut*, *saskut*, *misut*-plants, *senet*-stones, *aba*-stones, / *ibsa*-plants,
R25 *inbi*-plants, pigeons, *naru*-birds, *weges*-birds, *tebu*, / *weben*-plants, *tebes*-

1. Field of Salt: the modern Wadi Natrun.

2. This sentence is not in the Egyptian, but one must assume that at this point the wife followed her husband’s instructions, for what follows makes it evident that the peasant gave to his wife an amount of barley which he had taken from the total amount which she had measured.

3. Many of the items in the list which follows are unidentifiable, although the plants mentioned are probably medicinal.

4. An unidentified locality. Faulkner, in the previous edition of this book, suggests “[Hes]-tiu country.”

5. Ta-Menment: “Cattle Country,” the modern Farafra Oasis.

R30 plants, *gengent*, berries (?), and *inset*-seeds, a full / abundance of all the
 R35 finest products of Sekhet-Hemat.

The peasant continued on his way, traveling southward in the direction
 Neni-nesut, and arrived at the district of Per-Fefi to the north of Medenit.⁶
 There he encountered a man standing on the river bank whose name was
 R40 Nemtynakhte. He was the son of a man / whose name was Isry, / and he was
 a subordinate of the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru. Then this
 Nemtynakhte, when he had seen the peasant's donkeys which greatly de-
 lighted his heart, spoke saying, "Would that I had some kind of charm
 endowed with power through which I might confiscate the possessions of
 R45 this peasant!" Now the house of this Nemtynakhte was at the juncture / of
 the beginning of a narrow path, one which was not broad enough to exceed
 the width of a loincloth. One side of it was bounded by the water, and the
 other side by the barley. Then Nemtynakhte said to his servant, "Go and
 bring me a piece of clothing from my house." Immediately it was brought to
 R50 him, and he stretched it out over the juncture of the beginning of the path, /
 so that its fringe touched the water, and its hem the barley.

B1,1 Now the peasant was traveling along the public road, / and Nem-
 tynakhte said, "Watch out, peasant! Do not tread on my clothing." Then
 the peasant said, "I shall do what pleases you, for my path is good."⁷ So he
 B1,5 went toward the higher ground. Then Nemtynakhte said, / "Is my barley to
 be a path for you?" Then the peasant said, "My path is good, but the bank is
 steep, so my way (must be) through the barley, for you are obstructing the
 road with your clothing. Will you not let us pass on the road?"

He had just finished speaking these words, when one of the donkeys
 B1,10 filled / his mouth with an ear of barley. Then Nemtynakhte said, "So now, I
 shall confiscate your donkey, peasant, because he is eating my barley. Be-
 hold, he will tread grain because of his crime." But the peasant replied, "My
 path is good, and only one (ear of barley) has been harmed. Could I buy

6. Neni-nesut is the Egyptian name of Herakleopolis in Middle Egypt, the capital of Egypt during the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties, the time, presumably, when the story takes place. The location of Per-Fefi is unknown, and Medenit refers to the twenty-second nome of Upper Egypt.

7. "My path is good": The peasant perhaps means either that he wishes to cause no inconvenience to anyone during his journey or that his general way and conduct of life is good and in accordance with what is required by the values of religion and Ma'at. A freer translation might render the line as "I am a peaceful man."

B1,15 back my donkey for its value, if you should seize him / for filling his mouth
with an ear of barley? Moreover, I know the owner of this estate: it is the
property of the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, and he curbs every
thief in this entire district. Am I to be robbed on his estate?" Then Nem-
B1,20 tynakhthe retorted, "Is there not a well-known proverb:/ 'A poor man's
name is pronounced (only) for the sake of his master'?⁸ I am speaking to
you, and do you dare to invoke the Chief Steward?" Then he took for
himself a switch of green tamarisk, beat his whole body with it, confiscated
his donkeys, and drove them to his estate.

B1,25 Then the peasant / lamented exceedingly through grief for what had
been done to him. But Nemtynakhthe said, "Do not raise your voice, peasant-
ant! Behold, you will go to the domain of the Lord of Silence."⁹ Then the
peasant replied, "You whip me, you take away my property, and you even
take the very lament out of my mouth. By the Lord of Silence, give me
B1,30 back / my property! Only then will I desist from my wailing which so
disturbs you." So the peasant spent a period of ten days pleading with
Nemtynakhthe, but he paid no attention to it.

