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# LITERARY FORM AND THE *TALE OF THE ELOQUENT PEASANT*<sup>1</sup>

By R. B. PARKINSON

The *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* is a complex work, for the interpretation of which literary form is crucial. The text is a unity, incorporating diverse styles and genres. It combines two modes of narrative and discourse which are indirectly complementary, being antithetical in their articulation of meaning. This antithesis is also presented through stylistic contrasts within the Tale and by a pervasive use of irony. Although the Tale is concerned with its own writing, the subject matter is not restricted to this. The formal tension between narrative and discourse parallels the dichotomy of awareness which underlies the plot, and which is between the situation as it appears to the protagonist and as it is presented to the audience. Form and content cannot be separated; the literary form which embodies this dichotomy is at one with the creation of the Tale's meaning.

## Introduction

LITERATURE cannot be regarded as a given entity. Its definition and circumscription in Egypt are debated and critical discourse about its nature has great relevance to Egyptological approaches to texts of all types, which have often concentrated on the texts as sources of historical or cultural information, rather than as artefacts with their own internal coherence. Attention to literary form is vital to the understanding of texts; an appreciation of form should if possible precede other types of analysis.

The *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* is a good example of the significance of such methodological considerations. It has received less critical acclamation than the *Tale of Sinuhe*, with which it is associated by many factors, including manuscript history. Leaving evaluative factors aside, it has not received such extensive study. One reason for this lack of regard is the fact that its literary form has been less immediately accessible to modern commentators, because it does not match any western genre closely.<sup>2</sup>

This article is intended to contribute to the discussion of the Tale's literary form. I do not discuss the interpretation of the Tale's meaning, but focus on the more basic elements and structures through which that meaning is created by author and audience. As is emphasized in critical theory, literary form and genre are of great importance in determining the context for any reading.<sup>3</sup> Failure to comprehend the Tale's generic position,

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to J. Baines for reading various drafts.

<sup>2</sup> See the remarks of J. Baines on Egyptological approaches to literature in general in *JEA* 68 (1982), 31. For the text see Parkinson, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (Oxford, 1991). I use that edition's line numbers for B1 (31 higher than the old numbers). For bibliography and recent studies see also Parkinson, 'Teachings, Discourses and Tales from the Middle Kingdom', in S. Quirke (ed.), *Middle Kingdom Studies* (New Malden, 1991), 91-122. Translated quotations show metrical 'line' divisions.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London, 1967), 222; A. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: an Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford, 1982), 256-76.

which happens to lack parallels or 'posterity' in the western tradition, has led to radical misunderstandings of its character and style. Compounded with the problem of genre is the tendency of many commentators to base their expectations of literature solely on characteristics of their own, western, tradition. Thus, for example, Hornblower described the Tale as a practical collection of 'models . . . for the use of petitioners', while Gardiner's negative evaluation, in which he spoke of an author who was 'anything but a literary artist' was similarly extraneous.<sup>4</sup> Such a judgement accords ill with the Tale's own praise of the petitions' style and with the esteem implied by the high number of surviving manuscripts from the Middle Kingdom. These evaluations arise in part from an atomistic approach to the text. The literary form, which they ignore, is integral to the meaning of the Tale, although it does not in itself constitute that meaning.

### The unity of the text

Before analysing the literary form of a text, it is desirable to examine the nature of the archetype, and to consider whether the text was always a single, unified and unitary composition.<sup>5</sup>

As with the Book of Job, the juxtaposition of the two modes of narrative and discourse in the Tale has been taken as evidence that the extant text was a redaction of at least two sources.<sup>6</sup> On a further level, it has been suggested that differences in style and theme within the petitions are evidence of a multiple composition; this redactional criticism is exemplified by Siegfried Herrmann.<sup>7</sup> While redactional activity is attested in Egyptian texts<sup>8</sup> it is uncertain whether it can be detected in the Tale. There is a simple case for the basic unity of the narrative and petitions. Without the introductory and concluding narrative, the petitions would implicitly have the opposite meaning to their affirmation of Maat and their (ultimately ironic) denunciations of the state. Without the petitions, the narrative would be superficially simple to the point of dullness: a peasant is robbed and his goods are returned. The two parts also cohere in references to specific characters and situations, in motifs, and in style. An example of the coherence of motif is the metaphor of grain. This runs throughout the petitions, as where Maat is 'measured well' (B1 281-3), echoing the opening scene of the narrative, in which the peasant tells his wife to 'measure out for me the grain' (R 1.2-1.6). An example of stylistic coherence is the paronomasia with patronyms in B1 53 and 309.<sup>9</sup> From such evidence, it seems—as Fecht has concluded—inadmissible to question a unitary conception of the archetype.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> G. D. Hornblower, *JEA* 10 (1924), 44-5; A. H. Gardiner, *JEA* 9 (1923), 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> On the transmission of the text see Parkinson, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, 1.5.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. S. Herrmann, *Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgestalt mittelägyptischer Literaturwerke* (Berlin, 1957), 92. For Job, see e.g. E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (London, 1967 [1926]), lxi-cx.

<sup>7</sup> *ZAS* 80 (1955), 34-9. *Untersuchungen*, passim.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. the two different versions of *The Teaching of Ptahhotep* known from the Twelfth Dynasty (P and L1). See G. Burkard, *Textkritische Untersuchungen zu altägyptischen Weisheitslehren des Alten und Mittleren Reiches* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 192-246. For other examples see R. J. Williams, *JAOS* 101 (1981), 7; W. Schenkel, *LÄ* VI, 459-60.

<sup>9</sup> Discussed by H. Fischer, in J. Assmann *et al.* (eds.), *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur: Studien zum Gedenken an Eberhard Otto* (Wiesbaden, 1977), 159-60.

<sup>10</sup> G. Fecht, *LÄ* I, 640. The same conclusion is reached by e.g. H. Goedicke, *The Report about the Dispute of a Man with his Ba (P. Berlin 1024)* (Baltimore, 1970), 62 n. 23; H. Brunner, *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der altägyptischen Literatur* (Darmstadt, 1986), 24.

On another level, Herrmann's redactional critique relies on the assumption that different styles and themes could not ultimately arise within a single literary work of such an early date but must relate back to distinct 'Sitze im Leben'. This is a simplistic evolutionist approach to genre, of a sort described by Dhorme: 'There is no need to refute in detail such theories, which . . . could impress only those who require conformity to the most prosaic laws of association of ideas in a literary genre which permits the most varied movements and the loftiest flight of poetic imagination.'<sup>11</sup> The manuscripts present the Tale explicitly as a unified composition, as is implied by the presence of a colophon (B2 142). The text as available to the owner of the 'Berlin library' of literary papyri had 'a single implied author, a homogenous philosophical and artistic consciousness.'<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the burden of proof should lie on the critics who propose the disunity of the text, a proposition which requires evidence of external or internal indicators of disunity. There is no external evidence for the existence of the Tale in another form. Internal indications whose presence would suggest a disunified archetype include:

- (1) significant contradictions in factors or happenings<sup>13</sup>
- (2) an absence of systematic structure or development together with stylistic variation
- (3) juxtaposed sections which are distinctive in subject matter and form and without cross references
- (4) non-contemporary linguistic features which are considered inexplicable within a consistent style
- (5) stylistically distinct doublets.

