

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE POOR IN THE POOR MAN OF NIPPUR
AND THE ELOQUENT PEASANT

By

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ABBREVIATIONS

ÄAT	Ägypten und Altes Testament
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary. Edited by D.N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992.
AnSt	Anatolian Studies
Akkadica Suppl.	Akkadica Supplement Series
CAD	The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Edited by A.L. Oppenheim, et al. 21 vols. Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956-.
CdÉ	Chronique d'Égypte
CANE	Civilizations of the Ancient Near East. Edited by J. Sasson. 4 vols. New York, 1995.
CHANE	Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
EJ	Encyclopaedia Judaica
GM	Göttinger Miszellen
JAF	Journal of American Folklore
JAMA	Journal of the American Medical Association
JEA	Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
JESHO	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
JCS	Journal of Cuneiform Studies
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JSP	Journal of Social Policy
LÄ	Lexikon der Ägyptologie. Edited by W. Helck and E. Otto. 7 vols. Wiesbaden, 1986.
LingAeg	Lingua Aegyptia
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (1985)
OEAE	The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt. Edited by D. Redford. 3 vols. New York, 2001.

PAPS	Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society
Rhetorica	Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric
SAAB	State Archives of Assyria Bulletin
SBLDS	Society for Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLWAW	Society for Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Mesopotamian satire *The Poor Man of Nippur* (PMN) tells the story of Gimil-Ninurta, a pauper from Nippur, who tries unsuccessfully to share his only possession, a goat procured using proceeds from the sale of his last garment, with the mayor. When the mayor instead steals the goat and beats the Poor Man, dismissing him from the compound with only gristle and third-rate beer, Gimil-Ninurta vows to visit threefold revenge upon his abuser. The majority of the tale details Gimil-Ninurta's cleverly planned revenge against the mayor, which involved three comic and severe beatings, in fulfillment of his vow.¹ Throughout the tale, Gimil-Ninurta's extreme poverty functions as a carefully articulated aspect of character that underlies his sometimes curious behavior and leaves him vulnerable to the abuse of members of the upper stratum at the same time as it empowers his dramatic response.

When PMN was first edited by O.R. Gurney in 1956 it was heralded as the sole extant work of humor from Mesopotamia, a region hitherto assumed to have been inhabited by a "humourless people."² PMN, Gurney explains, is "nothing less than a humorous tale"³ that, E.A. Speiser predicted, "is bound to stand out, primarily because it portrays the ancient Mesopotamians—as Gurney has stressed—in a lighthearted mood that is certainly rare if not altogether unexpected."⁴ Not long after its publication, the tale came to be recognized also as a work of implied social criticism and for the welcome and unique light that it was believed to shed on lower strata Mesopotamians.⁵ A.L. Oppenheim observes that "The story is told with great freshness and gives us much precious information about everyday speech, the mores of citizens of Nippur, and a

¹ O.R. Gurney. "The Poor Man of Nippur," *AnSt* 6(1956): 145-164; O.R. Gurney and J.J. Finkelstein. *Sultantepe Tablets I* (London: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1957); J.S. Cooper. "Structure, Humor, and Satire in the Poor Man of Nippur," *JCS* 27.3(1975): 163-174.

² G. Contenau. *Everyday Life in Babylon and Assyria* (London: E. Arnold, 1954), p. 302.

³ Gurney, "Poor Man of Nippur," 145

⁴ E.A. Speiser. "Sultantepe Tablet 38 73 and Enuma Eliš Iii 69," *JCS* 11.2(1957): 43.

⁵ A. L. Oppenheim. *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (ed. E. Reiner; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 274.

number of facts about workaday life not to be found in the usual types of documentation.”⁶

The most complete text of PMN is dated to 701 BCE and was found in Hurzina (modern Sultantepe, Turkey).⁷ Like many works of Mesopotamian literature that survived the ages, the text was probably copied as part of the rigorous scribal curriculum. Based on its archaic linguistic features, it has been concluded that the folktale was a part of the traditional Babylonian literary canon.⁸ Alongside the complete Sultantepe edition another 8th century fragment was found, containing parts of lines 72-82 from the upper right-hand corner of a tablet that probably contained only a small selection of the tale. Another partial edition of the text was found in Nineveh in the collection of Assurbanipal, containing parts of lines 1-18.⁹