So the peasant made his way to Neni-nesut in order to petition the
Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru. He met him just as he was coming
B1,35 out of the door / of his house to board his official barge. Then the peasant
said, "I would like to be permitted to inform you about this situation of
mine. There is good reason that a faithful assistant of yours should be
charged to come (to me), so that I may send him back to you (to tell you)
B1,40 about it." Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, ordered / a
faithful assistant of his to come to him,¹⁰ and the peasant sent him back (to
him) concerning the matter in its every detail.

Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, laid a charge against
Nemtynakhthe to the magistrates who were under his jurisdiction. They,
however, said to him, "In all likelihood, this is one of his peasants who
B1,45 has gone over to someone other than him. / After all, this is the way they
usually deal with peasants who go to the jurisdiction of someone else. Yes,
B1,50 this is the way they handle (such things). Is there any reason to punish
Nemtynakhthe on account of a few scraps of natron and a bit of salt? He will

8. I.e., a commoner has no value or rights except in relationship to his master.

9. The Lord of Silence is Osiris. Perhaps Nemtynakhthe means this as a threat that he will kill the peasant if the latter does not keep quiet.

10. I.e., to the peasant.

be ordered to return it, and return it he will.” / Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, kept silent, neither replying to the magistrates nor giving answer to the peasant.

1 .

Then the peasant came to make petition to the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, saying: “O Chief Steward, my lord, greatest of the great, arbiter of everything, both that which is yet to be and that which (now) is:¹¹

- B1,55 If you descend to the Lake of / Ma’at,
 You will sail thereon in the breeze.
 The fabric of your sail will not be torn,
 Nor will your boat be driven ashore.
 There will be no damage to your mast,
 Nor will your yards be broken.
 You will not founder when you come to land,
 Nor will the waves bear you away.
- B1,60 You will not taste the perils / of the river,
 Nor will you gaze upon the face of fear.
 The swiftly swimming fish will come to you,
 And you will catch (many) fatted fowl;
 For you are a father to the orphan,
 A husband to the widow,
 A brother to her who has been cast out,
 The clothing of him who has no mother.
- B1,65 Permit me to exalt your name in / this land
 In accordance with every good law:
 A leader untainted by greed, a noble unpolluted by vice,
 One who obliterates deceit, one who nurtures Ma’at,
 One who answers the plea of him who raises his voice.
 I shall speak and (surely) you will hearken:
 Fulfill Ma’at, O exalted one,
 Exalted even by those who are themselves exalted.

11. Here follows a series of nine appeals made by the peasant to the Chief Steward Rensi, much of which is written in poetry or poetic prose.

B1,70 Relieve / my distress, for lo, I am afflicted;
Take heed to me, for lo, I am in anguish.”

Now the peasant spoke these words during the time of his Majesty, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebkaure the justified.¹² Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, went before his Majesty and said, B1,75 “My Lord, / I have found someone among the peasants who is exceedingly eloquent of speech. His property was stolen by a man who is in my service, and behold, he has come to petition me about it.” Then his Majesty said, “As you desire to see me healthy, cause him to remain here, B1,80 without replying to anything which he says. And so that he may keep on / speaking, remain silent. Then let his words be brought to us in writing, that we may hear them. However, provide the means so that his wife and his children may live, for behold, one of these peasants comes to the city¹³ only when there is nothing in his house. And furthermore, provide the means so that this peasant himself may live: you will see that food be supplied to him without letting him know that it is you who is giving it to him.”

So there was apportioned to him ten loaves of bread and two jugs of B1,85 beer / every day. The one who supplied them was the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru. He would give them to a friend of his, and he would give them to (the peasant). Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, wrote to the governor of Sekhet-Hemat about the issuing of provisions for the peasant’s wife, three measures of barley every day.

2.

Then the peasant came to petition him a second time, saying, “O Chief Steward, my lord, greatest of the great, wealthiest of the wealthy, in you those who are great (know) one who is greater, and those who are wealthy B1,90 (know) / one who is wealthier:

O helm of heaven, support-beam of the earth,
O plumb line which carries the weight:
Helm, do not steer off course,

12. The Nebkaure mentioned here may be King Nebkaure Akhtoy who ruled from Neni-nesut (Herakleopolis) during Dynasties 9/10.