In preparing a commentary on the tale I have been unable to find such features. If this cohesiveness were the result of 'collage', in which the components had been transformed into parts of the unified whole (as idioms are in any original composition), the distinction between original author and redactor, which is central to redactional criticism, could not in any case be made.<sup>14</sup> Although a unified work may have many creators, a redactional approach is a valid method of interpretation only if this distinction can be detected, or separate components of the text can be identified. In the Tale the pattern of the unitary whole dominates the diverse sub-patterns of style and the like to such an extent that a single composition by an author or author-redactor is the most plausible hypothesis—as is also the case with the two halves of the *Loyalist Teaching*.<sup>15</sup> There are no features which require a hypothetical redactor. The episodic nature of the style, with its multiple antitheses and the lack of a single simple thematic progression, must not be mistaken for indications of collation or redaction, but is characteristic both of such discourse and wisdom texts in general and specifically of the Tale.<sup>16</sup> Not through such factors alone do texts achieve unity, but through a 'coherence of thematic and verbal texture'.<sup>17</sup> I attempt

<sup>11</sup> *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, cx; cf. lxiii–v, ciii.

<sup>12</sup> On literary texts in general, M. V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison, 1985), 258–9 n. 7; the following discussion draws on *ibid.* 202–26. For a discussion of unity in the Middle Kingdom literary corpus, see Parkinson, in *Middle Egyptian Studies*, 94–6.

<sup>13</sup> I do not include minor discrepancies, such as that in *Sinuhe* noted by Baines, *JEA* 68, 44 n. 52.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Fox, *Song of Songs*, 220.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. Posener, *L'Enseignement loyaliste: sagesse égyptienne du Moyen Empire* (Geneva, 1976), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Fletcher, *Allegory: the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca NY, 1964), 171, on the 'allegorical style' in the west; Fox, *Song of Songs*, 226, on Near Eastern parallels.

<sup>17</sup> Fox, *Song of Songs*, 226.

here to show how the varied genres are parts of such a whole, and trace their interaction in forming a unified pattern.

### Genre and the components of the Tale

Genre is crucial to any interpretation, and ‘the processes of generic recognition are in fact fundamental to the reading process’, but a general definition of genre is problematic.<sup>18</sup> ‘Representational modes’ such as narrative or discourse are elemental, rather than generic,<sup>19</sup> and play a more fundamental role in patterning texts; for this reason, I discuss the Tale’s ‘modal’ structure before its ‘generic’ structure.

The Tale consists of two interwoven parts, the petitions and the narrative. The narrative is written in an ‘objective’ style, which is an example of Hintze’s ‘Erzählung’, or Benveniste’s ‘récit historique’.<sup>20</sup> Amongst Middle Kingdom narratives it is most similar to that of *The Words of Neferti* in its distribution of *sdm.jn:f* and *ḥc.n-sdm.n:f* with dialogue, and it differs from *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor* and *The Discourse of Sisobek* in this respect. The petitions are ‘discourse’, which is in contrast a subjective representational mode, used in wisdom texts as a highly wrought literary form.

These two representational modes are juxtaposed principally in the overall pattern Narrative-Discourse (the ‘petitions’)-Narrative. They are also interwoven when discourse occurs as dialogues within the narratives, and when narrative introduces and interrupts episodes of discourse (the ‘interludes’). This interweaving is more pronounced at the transition from the narrative to the petitions, than in the later petitions, where the transition is more subtly effected. At the transition there are narrative ‘interludes’ after the first and third petitions, and the second petition is interrupted by a riposte by the High Steward (B1 134–5), while later there are references within the petitions to the situation of the plot. The different paces of narrative and discourse are integrated with such devices as explicit references to the extraordinary length of the peasant’s eloquence:

‘Long is the petitioner(’s task), onerous the divide;

‘Who is that there?’ will be said’ (B1 159–60).

‘O a fourth time in appealing to you! Shall I spend all my time at it?’ (B1 256).

This fusion of representational modes seems to be standard in the Middle Kingdom literary corpus: a modally bipartite text would not have struck an audience as unusual, but as belonging to a formally defined literary group. *Sisobek* is an exact parallel, especially in its style of discourse, which combines gnomic statements with injunctions and descriptions, and expresses similar sentiments. *Sisobek* dates to the Middle Kingdom, as do other bicorporate works such as *Neferti* and *The Account of the Sporting King*, in which the discourses are elaborate figurative praise songs.<sup>21</sup> The same phenomenon occurs on a generic, rather than ‘elemental’ level in the bipartition of Middle Kingdom

<sup>18</sup> Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 259, 256–72. See also Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, passim; H. Dubrow, *Genre* (London, 1982), 4–7. For a survey of genre in relation to the Middle Egyptian literary corpus, see Parkinson, in *Middle Egyptian Studies*, 99–100, passim.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 235–7.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. E. Doret, *The Narrative Verbal System of Old and Middle Egyptian* (Geneva, 1986), 13. For a characterization of the style of the narrative in the Tale, see E. Perry, ‘A Critical Study of the Eloquent Peasant’ (PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1986), 46–8.

<sup>21</sup> See Parkinson, in *Middle Egyptian Studies*, 110–11, 112, 118–19 (nos. xi, xv, xxix).

texts such as the *Teachings of Amenemhat*, *Khety, a Man for his Son*, and *Kemit*.<sup>22</sup> However, the Tale is distinct from these parallels in that its narrative is longer (186 metrical lines out of 607), and is significant beyond being a frame: ultimately, it supplies the context for the Tale's meaning and determines it. This importance is displayed by the introduction of the text as a narrative: *s-pw wn*, 'There was once a man . . .' (R 1.1).<sup>23</sup> More significantly, in the Tale the two representational modes are indirectly complementary, being antithetical in their articulation of meaning: the assumptions underlying the petitions—principally that the peasant is unheard—are the contrary of those embodied in the narrative—that he is heard. Thus, while the peasant denounces the High Steward's silence as an evil, the narrative asserts that it is good. Neither can be read correctly on its own, and this factor is significant both formally and in the creation of meaning.