In 1975, J.S. Cooper observed that “Because it [PMN] is unique, having little in common with other genres of Akkadian literature, the text can be examined and explicated on its own terms, with minimal external referents.”¹⁰ At the same time, in addition to the synchronic study of the tale, Cooper notes that “Subsequent studies may... perhaps utilize evidence from similar literature in other cultures to improve our understanding of the Poor Man of Nippur.”¹¹

Following Cooper’s suggestion, I note that PMN finds a most interesting parallel in the Middle Egyptian folktale The Eloquent Peasant (EP), which recounts the courtroom exploits of Khunanup, a peasant who appeals the unjust confiscation of his valuable cargo by an official named Nemtinakht.¹² The majority of EP retells Khunanup’s petitions to Nemtinakht’s lord Rensi, who is so taken by the peasant’s

⁶ Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 274.

⁷ Gurney, “Poor Man of Nippur.”

⁸ Gurney, “Poor Man of Nippur,” Speiser, “Sultantepe Tablet 38 73 and Enuma Eliš Iii 69.”

⁹ Gurney, “Poor Man of Nippur,” 148; M. deJ. Ellis. “A New Fragment of the Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur” *JCS* 26.2(1974): 88-89.

¹⁰ Cooper, “Structure, Humor, and Satire,” 163.

¹¹ Cooper, “Structure, Humor, and Satire,” 163. See also E. Reiner. “Why Do You Cuss Me?” *PAPS* 130.1 (1986).

¹² A.H. Gardiner. “The Eloquent Peasant” *JEA* 9.1/2 (1923): 5-25; M. Lichtheim. “The Eloquent Peasant,” *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings, Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 169-184; R.B. Parkinson *The Eloquent Peasant* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1991); idem. “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940-640 BC* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 54-88; V.A. Tobin. “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 3rd Ed. (ed. W.K. Simpson; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 25-44.

rhetorical skill that he postpones the peasant justice at the request of the King in order to continue hearing his oratories, a duplicity that parallels Joseph's detention of his brothers in Genesis 42-45. Both tales describe the detention of others with ulterior motives. In order to avoid spoiling the authenticity and delightful urgency of the peasant's petitions, Rensi is careful to keep Khunanup from knowing his sympathy for his case. Rensi maintains the perception of partiality to Nemtinakht throughout the petitions, even as he supplies Khunanup and his family with stipends through intermediaries, ensuring that no real harm befalls them.

After nine artfully crafted and deliciously ironic petitions that discuss the nature of Ma'at (Justice), Khunanup surrenders in frustration and leaves Rensi's court. To Khunanup's surprise, he is rewarded with the position, person, and possessions of Nemtinakht, a conclusion that seems foregone to the audience, which knows from the beginning why the proceedings were prolonged. Because of Khunanup's patience with the official mechanisms for airing grievances, EP functions to reinforce the importance of following procedure and the significance of rhetoric even as it serves to warn of the dangers of misuse of power. As we see in PMN, Khunanup's poverty relative to Nemtinakht and Rensi functions to help guide the peasant's decisions throughout the tale, leading him to follow procedure even when it brings disaster upon him. Unlike Gimil-Ninurta, Khunanup had much to lose by discarding procedure.

EP is partially extant in three Middle Kingdom Egyptian manuscripts, which when collated contain what is assumed to be the complete text.¹³ The earliest two editions of the text, P. Berlin 3023 (B1) and 3025 (B2), date to the 12th Dynasty and contain slight textual variations, and it is also extant in P. Berlin 10499 (R) from 13th Dynasty Thebes.¹⁴ A Middle Kingdom date for the tale is supported by the political circumstances that W.K. Simpson observes are reflected in "anti-administration elements" underlying the text that are emblematic of the political and social upheaval at the end of Dynasty 12 (1990-1785).¹⁵

¹³ Lichtheim, *AEL*, 169.

¹⁴ Parkinson, *The Eloquent Peasant*.

¹⁵ W.K. Simpson. "The Political Background of the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant," *GM* 120(1990): 95-99.