13. “To the city”: lit. “to the land.”

Support-beam, do not list,
Plumb line, do not vacillate.

B1,95 A mighty lord should recover that which its owner has lost¹⁴ and defend the desolate. What you require is (already) in your house, a jar of beer and three loaves of bread. What will it cost you to recompense / those who appeal to you? One who is mortal perishes along with those who are under him. Do you expect to live forever?¹⁵

Surely these things are wrong:
A balance which tilts,
A plummet which errs,
A precise and honest man who becomes a deceiver.
Behold, Ma'at flees from you,
Driven from her throne.
Nobles perpetrate crimes,
And rectitude of speech is overturned.
Judges steal what has already been stolen,
And he who can twist a matter in just the right way
B1, / Can make a mockery of it.
100 He who supplies the winds languishes on the ground,
He who refreshes the nostrils (now) causes men to gasp.¹⁶
The arbiter is (now) a thief,
And he who should quell distress is one who creates its origin.
The town is flooded (with wrong),¹⁷
And he who should punish evil (now) perpetrates crimes."

Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, said: "Is your obstinacy greater than (the fear) that my servant might seize you?" But the peasant continued:

B1, "He who measures / the tax allotment embezzles for himself;
105 He who administers on behalf of another steals his goods;
He who should rule in accordance with the laws condones
thievery.

14. Lit. "that which is without its owner."

15. Lit. "Will you be a man of eternity?"

16. These two lines are a reference to Osiris as the giver of the winds and of breath. The reference is used as a symbol of the confusion of justice which the peasant laments.

17. Lit. "The town is in its flood."

Then who is there to redress evil?
 He who should dispel crime commits transgressions?
 One is meticulous in perversity,
 And another gains respect because he commits crimes.
 Do you see herein anything referring to yourself?
 Punishment (now) is short, but iniquity is extensive.
 Yet a good deed will bring its own reward,¹⁸
 For there is a proverb:

B1, 'Do for one who may do for you,
 110 That you may cause him thus to do.'¹⁹
 This is like thanking him for what he will do,
 It is like warding off something rather than attacking (it),
 It is like entrusting something to a skilled artisan.

Would that (you might know) a moment of destruction,
 Devastation in your vineyard,
 Dearth among your birds,
 Destruction among your water birds!
 Let him who sees (now) become blind;
 Let him who hears (now) become deaf,
 For he who used to guide now guides but to confusion.

B1, / [...] ²⁰ Behold you are mighty and powerful,
 115 Yet your hand is stretched out, your heart is greedy,
 And compassion has passed far beyond you.
 How destitute is the wretch whom you destroy!
 You are like unto a messenger of Khenty!²¹
 B1, You exceed (even) the / Lady of Pestilence!²²
 120 If it is not your concern, it is not her concern;
 If something does not affect her, it does not affect you;
 If you have not done something, she has not done it.
 He who is well provided should be compassionate,

18. Lit. "A good deed will return to its place of yesterday."

19. Lit. "Do for the doer in order to cause him to do" (*ir n ir r rdit iri.f*).

20. The sense of the Egyptian here is virtually unintelligible. However, the peasant appears to be asking the Chief Steward what he would do if he were confronted with a certain difficult situation.

21. A crocodile deity.

22. The goddess Sekhmet.

For force belongs (only) to the desperate,
 And theft is natural (only) for him who has nothing of his own;
 That which is theft (when done) by the criminal
 Is (only) a misdemeanor (when done by) him who is in want.
 One cannot be wrathful with him on account of it,
 For it is only a (means of) seeking (something) for himself.

B1, You, however, are satisfied / with your bread
 125 And contented with your beer;
 You abound in all manner of clothing.
 The gaze of the steersman is directed forward,
 But the ship drifts of its own will.
 The king is in the palace,
 And the tiller is in your hand,
 But evil is done all around you.
 Lengthy is my petition, and heavy is my lot.
 People will say, 'What business does that fellow have?'

B1, Construct a refuge, keep your riverbank hale,
 130 For behold, your abode reeks of crocodiles.
 Be meticulous with your tongue so as not to let it wander,
 For the power²³ which is in it is the abomination of a man.
 Do not utter falsehood; keep prudent the magistrates.
 The judges are an insatiable belly,²⁴
 The speaking of falsehood is like (fine) herbs for them,
 For such poison is pleasant to their hearts.