On a less elemental level the Tale is a fusion of various genres: stylistically (with both verbal and syntactic formulae) it alludes to and incorporates various genres, a procedure that is central to many texts, particularly *The Tale of Sinuhe*.<sup>24</sup> Such inclusion is a universal phenomenon, which is often contemporary with a common use of framing devices.<sup>25</sup> In the Tale, genres are often used ironically (see below). I review the genres included:

(a) Pessimistic 'Discourses' or 'Laments'. These sections of the petitions are characterized by descriptions of the evil state of the land, as in B1 225-34:

'Destroyed is good without its union,  
(as is) casting to the ground of Falsehood's back  
...  
Who sleeps till dawn?  
For destroyed is going by day and traversing by night'.

They are also characterized by sequences of antithetical descriptions of undesired social and ethical states and transformations.<sup>26</sup> Most of these passages are in the first two triads of petitions (e.g. B1 129-34, 136-9, 279-81). The social concern of 'Laments' is also found in the description of professions in B1 199-209 ('Look, you are a wretch of a washerman . . .'), where it is given a second person reference within the context of the petition.

(b) *sbyjt*. The 'teaching' genre is incorporated throughout the petitions in injunctions and gnomic statements, and to a lesser extent in conditional clauses.<sup>27</sup> Much of the discourse has a primarily didactic aspect aimed in context at the High Steward Rensi. However, the context of 'Teachings' is usually characterized by the established office of the teacher and the 'liminality' of the junior person to whom they are addressed;<sup>28</sup> here,

<sup>22</sup> Posener, *L'Enseignement loyaliste*, 12-13; E. Blumenthal, *ZÄS* 111 (1984), 95.

<sup>23</sup> The same construction is an introductory narrative statement in *Neferti* (ed. Helck) 13a; *Urk.* IV, 1989.7 [= P. Vernus, *RdE* 30 (1978), 115-19]. Other partial parallels include *Ipuur* 16.1, where a parable begins *wn-s-pw*, and *P Westcar* 6.26. See G. Fecht, *Der Vorwurf an Gott in den "Mahnworten des Ipu-wer"* (Heidelberg, 1972), 36-7, 189-94, 232.

<sup>24</sup> K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London, 1966), 125-6; E. Bergman, in E. Hornung and O. Keel (eds.), *Studien zu altägyptischen Lebenslehren* (Freiburg, 1979), 82-3; Blumenthal, *ZÄS* 111, 95-9; Baines, *JEA* 68, 34-5.

<sup>25</sup> Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 179-81, with Renaissance examples.

<sup>26</sup> See Blumenthal, *ZÄS* 109 (1982), 9-10; W. Schenkel, *WdO* 15 (1984), 51-61.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Blumenthal, *ZÄS* 111, 95-6.

<sup>28</sup> L. G. Perdue, *ZAW* 93 (1981), 114-26.

ironically, it is the 'liminal' peasant, from the edge of society, who is the teacher of a senior official.

(c) Eulogy. Eulogistic epithets and phrases, with non-verbal predications,<sup>29</sup> occur frequently in the petitions (e.g. B1 93-5, 171-3), and evoke primarily royal eulogies, as is shown by the presence of a sequence of epithets which is presented as a mock-titulary:

'Let me make your name in this land, according to every good law:  
Leader free from selfishness,  
Great one free from baseness,  
Destroyer of falsehood, Creator of truth' (B1 41-2).

While themes and phrases allude to the self-eulogies of private autobiographies, this subgenre is not included so explicitly as in *Sinuhe*. In Petition 7 there is a passage of first person 'récit historique', which may allude to the narrative sections of autobiographies:<sup>30</sup>

'Now then, I plied my pole, baled out my water,  
unloaded what was in my body, washed my soiled clothes! (B1 307-10).

The idealizing acclamations display the same attitudes and phraseology as the 'Teaching' elements; the two genres are closely related, both historically and thematically.<sup>31</sup>

(d) Lists. These are a self-contained genre<sup>32</sup> and occur in both the narrative and the discourse of the Tale: the goods carried by the peasant are listed in the introductory narrative, as are the possessions of Nemtinakht in the conclusion (B1 1-14; B2 135-8), while in the petitions the High Steward is likened to various workers and officials, with extended lists of corrupt or undesirable professions (B1 199-209, 258-61). This genre implies inclusiveness, and its frequency mobilizes the Tale's potential universality.

Two other genres have been considered relevant:

(e) *Königsnovelle*. The definition of this genre is problematic. Blumenthal<sup>33</sup> rightly argues that Middle Kingdom *Königsnovellen* are formally distinct from the motif of the king and courtiers found in *Neferti* and *The Tales of the Court of King Cheops*. A comparable example of this motif is *The Sporting King*, where the king is presented with speeches at his request (A.2.1-3). While elements reminiscent of it are present in the Tale's setting—the High Steward Rensi approaches the king with news of the peasant (B1 102-18), and the council scene between the High Steward and the courtiers (B1 73-82) recalls the royal court setting in *Königsnovellen*—this motif is at most alluded to; it is not included within the Tale.

(f) Folktale and 'oral' elements. Herrmann considers one component included in the Tale to be an old folktale. The basic situation of the plot—a subtle peasant who is robbed—would make a plausible folktale and Perry discusses folktale motifs in the narrative. However, these are more likely to be a conscious stylistic device of mock

<sup>29</sup> Assmann, *LÄ* II, 40-6, esp. 42-3.

<sup>30</sup> As does the narrative monologue of *Amenemhat*: Blumenthal, *ZÄS* 111, 96-7.

<sup>31</sup> See principally J. Assmann, in A. Assmann (ed.), *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation*, 1 (Munich, 1983), 64-93.

<sup>32</sup> See Baines, in Baines *et al.* (eds.), *Pyramid Studies and Other Essays Presented to I. E. S. Edwards* (London, 1988), 130-3.

<sup>33</sup> *ZÄS* 109, 17-21; see also A. J. Spalinger, *Aspects of the Military Documents of the Ancient Egyptians* (New Haven and London, 1982), 101-5.

simplicity.<sup>34</sup> The related phenomenon of 'oral' elements has also often been overestimated in arguments proposing that the Tale evolved from various pieces of 'oral literature'. While the narrative and the petitions include several explicit citations of oral sayings (B1 50-1, 140-1, 177), this device is well attested in other texts. Proverbial and formulaic elements are characteristic of all Middle Kingdom wisdom literature, which is presented in written texts as being orally delivered.<sup>35</sup> This does not indicate that the texts are transcriptions of oral works—they belong rather to a distinct 'grapholect' of the language—but that they are written works created within 'an orally constituted sensibility and tradition'.<sup>36</sup> Oral features are inherent in the Tale's modes and genres and cannot be isolated as an 'included' phenomenon; they are, however, a stylistically significant aspect, being made prominent by the presentation of the petitions (see further below).