1.1 PMN, EP, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Texts

Although, as we shall see, Oppenheim may have overstated the value of PMN as an accurate record of everyday life in Mesopotamia, his reading clearly reflects the paucity of data on the poor in the ancient Near East. Archeological evidence of the poor is indeed limited; materially, the poor had fewer—and lower quality—goods than members of the upper strata of society, and in any event no artifact could help explain the everyday speech or mores of Nippur’s lower social strata. Because the poor had few possessions, they engaged less in commercial activity and appear occasionally as agents in economic documents, and slaves—a lower stratum group—are sometimes bought and sold, as discussed in G. Galil’s recent study of lower strata families in Neo-Assyria.¹⁶

Biographical, wisdom, and legal literature from the ancient Near East often point to the imperative of protecting the rights society’s weaker members, especially widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor.¹⁷ From Mesopotamia, the prologue to the Sumerian Laws of Ur-Nammu (ca. 2100 BCE) is illustrative. Ur-Nammu boasts that:

I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty. I did not deliver the man with one shekel to the man with one mina (i.e., 60 shekels). I did not deliver the man with but one sheep to the man with one ox (A iv 162-168, C ii 30-39).¹⁸

Similarly, in the Middle Egyptian Instruction of Merikare, a pseudepigraphic text attributed to Herakleopolitan King Merikare’s father Kheti that Lichtheim holds was written during the reign of Merikare “to announce the direction of his policy and containing valid, rather than fictitious, historical information,”¹⁹ Merikare is instructed: “Do justice, then you will endure on earth; Calm the weeper, don’t oppress the widow ...”²⁰ (46-47) Also, in EP, Khunanup compliments Rensi, proclaiming that he is “the father of the orphan and the husband of the widow” (B1.93-94). The moral imperative is

¹⁶ G. Galil. *The Lower Stratum Families in the Neo-Assyrian Period* (CHANE 27; Boston: Brill, 2007)

¹⁷ F. Charles Fensham. “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature” *JNES* 21.2(1962): 129-139.

¹⁸ M.T. Roth. *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (SBLWAW 6; Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1995), p. 16.

¹⁹ Lichtheim, *AEL*, 97.

²⁰ Lichtheim, *AEL*, 100.

articulated in the Hebrew Bible as well; Deuteronomy 24:17, reflecting a common biblical sentiment, decrees: “You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pawn.”²¹

Abundant though these references may be, they do not describe the everyday condition of lower stratum groups, and in any case they tend to tell analysts more about the people who wrote about these groups than about the people who their authors claim to have protected. Wisdom literature sometimes judges poverty as divine punishment and other times views it as the product of socioeconomic, rather than supernatural, forces.²² The book of Job reflects this tension in the discourse between the innocent sufferer Job, who questions the meaning of his agony, and his friends, who represent the retributive orthodoxy, but again this tells us little about the condition of the poor. Accordingly, the value of these texts is in primarily for the study of upper stratum ethical standards rather than the conditions of lower social strata, although they do indeed point to the existence of a social structure in which the lower strata were vulnerable and in need of protection.

Perhaps capitalizing on the ethical imperative of protecting the poor, petitioners—and Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup may be literary examples here—tend to present themselves as being poor, describing themselves using diminutive terms and overstating their poverty in an effort to win favor. One particular petitioner, the spurned exorcist Urad-Gula may have actually drawn subtle parallels between his circumstances and the poverty of Gimil-Ninurta in an effort to win the favor of Assurbanipal, a move that underscores PMN’s popularity.²³ Interestingly, petitions such as these followed the same pattern as prayers, reminding us of the idea that poverty was often understood as divine punishment: gods made people poor and the king could intercede on their behalf, a nuance that will be important to remember in reading PMN and EP.²⁴

²¹ See also, for example, Exodus 22:21-24 and Psalm 82. All Bible translations follow the NJPS.

²² H.C. Washington. *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs* (SBLDS 142; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

²³ S. Parpola. “The Forlorn Scholar,” in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner* (ed. F. Rochberg; New Haven: AOS, 1987), p. 257-278.

²⁴ Parpola 1987 and B. Lion. “La conception de la pauvreté dans les textes littéraires akkadiens,” in *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East. Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre assyriologique internationale, Prague, July 1-5, 1996 - Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Oriental Institute* (ed. J. Prosecky; Prague: Oriental Institute, 1998), p. 199-214.