B1, You who know the affairs of / all men,
 135 Can you ignore my plight?
 You who can extinguish the peril of all waters,
 Behold, I am on a voyage without a boat.
 You who are safe harbour for all who are drowning,
 Rescue one who has been shipwrecked.
 Deliver me from my plight, for you are mighty."

23. "Power": lit. "limb," "member."

24. "Insatiable belly": lit. "a basket of fat things," i.e., always ready to swallow rich bribes.

3.

- B1, Then the peasant came to petition him a third time, saying: / “Chief
 140 Steward, my lord:
 You are Re, the lord of heaven, with your attendants;
 The provisions of all mankind are from you as from the flood.
 You are Hapy²⁵ who makes verdant the fields and revives the desert.
 Punisher of the thief, defender of the distressed,
 B1, Become not / a raging torrent against the suppliant.
 145 Be vigilant against the approach of eternity,
 Cherish length of life, for, as is the saying,
 ‘To do Ma’at is the breath of the nostrils.’
 Inflict punishment on him who merits punishment,
 And none will resemble you in your integrity.
 Will the balance be off? Will the scale tilt to one side?
 B1, Will Thoth / be merciful, and then you do wrong?
 150 You must show yourself the equal of these three;
 As these three are benign, so you must be benign.
 Neither answer good with evil,
 Nor put one thing in the place of another,
 For speech grows more (rapidly) than weeds
 To find the breath for its answer.²⁶
 B1, Then wrong will pour forth / more (readily) than one spreads out
 155 garments.
 This is my third attempt to make you act!²⁷
- You must steer your course by minding the sail;
 Ride the waves so as to do Ma’at.
 Be on guard, for you could run aground through the tiller rope,
 But the stability of the land is to do Ma’at.
 Do not utter falsehood, for you are noble;
 B1, Do not be petty, / for you are distinguished;

25. The god Hapy was the personification of the Nile flood and hence symbolic of the prosperity and well-being of Egypt.

26. I.e., be careful of what you say, for it is very easy to make a sudden wrong remark.

27. The peasant makes an aside reference to the fact that he is now trying for the third time to arouse the Chief Steward to action on his behalf. The Egyptian text has here the third person singular pronoun with the verb *iri*, but I emend it to the second person singular.

- 160 Do not utter falsehood, for you are a balance;
 Do not go off course, for you are impartiality.
 Behold, you are the sole one with the balance;
 If it wavers, then you will waver.
 Do not drift; steer your course; pull on the tiller rope.
 Do not rob, but take action against the robber;
 B1, / He is not truly great who is great (only) in greed.
 165 Your tongue is the plummet,
 Your heart is the weight,
 And your two lips are its arms.
 If you veil your face against brutality,
 Who then will reprove evil?
- Behold, you are a despicable scrubman,
 B1, One so grasping as to abuse / a friend,
 170 One who would abandon his friend in favor of a fawner,
 One whose brother is he who comes and brings him (a bribe).
 Behold, you are a ferryman who transports only him who has the fare,
 An honest man whose honesty has been truncated.
 Behold, you are the supervisor of a storehouse
 Who does not permit a poor man to buy on credit.
 B1, Behold, you are / a hawk to the commoners,
 175 One who lives on the most worthless of the birds.
 Behold, you are a butcher whose delight is slaughter,
 And the mutilation thereof means nothing to him.
 Behold, you are a poor shepherd of the flock, for you take no heed.²⁸
 Act, therefore, less like a gluttonous crocodile,
 For there is no safety in any town of this entire land.
- B1, / Hearer, you do not hear! Yet why do you not hear?
 180 Have I today repulsed the marauder?
 Does the crocodile recoil?
 What profit is in it for you?
 For the truth which was hidden has now been found,
 And deceit is thrown backwards upon the earth.
 Do not dispose tomorrow when it has not yet arrived,
 For no one knows the evil thereof.”