The Tale is structurally complex and allusive in its representational modes and genres, which are often used ironically. The inclusion of genres often contrasts their implications with the context in which they occur in the Tale. Thus, titularies and the like are used to elevate the High Steward's status, occurring both seriously (B1 96-8; B1 191-3) and ambivalently or ironically (B1 252-5, 258-62; extensive parody of eulogy: B1 199-209, 220-4). In a similar fashion, the juxtaposition of the two modes of narrative and discourse is not complementary, as one might expect with such a framing pattern, but are antithetical in their meaning.

### Style

In the present context, it is sufficient to investigate some characteristic features of the style which reflect the structure of text in the creation of meaning.<sup>37</sup> Several previous interpretations have overemphasized the autonomy of the role of style, as well as misreading the style itself. Early in its critical history, the Tale was taken by Spiegelberg and Schneider to be a satiric pastiche of Middle Kingdom literary tendencies.<sup>38</sup> A similar view of it as excessively distinctive is perpetuated by Fox, who argues that the peasant's eloquence is 'a deliberate polemic' against the rhetorical canons of silence and restraint enjoined in other wisdom texts.<sup>39</sup> However, all the petitions imply that the peasant is forced to speak by the High Steward's neglect. The peasant's laments emphatically justify his apparent violation of the canon of restraint, as in B1 307-12, where he describes his

<sup>34</sup> Herrmann, *Untersuchungen*, 92; Perry, 'A Critical Study of the Eloquent Peasant', 39-44. Compare Baines, *JEA* 76 (1990), 58-60, on folktale elements in the *Shipwrecked Sailor*.

<sup>35</sup> For the 'oral' aspect of formulae see e.g. W. J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), 34-6; examples of references to oral wisdom include *The Teachings of Hardedef* (ed. Helck), 5.1; *Ptahhotep*, 210, 292, 568; *Merikare* (ed. Helck), 9i-j. Compare the discussions of the formulaic aspect of Egyptian texts by C. J. Eyre, in S. Israelit Groll (ed.), *Studies in Egyptology Presented to Miriam Lichtheim* (Jerusalem, 1990), 1, 153-60; W. Guglielmi, *SAK* II (1954), 347-64.

<sup>36</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 99; for the limited literacy of the predominantly 'oral' Middle Kingdom culture see Baines and Eyre, *GM* 61 (1983), 65-72; for the oral influence on style see Eyre and Baines, in K. Schousboe and M. T. Larsen (ed.), *Literacy and Society* (Copenhagen, 1989), 106-13.

<sup>37</sup> For the problem of assessing style, see e.g. R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth, 1985 3rd ed. [1963]), 177. Full stylistic analyses of Egyptian texts include H. Grapow, *Untersuchungen zur ägyptischen Stilistik I: Der stilistische Bau der Geschichte des Sinuhe* (Berlin, 1952); H. Brunner, *Die Lehre des Cheti, Sohnes des Duauf* (Glückstadt, 1944), 50-8; compare also W. Guglielmi, *LÄ* VI, 22-41.

<sup>38</sup> W. Spiegelberg, *Die Novelle im alten Aegypten: ein litterar-historischer Essay* (Strasburg, 1898), 20; H. Schneider, *Kultur und Denken der alten Agypter* (Leipzig, 1907), 174-5.

<sup>39</sup> M. V. Fox, *Rhetorica: the History of Rhetoric* I (1983), 17, 12-15.



appeal in verses ending:

‘and my speech is done, my wretchedness finished before you—what more do you want?’

and then continues the petition. Similarly in B1 242 and 346–7, he ironically alludes to himself indirectly as a ‘silent man’. He represents the ideals of oratory found elsewhere, and the petitions are a highly wrought instance of the ‘normal speech-code’ of Middle Kingdom literary texts. For example, wordplay (polyptoton and paronomasia) is extensive, but this is not unparalleled; even the extreme instance of B1 337—*nfr-nfrr-nfr-r:f* ‘(Only) the goodness of the good man is good beyond him’—is equalled in several texts.<sup>40</sup> The petitions are neither a collection of ‘commonplaces’<sup>41</sup> nor elaborate beyond the bounds of artistry. The style is integrated with the plot, and is crucial in the creation of meaning.

As in *Neferti* and *Sisobek*, the style of the narrative is objective and concise, like other Middle Kingdom narratives, in contrast to the petitions. Although there are narrative interludes, within the petitions there are no stylistically comparable narrative sections (unlike the parables narrated by the *ba* in the *Lebensmüder*, 68–85). The simplicity of the narrative is probably studied in order to heighten this contrast:<sup>42</sup> whereas there is a uniform progression in the narrative and its dialogues, the petitions present a swiftly changing and allusive monologue, which varies between direct and indirect address of the High Steward, and which presents the complexity of the peasant’s arguments. The prominence of interrogative sequences (e.g. B1 179–81), although not unique to the Tale,<sup>43</sup> emphasizes the discursive, oral character of the petitions. Exhortation and injunction have a varying prevalence in individual petitions, although they are quite pervasive. They articulate the rationale for the discourse, which is not so directly emotional and introspective as that of the *Lebensmüder*, and is less personal in its concerns, but is still strongly ‘subjective’. Shifts in emotional tone—from eulogy to denunciation, from subtle to direct abuse—mark the peasant’s desperate recourse to different approaches, and are patterned to express his mounting anxiety. The tendency towards abstraction in the final petitions is balanced by the peasant’s increasingly direct references to himself and his opponent, which maintain awareness of the dramatic context. This is in any case kept in mind by the fact that all the petitions are one-sided dialogue rather than an interior monologue (‘Hearer, you do not hear!/Why do you not hear?’ B1 211), which highlights the partiality of the peasant’s perception, in contrast to the objectivity of the narrative.<sup>44</sup>

Since the petitions are both the majority of the text and stylistically the most complex part, I concentrate on their salient features, notably repetition and partition, imagery, antitheses and irony.

In the petitions the repetition of individual words, including such key terms as *nfr*, is extensive and significant, and so is that of motifs of imagery like that of steering a boat. At

<sup>40</sup> See Fecht, *LÄ* I, 641–2. Other examples of such wordplay include *Sisobek* Bii.15; *Khakheperresonbe* rt. 3, 5; *Ptahhotep* 535–7; *Merikare* (ed. Helck), 15a.

<sup>41</sup> F. Ll. Griffith, *PSBA* 14 (1892), 471.

<sup>42</sup> Compare assessments of the style of the *Shipwrecked Sailor*: Baines, *JEA* 76, 57–8.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Blumenthal, *ZAS* 111, 97–9.