Considered in this light, Oppenheim’s assessment of the value of PMN—and by extension, EP—rings true: there are precious few resources for the study of the poor in the ancient Near East, and in this regard PMN and EP are exceedingly important, even if its descriptions, as we shall see, lean toward the fantastic or literary. Neither tale purports to tell the historically true story of their lower stratum protagonists and to read them in that way would distort the great value of PMN and EP: two nuanced portrayals of exceptional lower strata protagonists who react very differently to roughly comparable situations. It is the aim of the present project to explore the literary representations of the poor in PMN and EP, with a view toward circumscribing the contribution that such depictions have to our understanding of the poor in the ancient Near East and to highlight the role of poverty in the two tales.

1.2 Comparing PMN and EP

Despite their histories of contemporary scholarship and the apparent similarities of the texts, PMN has yet to be systematically compared to EP. Oppenheim notes briefly in *Ancient Mesopotamia* that in PMN, “the King is addressed ceremoniously and with recondite phrases, a situation which reminds of the Egyptian story of ‘The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant.’” And, in H. Jason’s analysis of PMN as ethnopoetry, she notes differences in the ways that Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup respond to adversity, the latter being substantially more conventional than the former. Although Jason is confident that both emerged as oral tales, she explains “that the ‘Peasant’ is a courtly reworking of an oral story, more literary and refined, and much farther removed from its source than the ‘Poor Man.’”²⁵

The topical similarity of PMN and EP is fairly straightforward: both feature protagonists that face similar adversity at the hands of their social betters. To be ‘poor’ is to live in a condition of lacking material and cultural possessions that can be understood as deprivation relative to the others’ privilege (see 2.1.1). Although Khunanup was somewhat more privileged than Gimil-Ninurta, both characters were poorer than their antagonists.

²⁵ H. Jason “The Poor Man of Nippur: An Ethnopoetic Analysis,” *JCS* 31.4(1979); 194.

As Jason has noted, both protagonists respond differently to adversity, conveying distinct messages in the context of roughly comparable problems. Whereas Khunanup responds to his unfair treatment by making excellent use of accepted channels of appeal—EP often seems at pains to show that Rensi causes no real harm to befall Khunanup or his wife—Gimil-Ninurta, who is also the victim of injustice, responds in a way that is by all accounts unorthodox although not necessarily morally wrong. By taking the mayor of Nippur outside the city gates and beating him comically, Gimil-Ninurta chooses to honor the value of reciprocity over the respect of social structures. In doing so, PMN departs from accepted values and lampoons them, even in the carnivalesque world constructed by the folktale out of opposites and improbabilities. Ironically, Khunanup’s measured and finely rendered response motivated Rensi to postpone justice, bringing upon a second crisis that has no parallel in PMN. Although vastly different, both reactions to adversity are made possible by the social location of the reactors; Khunanup had much to lose by responding with the abandon displayed by Gimil-Ninurta.

As folktales, it should be remembered that PMN and EP most likely achieved popularity and survival because they ultimately served the important role of inculcating accepted societal norms in young people. W.R. Bascom reminds us that:

folklore is an important mechanism for maintaining the stability of culture. It is used to inculcate the customs and ethical standards in the young, and as an adult to reward him with praise when he conforms, to punish him with ridicule or criticism when he deviates, to provide him with rationalizations when the institutions and conventions are challenged or questioned, to suggest that he be content with things as they are, and to provide him with a compensatory escape from ‘the hardships, the inequalities, the injustice’ of everyday life.²⁶

Viewed in this light, the reactions of Khunanup and Gimil-Ninurta to their respective injustices represent an important aspect of Egyptian and Mesopotamian society: the conservative impulse of community preservation and a reminder of the unacceptability of the stability-impairing abuse of power. Gimil-Ninurta’s unconventional response may be understood as an escape that need not reflect the actual historical situation or actual options of the poor. PMN does not necessarily give any record of the historical situation

²⁶ W.R. Bascom. “Four Functions of Folklore,” *JAF* 67(1954): 349.

of the poor in ancient Nippur, although it is certainly appears to reinforce conformity with accepted means for redress of injustice while at the same time warning of the dangers of the misuse of power. The way in which both tales may fit into Bascom's proposal concerning the social function of folklore will be explored in the coming pages, as a complement to the discussion of their respective stories.