28. The meaning of this line is highly uncertain.

B1,185 Now the peasant had spoken this speech / to the Chief Steward Rensi,
 the son of Meru, at the entrance to the court. Then (Rensi) caused two
 attendants to set upon him with whips, and they thrashed his every limb.
 Then the peasant said, “The son of Meru is in error, for his face is blind to
 what he should see and deaf to what he should hear, and his heart neglects
 what has been brought to his attention.

B1, Behold you are (like) a city / without a governor,
 190 Like a people without a ruler,
 Like a ship on which there is no captain,
 (Like) a crowd without a leader.
 Behold, you are a constable who steals,
 A governor who takes bribes,
 A district administrator responsible for suppressing crime
 But who has become the archetype of the perpetrator.”

4.

Then the peasant came to petition him a fourth time. He found him
 B1,195 / coming out from the gate of the temple of Herishef, and he said: “O
 gracious one! May Herishef be gracious to you, he from whose temple you
 have just come.

Goodness is annihilated, for there is no fidelity to it,
 (No desire) to fling deceit backwards upon the earth.
 If the ferry has been beached, then how can one cross (the river)?
 Success is attained (only) in abomination.
 B1, To cross / the river on foot²⁹—is this a feasible way to cross?
 200 Such cannot be done!³⁰
 Who now can sleep peacefully until the dawn?
 Vanished (now) is walking during the night,
 Or even traveling by day,
 Or permitting a man to stand up for his own cause,
 Even though it be truly excellent.

29. “On foot”: lit. “on sandals.”

30. Lit.: “it does not exist” (Eg.: *nn*).

- But behold, there is no gain for him who tells you these things,
For compassion has passed far beyond you.
- B1, How destitute is the wretch / whom you destroy!
205 Behold, you are a fisherman³¹ who (fully) satisfies himself,
One who is determined to do what he desires,
One who harpoons hippopotami, shoots wild bulls,
Catches fish, and snares birds.
But he who is hasty of speech is not free from indiscreet talk,
And he who is light of heart is not serious of mind.
- B1, Be patient, so that you may learn Ma'at;
210 Control your own preference, so that the humble petitioner may gain.
There is no impetuous man who attains to excellence,
There is no impatient man to whom authority is given.
- Let your eyes see! Let your heart be instructed!
Do not be tyrannical in your power,
That evil may not overtake you.
- B1, If you ignore one incident, it will become two.
215 It is the eater who tastes,
It is he who is questioned who answers,
And it is the sleeper who sees the dream.
As for the judge who merits punishment,
He is an archetype for him who does wrong.
- Idiot! Behold, you are struck!
B1, You know nothing! And behold, you are questioned!
220 You are an empty vessel! And behold, you are exposed!³²
Helmsman, do not let your ship veer off course;
Giver of life, do not let men die;
Provider, do not let men perish;
Sunshade, do not attract (the heat of) the sun;
Refuge, do not let the crocodile carry (me) off.
- B1, 225 This is the fourth time I appeal to you. / Must I spend all my time at it?"

31. The Egyptian term *mbw* can also be used of a hunter of game.

32. Lit. "Pourer of water, behold you are entered." The meaning of this statement, however, is obscure, and I offer the above translation as a suggestion of its possible significance.

5.

Then the peasant came to petition him a fifth time, saying, “O Chief Steward, my lord:

The *khudu*-fisherman [...] kills the *iy*-fish,
 The spearer of fish harpoons the *aubeb*-fish,
 B1, The *djabhu*-fisherman spears / the *pager*-fish,
 230 And the *uha*-fisherman plunders the river.
 Behold, you are much the same as them.
 Do not deprive a pauper of his goods,
 One known to you as a lowly man.
 His possessions are the very breath of a pauper,
 And stealing them is (like) plugging his nose.
 You were appointed to judge complaints,
 B1, To judge between two (disputants), and / to curb the thief when he steals.
 235 But behold, your actions are a support of the thief;
 Men trust you, but you have become a transgressor.
 You were appointed as a dam for the destitute
 That he might not drown,
 But behold, you are a torrent raging against him.”

6.

B1,240 Then the peasant came / to petition him a sixth time, saying, “O Chief Steward, my lord:

He who fosters Ma’at diminishes falsehood (*grg*),
 And he who fosters goodness is a destroyer of evil (*bw*),
 As when satisfaction comes and ends hunger,
 As when clothing ends nakedness,
 B1, As when the sky is calm after a / high wind and warms all who are cold,
 245 As when fire cooks what is raw,
 As when water quenches thirst.
 Look right before your face:
 The arbiter is a despoiler,
 He who should make peace (now) creates misery,
 B1, / He who should create calm (now) causes trouble;
 250 But he who deceives diminishes Ma’at.