<sup>44</sup> A sympathetic interlocutor is also lacking in the *Lebensmüder* 5–6, 103–30; P Ramesseum II vs. ii.4. Similarly, the *Words of Khakheperresonbe* are addressed to his unresponsive heart, urging it to answer: rt. 7, vs. 1, 5–6.

the start of the second petition this image is introduced at its most forceful, universal and abstract: 'O helm of heaven' (B1 121); thereafter he is the helmsman (B1 157), the holder of the helm (B1 158), he is a steerer (B1 187-8, 194), a ferryman (B1 202-3), a ferry (B1 221-2), and again a helmsman (B1 252). The same phenomenon occurs to a lesser extent in the narrative, as with the 'two attendants' who feature in the narrative sections several times (B1 217, B2 116, 134).

This repetition has led to erroneous characterizations of the vocabulary as poor.<sup>45</sup> Schenkel has calculated the 'word density' of *Sinuhe* as 0.83, and of *Lebensmüder* as 0.85.<sup>46</sup> By my calculations, that of the Tale is 0.79. While they may be significantly lower and may exemplify a more repetitive style, the vocabulary as a whole, rather than being 'poor', is recherché. This is clearest in the longer version of the list of goods preserved in R 2.1-5.6, and in the list of fishers in Petition 5, where the three preserved fish-names are all *hapax legomena* (B1 258-61).<sup>47</sup> The same is probably true to some extent of all Middle Egyptian literary texts, which aim for

'unknown phrases, strange verses  
in a new speech which does not pass,  
free from repetition' (*The Words of Khakheperresonbe* rt. 2-3).

The number of *hapax legomena* does not seem higher than that of other literary texts, nor is the Tale's vocabulary strikingly different in character. The repetition of larger units of several words is significant, but is not used to pattern long passages with refrains (as for example in *Ipuur*). There are extended sequences of epithets (e.g. B1 119-22: 'Greatest of the great!/Richest of the rich! ...') and eulogistic statements (e.g. B1 319-20: 'The officials are repeller of evil, they are lords of goodness ...'); these are stylistic features of the genre 'Eulogy' (cf. *Sinuhe* B 46-72).<sup>48</sup> Series of negative constructions are particularly common (B1 87-91, B2 100-3, 109-11, 316-18),<sup>49</sup> as are sequences of vetitives (B1 301-3), which are often combined with epithets or similar eulogistic elements (e.g. B1 122-3, 190-2); there are corresponding affirmative sequences with *mk* (e.g. B1 199-209) and *jw* (e.g. B1 221-3). These features of patterning and repetition make the petitions more forceful. They essentially operate in the same way as the Tale's extensive formulae and generic references, but allude to specific instances within the Tale, rather than to a general body of literary phraseology. For example, the petitions contain several almost exact doublets (e.g. 'For mercy has passed you by: how miserable is the wretched one whom you destroy', B1 235-6 = 148-9; 'One cannot know what is the heart', B1 287 = 304). These are probably not due to textual corruption,<sup>50</sup> but are rather heightened recollections of earlier phrases, topics and syntactic patterns.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Gardiner, *JEA* 9, 10 n. 3.

<sup>46</sup> *GM* 5 (1973), 21-4.

<sup>47</sup> *jḏ, wbbw, pṣqrw*; see I. Gamer-Wallert, *Fische und Fischkulte im alten Ägypten* (Wiesbaden, 1970), 46.

<sup>48</sup> Note, however, that such statements with *pw* are not always part of a eulogy: e.g. B1 140-2; cf. *Lebensmüder* 56-9; *Sisobek* Bi.15, 18, Bii.20.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Amenemhat* [ed. Helck] 7e-f.

<sup>50</sup> A possible exception is R 26.3-6, which seems to me to be an erroneous repetition of R 16.5 ('Look, I am laden with woe./Look, I am in your hand, so may you judge me! Look, I am in suffering'), inspired by the doublet *dr-sjṛ*, a phrase which occurs in both passages.

<sup>51</sup> The same feature occurs in *Ipuur*: Fecht, *Vorwurf an Gott*, 13-14.

A related phenomenon is the use of synopses, which summarize as well as developing preceding arguments and images. Clear instances in relation to the structure as a whole are Petition 5, whose style reflects its role as a central résumé of the Tale's social aspect, and Petition 9, whose recollections of previous phrases mark it as a summation. There are also synopses within petitions (e.g. B1 192–4), and as epitomizing codas (e.g. B1 353–7). Like the use of phrases and generic elements, the form of the nine petitions creates an episodic presentation which is cyclical and repetitive in that they have a single theme variously and repeatedly expounded, and which contrasts with the unitary progression of the dialogues in the narrative.<sup>52</sup> This division and episodic presentation complements the length and number of the petitions, which is an expression of comprehensiveness and manifold totality ( $3 \times 3$ ), also embodying the quality of the peasant's oratory by virtue of the text's all-inclusiveness and volubility.<sup>53</sup>

These features of repetition and partition, as well as a more or less formulaic style, are characteristic of literature in an 'oral' society and show the psychodynamics of orality. An 'oral' sensibility can be traced both in the narrative, which is additive rather than subordinating, and in the petitions, which are aggregative rather than analytic.<sup>54</sup> However, it is uncertain whether the oral context alone can account for the salience of such features in the Tale. The prominence, handling, and presentation of such oral features as repetition within the structure, which itself draws attention to orality, suggest that they are used as a 'literary vehicle' for creating intentional associations and connections' in order to increase the intensity of the text.<sup>55</sup> Attention is drawn not only to the virtuosity of the style. Much of the Tale's meaning is presented through viewing the same themes in different ways, revealing new implications and associations of the fundamental subject matter—Maat. Furthermore, the 'orality' of the petitions heightens their 'subjectivity'.

Imagery is prominent, more than in many other literary texts.<sup>56</sup> It is both pervasive and repetitive, both explicit in similes and implicit in metaphors and figurative language. It is not kept within continuous extended sequences of extravagant similes, as in the *Lebensmüder* or *The Account of the Sporting King*. The only non-pervasive imagery is the use of extended metaphors in the final petition, which amount to personification allegories similar to the parables of other texts.<sup>57</sup> As is usual in Egyptian texts, the motifs of the imagery reflect not the character of the speaker, but the subject matter.<sup>58</sup> Many are drawn from basic life-situations and features of daily life, as if to emphasize the daily relevance of the petitions. Others embrace the divine and the cosmic, as if to bring out the universal importance of what is said. Specific instances present absolute principles with a technique of 'expansion' common in wisdom literature. For example, the idea that every action will

<sup>52</sup> The restatement of positions in a dispute can be paralleled in the *Lebensmüder*, as noted by W. Barta, *Das Gespräch eines Mannes mit seinem Ba* (Papyrus Berlin 3024) (Munich, 1969), 99.

<sup>53</sup> Fecht, *LÄ* 1, 639. Repetition to the point of redundancy is a virtue in an oral composition: Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 39–41.

<sup>54</sup> See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 30–57.

<sup>55</sup> On Job see N.C. Habel, *The Book of Job: a Commentary* (London, 1985), 49. Compare the remarks of Baines on *Sinuhe*, where there is 'a very uneven flow of events, focusing the reader's attention . . . on the examples of fine writing . . . The smaller forms are used in virtuoso fashion' (JEA 68, 35).

<sup>56</sup> Noted by M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, A Book of Readings* 1: *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley, 1973), 10; Fecht, *LÄ* 1, 646.

<sup>57</sup> J. Osing, *LÄ* II, 618–24; Baines, *Fecundity Figures* (Warminster, 1985), 17. 'Parables' occur in *Ipuur* 16.1–4 (see Fecht, *Vorwurf an Gott*, 190–1); *Lebensmüder*, 68–80, 80–5.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. Posener, *L'Enseignement loyaliste*, 13–14.

have an inevitable consequence is expressed with the specific image of a man feeding: 'It is the eater who tastes', and the next verse points to the relevance of the wider significance of this to the peasant's situation as petitioner: '(so) does one who is accused reply' (B1 246-8). Only in part can the Tale's presentation of the abstract theme of justice in concrete and metaphorical terms be related to the necessity for 'oral cultures [to] conceptualize and verbalize . . . knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld'.<sup>59</sup> The tendency to juxtapose different images such as steering and weighing (B1 187-98) and to maximize the 'metaphoric distance'<sup>60</sup> of some mobilizes them for their figurative rather than their literal value:

'Your tongue is the plummet;  
your heart is the weight;  
your lips are its arms' (B1 196-8).

The details of the image are self-consciously bizarre.<sup>61</sup> In B1 342-4 the imagery of Maat as a balance and scales is formulated to focus attention on Maat as the metaphorically represented entity, rather than on the scales *per se*:

'If it [Maat] is scales, it cannot tilt;  
if a balance, it cannot incline to one side'.

This exemplifies the petitions' concern with the realization of an ideal: the balance's role in this figurative description is explicitly connected with its embodiment of Maat's immutability. Thus, this aspect of the imagery, which is displayed by the prominence of personification and role imagery and of analogies,<sup>62</sup> is no mere rhetorical decoration, nor an incidental or inevitable 'oral' feature: it is thematically integral to the Tale's treatment of its subject-matter of Maat.<sup>63</sup> The imagery enacts a literary embodiment of Maat, even as the High Steward is urged to become its human embodiment.

Amphiboly occurs throughout the petitions, but is less extended than in *Ptahhotep*, where an entire maxim can have two complementary readings.<sup>64</sup> In the Tale amphiboly deepens the meaning of particular phrases, such as 'Rescue<sup>65</sup> *hr-nfrjt* at the tiller = *hr nfrt* on account of goodness' (B1 195), and particular passages (e.g. the imagery of navigation and of excretion in B1 309-10), but not of whole sections.<sup>66</sup> The 'expansion' of literal meaning is achieved rather by the structural use of imagery and irony. As well as this complementary role, amphiboly relates to the ironic presentation of the genre 'Eulogy'. In B1 316-18 there is a series of eulogistic statements which are deeply ambiguous. The verse 'There is none whom you have made to speak (who is still) silent' may express the High Steward's power, but, since 'silence' is a desired state for the peasant and his speaking a result of agony, it implies a denunciation.

<sup>59</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 42.

<sup>60</sup> For this term see Fox, *Song of Songs*, 272-7.

<sup>61</sup> Balances which are modelled on parts or all of the human body are known (C. Sourdivé, *La main dans l'Égypte pharaonique* (Bern, 1984), 366-8), but this image is possible in visual terms. See n. 73.

<sup>62</sup> Noted by Osing, *LÄ* 1, 621.

<sup>63</sup> See J. Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten* (Munich, 1990), 58-60.

<sup>64</sup> G. Fecht, *Der Habgierige und die Maat in der Lehre des Ptahhotep* (5. und 19. Maxime) (Glückstadt, 1958).

<sup>65</sup> Lit. 'remove (danger)'.

<sup>66</sup> Compare the treatments of 'bringing a vile deed to land' in B1 356-7 and *Ptahhotep* 93—a highly amphibolistic passage.

Antithetical formulations ('then'-'now') which are characteristic of the genre of 'Lament' are not restricted to that genre, and they can articulate positive statements (as in the albeit ambivalently eulogistic passage just noted: B1 316-18).<sup>67</sup> Antithesis is used within individual stanzas and, as a broader principle, to contrast what is and what should be. Most of the peasant's antithetical statements present a unitary attitude, but there are more extensive antitheses between attitudes, as in the striking juxtaposition of eulogy and denunciation within Petition 3: 'You are Re the lord of heaven' (B1 171) and 'Look, you are a wretch of a washerman' (B1 199-200). This principle of juxtaposition and alternation is not unique to the Tale,<sup>68</sup> but it is prominent here in expressing the ambivalence of the authority which the peasant confronts both in the High Steward and in the officials: compare

'Beware of the officials:  
hearers and sifters, they are a basket,<sup>69</sup>  
(but) their herb is speaking Falsehood,  
so that it is light to their hearts' (B1 163-5).

with

'The officials are repellers of evil, are lords of goodness;  
they are craftsmen of creating what is, joiners of the severed head' (B1 319-20).

In the final petition the contradictory situation behind such varied and contrasting statements is formulated into a single paradoxical stanza which provides a resolution to the use of antithesis:

'(Even) when its portion exists, Falsehood [sallies forth(?)].  
To face it, Truth turns herself back;  
Truth is the goods of Falsehood,  
is making it flourish; (yet) it has not been gathered(?)' (B2 95-9).<sup>70</sup>

Thus, descriptions of the High Steward as an evil justice lead to statements of the paradoxical relationship of Maat and Falsehood—a progression which constitutes a movement in the text from metaphor to abstraction.

Related to these antitheses is the pervasive use of irony. Within the petitions this is especially clear in the treatment of genres (see above), and it becomes increasingly prominent after the initial eulogies, which are not ironic or sarcastic.<sup>71</sup> In Petition 4 the opening eulogy of the High Steward (B1 272-3) is parodied in the concluding denunciation (B1 294-6), with ironic repetitions of several words (*grg*, *shpr*, *bw*-). Within the Tale incidents are also ironically recalled; thus two attendants are sent to bring the peasant to

<sup>67</sup> See Schenkel, *WdO* 15, 54-5; for other examples of positive antithetical statements see, e.g. *The Teaching of Man for his Son* (ed. Helck), 5.1-3.