So fulfill (your duty) well,
That Ma'at may be neither defrauded nor made extreme.

If you receive something, share it with your companion,
For to devour (something) selfishly is a lack of righteousness.

B1, But my misery leads (only) to / my departing,³³

255 My complaint brings (only) my dismissal.

No one knows what is in the heart.

Do not be idle, but attend to my accusation,

For if you destroy (something), who will restore it?

The sounding-pole is in your hand like an unused pole,

For by chance the water happens to be deep;

But if the boat should run aground, it will be ransacked,

B1, And its cargo cast onto the land / on every shore.

260 You are educated, you are intelligent, you are proficient—

But certainly not in order to steal—

But look at yourself! You make yourself just like everyone else!

Your deeds are perverse,

And the example for all men is now the deceiver of the entire land.

He who tends the garden of evil waters his field with corruption

B1, And cultivates his plot / with falsehood,

265 So as to irrigate iniquity for ever.”

7.

Then the peasant came / to petition him a seventh time, saying, “O
Chief Steward, my lord:

You are the rudder of the entire land,

And the land voyages in accordance with your guidance.

You are the equal of Thoth,

One who judges without discrimination.

B1, My lord, be patient,

270 That a man may entreat you / about his righteous cause.

Be not vexed, for it does not suit you.

33. I.e., I will leave here unsatisfied.

He who looks too far ahead will become disquieted,
 So do not dwell on what has not yet befallen,
 And do not rejoice about what has not yet happened.
 Patience prolongs friendship,
 But as for him who neglects a fault which has been committed,
 There is no one who knows what is in his heart.
 If law is subverted and integrity destroyed,
 B1, There is no poor man / who will be able to live,
 275 For he will be cheated, and Ma'at will not support him.

Now my body was full, my heart was burdened,
 And it has poured from my body of its own accord;
 There was a break in the dam, its water gushed out,
 And my mouth opened to speak.
 Then I plied my sounding pole and drained off the flood (within me).
 I have unburdened what was in my body,
 I have washed my soiled linen.
 B1, / My harangue is (now) completed;
 280 My misery is fully in your sight.
 What (now) do you lack?
 Your indolence will mislead you,
 Your greed will deceive you,
 And your cupidity will increase your foes.
 But will you (ever again) encounter another peasant like myself?
 As for one who is indolent, will a petitioner remain at the door of his
 house?

B1, / There is no one who was silent whom you caused to speak,
 285 There is no one who was sleeping whom you caused to wake,
 There are none who were exhausted whom you have revived,
 There is no one who was closemouthed whom you have opened,
 There is no one who was ignorant whom you have made wise,
 There is no one who was unlearned whom you have taught.
 But magistrates are responsible for driving out evil;
 They are masters of goodness;
 They are artisans who bring into being that which exists,
 (They are) responsible for joining the head which has been cut off."

8.

B1,290 / Then the peasant came to petition him an eighth time, saying, “O Chief
Steward, my lord:

Men flounder because of selfishness;
The greedy man lacks success,
For his (only) success is failure.
You are greedy, but it (gains) you nothing;
You steal, but it is no profit to you.
Now, permit a man to stand up for his cause which is truly good.
You have your provisions in your house, and your belly is full.
Your grain is excessive and even overflows,
B1, / And what issues forth perishes on the earth.
295 (You are) a rogue, a thief, an extortioner!
Yet magistrates are commissioned to suppress evil,
As safeguards against the aggressor;
Magistrates are empowered to fight falsehood.

It is not fear of you which causes me to petition you.
You do not know my heart:
A lowly man who turns again and again to make complaint to you,
One who does not fear him to whom he makes his petition,
B1, / One whose equal will not be brought to you from any quarter (of town).

300 You have a plantation in the country,
You have a salary in the administration,
You have provisions in the storehouse,
The officials pay you, and still you steal.
Are you an extortioner?
Do men bring (bribes) to you
And to the henchmen with you at the allotment of the farmlands?