<sup>68</sup> Different attitudes to death are juxtaposed and reconciled in a similar fashion in the Harpist's Song from the Mansion of King Intef (M. V. Fox, *Or* 46 (1977), 419-20), as they are in the dialogue of the *Lebensmüder*.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *CT* vi, 283s.

<sup>70</sup> I suggest a paraphrase for this problematic passage: Falsehood is aggressive, while Maat will only defend itself. Falsehood cannot exist without Maat, is dependent on it, and exists only as its contrary. Thus while Falsehood enslaves Maat, it cannot ultimately prevail.

<sup>71</sup> Such as that of Petition 1 (B1 93-102); contra, G. Lanczkowski, *Altägyptischer Prophetismus* (Wiesbaden, 1960), 72.

be vindicated in B2 115–16, just as they were sent to beat him in B1 217. The effect of this irony has been considered humorous, but humour is not easily identified and is not an inevitable concomitant or irony. Irony is, rather, ‘common ground between tragedy and comedy’,<sup>72</sup> and the context determines whether a particular instance is humorous. Thus, while a humble man speaking like a sage is potentially comic, other examples of humble sages in wisdom literature—see n. 88—suggest that this is not the effect in this literary context. Similarly, the use of striking archaisms or extreme ‘metaphoric distance’ in imagery is not necessarily humorous (e.g. B1 192–3, 196–8).<sup>73</sup> An example from the petitions is the group of satiric denunciations of the High Steward (B1 199–209), which can be compared in subject matter with the *Teaching of Khety* (ed. Helck) 4–21, where exaggeration produces humour.<sup>74</sup> Here, however, the peasant’s ‘humour’ is very grim, culminating in a sarcastic invocation to the crocodile to prey on him, in which the idea of a shepherd who should ward off the crocodile but who cannot even count is an expression of despair unlikely to produce laughter:

‘Look you are a shepherd—  
Is it not wrong for me that you cannot reckon?  
(if not), may you create loss, as a predatory crocodile!’ (B1 209–10).<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, such sarcastic irony, which has the serious didactic purpose of ridiculing the unjust,<sup>76</sup> is not pervasive. Thus, although the Tale can be characterized as having occasional flashes of dark humour, its general tone is not ‘comic’ or ‘satiric’.<sup>77</sup> The response of the audience to its irony is of another kind.

The irony is structurally significant, operating on two levels. The peasant is often ironic, which befits the role he considers to be his—a perceiver of ignored Maat—but the irony is also ‘dramatic’: the true situation, known by the audience, is hidden from the peasant and adds a further dimension to many of his remarks. Thus, his references to food are unknowingly ironic—for the High Steward is feeding him—as are ultimately all his complaints. This ironic presentation of his situation does not make him laughable or lessen the forcefulness of his petitions, and the tension between the detached presentation and the sympathy the peasant arouses is central to the structure of the Tale. This ironic use of structure, which juxtaposes the two ‘representational modes’ of narrative and discourse (whose styles are made conspicuously different), is ‘scriptible’ in the creation of meaning: the meaningful relationship between the petitions and narrative is never explicitly presented to the audience. While the dramatic irony is by its nature clear to the audience,<sup>78</sup> it is never stated directly that the answer to the peasant’s petitions is inherent in his situation, and this strategy of presentation is reflected in the (stylistic) dichotomy between narrative and discourse. Although the formal structure of the Tale can be

<sup>72</sup> Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 187. See the discussion of W. Guglielmi, *GM* 36 (1979), 69–85.

<sup>73</sup> As noted by Guglielmi, *GM* 36, 78–9. A similar image to that of B1 196–8 occurs in *CT* IV, 298b–299b where it describes a hostile demon ‘whose eyebrows are the arms of the balance’; there the striking imagery may express an alarming appearance. This parallel suggests that the peasant’s image is not meant to be humourously grotesque.

<sup>74</sup> So Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, I, 194.

<sup>75</sup> So U. Luft, *Oikumene* 4 (1983), 135.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Lanczkowski, *Altägyptischer Prophetismus*, 71–2.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 106–11.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Guglielmi, *GM* 36, 74–5.

paralleled, the tension between the objective and the subjective, between irony and suffering, cannot. In *Sinuhe*, for example, the structural significance of genres and modes of discourse—prayer, eulogy, narrative, reflective monologue etc.—runs parallel to the action of the narrative,<sup>79</sup> but in the Tale tension is maintained between the passionate suffering of the petitions and the irony of the plot, and this is echoed in the treatment of various genres within the petitions. The style consistently articulates and intensifies this tension. Rather than being simply comic or concerned with suffering, the mode is ‘tragicomic’; the mixture of subjective sympathy and objective irony is ‘the very essence’ of the Tale.<sup>80</sup> The text is complex, both in its use of style and the narrative’s treatment of the peasant’s oratory, and in its allusive, ironic structure.

### Literariness and meaning

These stylistic features are also significant in the creation of meaning. The way in which style and structure mobilize the Tale’s meaning is highly literary, as is the subject matter; the structural centre is the nine petitions, whose production is the main concern of the narrative plot. The Tale almost describes its own writing: the observation advanced most strongly by Formalist literary criticism—that ‘awareness of form constitutes the subject matter’ of all literature—is particularly illuminating in the case of the Tale.<sup>81</sup> However, an exclusive concern with oratory is not, and does not determine, the meaning of the Tale. In any oral culture knowledge has agonistic dynamics, and is expressed in rhetorical arguments, with concepts being used ‘in situational operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract’.<sup>82</sup> Although this oral or quasi-oral aspect can only partially account for the Tale’s emphasis on orality, it suggests that the Tale’s use of oratory need not reflect an overriding concern with oratory for its own sake, at the expense of other, more conceptual concerns. The modern critical history of the Tale shows a growing perception that its subject is not merely its own form. Herrmann and Brunner have emphasized that the Tale is not just an exercise in fine style or a treatise on the value of rhetoric—although these aspects are integral to any appreciation.<sup>83</sup> Nor are the discourses produced only ‘for the king’s aesthetic pleasure’, as Fox has suggested.<sup>84</sup> Assmann, by contrast, has recognized that Maat is the subject matter of the text—a matter of high intellectual seriousness.<sup>85</sup> Lichtheim analyses the Tale as ‘the intertwining of a plea for justice with a demonstration of the value of rhetoric’,<sup>86</sup> but this presupposes a straightforward conceptual distinction between form (rhetoric) and content (justice). Such a distinction is supported neither by the Egyptian term ‘perfect speech’ which denotes both ideas, nor by literary theory.<sup>87</sup> The relationship between form and content is more subtle.

<sup>79</sup> Baines, *JEA* 68, 31–44.

<sup>80</sup> As noted by Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1, 169.

<sup>81</sup> A. Jefferson and D. Robey, *Modern Literary Theory: a Comparative Introduction* (London, 1986), 37.

<sup>82</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 49.

<sup>83</sup> Herrmann, *Untersuchungen*, 79–93; Brunner, *Grundzüge*, 24. A survey of opinion is provided by Perry, ‘A Critical Study of the Eloquent Peasant’, 24–31.

<sup>84</sup> Fox, *Rhetorica* 1, 15–16; similarly O. D. Berlev, in J. Osing and G. Dreyer (ed.), *Form und Mass: Festschrift für Gerhard Fecht* (Wiesbaden, 1986), 82.

<sup>85</sup> See Assmann’s assessment of the ‘great tradition’ of Middle Kingdom literature: *Ma’at*, 48–51.

<sup>86</sup> *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1, 169.

<sup>87</sup> See B1 106 where the peasant is ‘one truly perfect of speech’, and B1 349–50, where the petition is ‘this perfect speech’. On ‘truthfulness’ as a canon of oratory see Fox, *Rhetorica* 1, 15–16; Assmann, *LÄ* v, 196. See also Jefferson and Robey, *Modern Literary Theory*, passim.

The stylistic and figurative oratory of the petitions makes reference to, and allies the Tale with, the tradition of 'perfect speech' found in Egyptian wisdom literature. This alliance is more specifically reflected in the fact that the petitions include the 'Teaching' genre, and even in the narrative's emphasis on the eloquent petitioner's 'peasant' status.<sup>88</sup> The petitions are highly literary, and it is impossible to determine any relationship between them and the actual pleas of peasants.<sup>89</sup> In wisdom literature 'words *are* deeds':<sup>90</sup> the text and its recitation are themselves the articulation and, thus, a manifestation of wisdom.<sup>91</sup> The Tale expresses this aspect of the genre in the image of the High Steward's representing justice as the palette of Thoth (B1 336), which evokes the significance of speech in a judicial context (among other implications). The peasant's laments describing the destruction of Maat embody Maat; through the synonymy of 'saying' and 'doing'—or 'creating'—Maat they reveal the peasant not merely as a rhetorician, but as an upholder of order, whose 'fine speech/comes forth from the mouth of Re himself' (B1 350). Thus, the Tale's concern with the bringing about of justice has a correlative in its involvement with its own production—in its being spoken and especially in being recorded. This last aspect is an image of the continuity of Maat, which is a goal of wisdom: the writing down of the 'perfect speech' ensures its transmission to future audiences. The association of writing and death, which is common to many cultures,<sup>92</sup> may be evoked in the Tale with respect to writing's being an embodiment of the ideal Maat, which is often associated with the other world,<sup>93</sup> and Maat's causing its 'doer' to endure in the other world.

The potentially fallible nature of recording—awareness of which is implicit in colophons—is important to the Tale, although it is not explicitly referred to when the king orders the writing down of the peasant's words (B1 102–18). The fallibility of speech is also important. A man's speech, like his acts, determines his destiny, but also inevitably reveals and judges his character:

'Be your tongue exact that you may not go astray;  
the limb within him is a man's bane(?)' (B1 162–3).  
'The tongue of men is their balance' (B2 92–3).

In discussing speech's realization of Maat, the peasant also emphasizes the correlative of this: speech may not incorporate Maat correctly or completely, and if it does not, this amounts to speaking Falsehood. Thus a distinction is drawn between 'the standard' itself (e.g. B1 356–7) and 'the standard of speech' (B1 129). This distinction is comparable to

<sup>88</sup> Lowly people who are also wise are a motif in wisdom texts, such as *Discourse of the Fisherman* (see Parkinson, in *Middle Kingdom Studies*, 111, no. xiii); *Ptahhotep* (ed. Dévaud) 58–9. See also the 'sages' in the *Hirtengeschichte* 12–13.

<sup>89</sup> Contra Hornblower, *JEA* 10, 44–5; C. Lalouette, *Textes sacrés et profanes de l'ancienne Egypte: Des Pharaons et des hommes* (Paris, 1984), 331 n. 2.

<sup>90</sup> E. M. Forster, *Maurice*, Chap. 5. On the close relationship between 'speaking' and 'doing' Maat see Assmann, *Ma'at*, 76–8.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. *Ptahhotep* 608–9, on wisdom as a textual tradition.

<sup>92</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 81. For an Egyptian example, see the use of writing to ensure immortality in the Eulogy to Dead Writers in P Chester Beatty IV vs. 2.7–11; translation in R. Parkinson, *Voices from Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Middle Kingdom Writings* (London, 1991), 148–50.

<sup>93</sup> Assmann, *Ma'at*, 117 n. 91.



that between the infallible Thoth and his potentially fallible 'palette':

'O reed, roll, palette of Thoth,  
may you avoid doing evil' (B1 336-7).<sup>94</sup>

This dichotomy is mobilized by the prominent role of imagery in the Tale—bizarre and contradictory images in which the High Steward could prove himself to be either Re, the standard and scales, or a wretched washerman (e.g. B1 171, 192-3, 199-200). The potential fallibility of speech and writing has an analogy in the ambivalent treatment of the peasant's oratory, which is both inspired and unwarranted and which at once promotes and delays justice. This awareness that the truth of the legal cause and the eloquence through which it is argued are not the same relates less to the nature of 'rhetoric'<sup>95</sup> than to the more universal paradox that things are not necessarily as they seem, and that one must distinguish between Maat and its fallible embodiments, whether in speech, written words, or deeds.

The Tale's emphasis on the petitions' oral aspect articulates their partial and subjective nature. The incident at the conclusion, in which the peasant's petitions are returned to him in written form on a 'new roll' (B2 128-9), brings about his final, more objective perception of his situation. It is, significantly, recitation from the roll which informs him of his vindication. The dichotomy in awareness between the peasant on the one hand, and the High Steward and the audience on the other, is most explicitly presented in the first interlude, where the king says:

'As you wish to see me healthy,  
may you cause (the peasant) to linger here,  
without answering anything that he says.  
For the sake of his speaking, be silent!  
Then shall we be brought (it) in writing, that we may hear it' (B1 109-11).

I have considered diverse features of genre, style, tone and structure as crucial factors for an interpretation of the Tale. They cannot be isolated from the thematic material and subject matter, but cohere in a unified whole. The Tale itself acts out the importance of literary form: writing marks the creation and resolution of the fundamental dichotomy between the actual situation and the situation as perceived by the peasant. The dichotomy in the plot and in the drama parallels the formal tension between the narrative and the subjective discourses. The literary form embodying this is both central to the Tale's ironic structure and at one with its creation of meaning.

<sup>94</sup> See Fecht, *LÄ* 1, 641-2. Cf. *Book of the Dead* (Naville) 175, 7-8.

<sup>95</sup> Pace Fox, *Rhetorica* 1, 18.