Perform Ma’at for the sake of the Lord of Ma’at,
For the constancy of his Ma’at is absolute.
B1, / (You are) the pen, papyrus and palette of Thoth,
305 So keep far from the doing of wrong.
That goodness should be potent is excellent indeed,³⁴

34. The text here has a wordplay on the Egyptian term *nfr*: *nfr nfrt nfr nf*.

- For Ma'at will endure unto eternity
 And go down to the grave with him who performs it.
 He will be buried, and the earth will enfold him,
 B1, / But his name will never vanish upon the earth,
 310 For he will be remembered because of his goodness.
 Such is the integrity of the decree of God:
 It is a balance, and it does not tilt;
 It is a scale, and it does not lean to the side.
- Whether it is I or another who comes (before you),
 You must acknowledge (him).
 B1, / Do not give back (to him) the reply of a silent man.
 315 Do not abuse one who himself has done no abuse.
- But you show no compassion!
 You are neither concerned nor perturbed!
 You do not give me due recompense for this fine speech
 Which comes from the mouth of Re himself.
 B1, Speak Ma'at! Perform Ma'at!
 320 For it is great, it is exalted, it is enduring,
 Its integrity is evident,
 And it will cause (you) to attain the state of veneration.
- Can a balance tilt?
 It is its scale-pans which bear things,
 B1, And there must be no / exceeding the measure.
 325 A criminal action does not reach safe harbor,
 But he who is humble will reach land."

9.

- B2,91 / Then the peasant came to petition him a ninth time, saying, "O Chief
 Steward, my lord:
- Men's balance is their tongue;
 It is the scale which determines what is lacking.
 Inflict punishment on him to whom punishment is due,
 So that men may conform to your integrity.
 B2,95 / [...] As for falsehood, its deeds may flourish,
 But Ma'at will turn herself to balance it.

Ma'at is the final end of falsehood,
 And (falsehood) will diminish and be seen no more.
 If falsehood walks, it goes astray;
 It does not cross in the ferry, and it makes no headway.

B2, / As for him who prospers through it,
 100 He will have no children, he will have no heirs upon earth.
 As for him who sails with it, he does not reach land,
 And his boat does not arrive at its mooring-place.

Do not be ponderous, but do not be frivolous;
 Do not be tardy, but do not hurry;
 B2, Do not be partial, and do not give in to / a whim;
 105 Do not cover your face against one whom you know;
 Do not blind your sight against one whom you have seen;
 Do not spurn one who entreats you.
 Turn away from this slothfulness,
 And let your decision be pronounced.
 Act on behalf of the one who has been active (in appealing) to you.
 Do not listen to everyone,
 But respond to a man in accordance with his righteous cause.

An idle man has no past;³⁵

B2, / One who is deaf to Ma'at has no friend;
 110 He who is grasping never has a joyful day.
 He who suffers will become wretched,
 And he who is wretched will become a plaintiff,
 But an enemy may become a killer.

Behold, I appeal to you, but you do not hear it.

B2,115 I shall now depart and appeal about you to Anubis.”

Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, had two attendants go to bring him back. Then the peasant was frightened, for he assumed that punishment would be inflicted upon him because of this speech which he had made. Then the peasant said, “(Like) a thirsty man’s approach to
 120 water, (like) the reaching out of the mouth / of the child of a nursing woman for milk, such is death for one who seeks (it), when he sees it coming, when his death, long delayed, finally comes.” Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the

35. I.e., has accomplished nothing.

son of Meru, said, "Have no fear, peasant. Behold, you will act in accordance with what is done on my part." Then the peasant swore an oath, saying, / "On my life! Shall I eat of your bread and drink of your beer forever?" Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, said, "Now wait here, and you will hear your appeals." Then he had someone read from a new scroll every petition word for word. [...]

125 / Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, dispatched them to his Majesty, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebkaure the justified, and they were pleasing to his heart more than anything which was in this entire land. Then his majesty said, "Son of Meru, give the verdict yourself."

130 Then the Chief Steward Rensi, the son of Meru, caused to guards to go to [bring Nemtynakhte]. / He was brought in and a list was made [of his property ...] six servants, along with [...] his barley, his emmer, his donkeys, his pigs, and his flocks [...] of Nemtynakht [was given] to the peasant [...].

135 It has reached its conclusion [...]