In comparing the characterizations of the poor in PMN and EP, I hope to more fully illuminate the ways in which poverty functions in the plot of the tales. In particular, I am interested in the ways that Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup are similar and different, as well as the ways that the authors of the texts conveyed unique messages by means of similar protagonists facing the common denominator of adversity due to the abuse of power. In order to compare these tales, it will also be helpful to appreciate the social dynamics embodied in PMN and EP and the ways that folk literature is capable of playing games with social stratification. Accordingly, as a preface to our discussion of PMN and EP, I consider aspects of social class and the social functions that folktales may be seen to serve.

CHAPTER II:
ASPECTS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND THE FUNCTIONS OF FOLKLORE

2.1 Social Stratification

2.1.1 'Poverty' and 'Wealth'

'Poverty' and 'wealth' are conditions resulting from different accumulations of resources, including ownership of and access to the necessities of life. P. Townsend explains that individuals can be said to be impoverished when they:

lack or are denied the income and other resources, including the use of assets and receipt of goods in kind equivalent to income, to obtain the conditions of life—that is, diets, material goods, amenities, standards and services—to enable them to play the roles, participate in the relationships and follow the customary behaviour that is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society...²⁷

Poverty is frequently defined in absolute terms, a practice that often leads to its conflation with subsistence; doing so, J. Scott cautions, “tends to equate ‘poverty’ with the very different idea of ‘starvation,’” and, moreover, ignores human physiological needs beyond mere survival.²⁸ While survival might provide an objective point of reference for discussions of poverty, human beings tend to aspire to more than that, and in any event, not all needs can be objectively assessed in those terms; as Scott observes, “the number and type of underclothes [that]... a person needs cannot be assessed with the same precision as the amount of carbohydrate that is required of a basic diet.”²⁹ Even caloric intake, however, cannot be measured absolutely across social and cultural boundaries. Senior citizens, for example, require different caloric intakes and non-physiological needs—clothing, for example—than professional athletes.³⁰ Bearing these considerations in mind, many analysts, including Scott, follow Townsend in understanding poverty as

²⁷ P. Townsend. “Poverty,” *Social Science Encyclopaedia* (3rd Ed; Ed. A. Kuiper; New York: Rutledge, 2004), p. 782.

²⁸ J. Scott. *Poverty and Wealth: Citizenship, Deprivation, and Privilege* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 10.

²⁹ Scott, *Poverty and Wealth*, 11.

³⁰ P. Townsend. “Poverty as Relative Deprivation: Resources and Style of Living,” in *Poverty, Inequality, and Class Structure* (ed. D. Wedderburn; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 15-41.

the condition of “relative deprivation” of resources.³¹ Relative definitions of poverty, “refer to the individual's or group's lack of resources when compared with that of other members of the society—in other words their relative standard of living.”³²

‘Poverty,’ understood relatively, cannot exist without its opposite, ‘wealth’—the possession of sufficient or excess resources enabling the satisfaction of the conditions of life or, beyond that, material enjoyment. The assignment of any absolute value to wealth is necessarily arbitrary and is best avoided. Viewed thus, the ‘wealthy’ are individuals whose access to resources exceeds the normal expected distribution of their community and any one person may be said to be wealthier than another based on their access to material property.

2.1.2 ‘Class’ and ‘Social Stratification’

‘Class’ is a concept used to describe and organize hierarchically perceived social and economic cleavages that distinguish certain groups from other groups on the basis of socio-economic power in a stratified population. Upper classes tend to have more power than lower classes. Although it is often the case that members of distinct social classes share particular attributes or worldviews and upper and lower classes always exist in non-egalitarian societies, the specific attributes of a given class—their characteristic politics, habits, and manners—are not universal. Shared perceptions of the attributes of different classes are socially constructed, partly on the basis of the perceived attributes of different classes, and partly on the basis of other social dynamics including power, jealousy, contempt, and the like. Class then is a universal phenomenon; the specific characteristics of classes in different cultures are socially constructed.

Power in socially stratified societies is, by definition, concentrated at the higher strata. As such, poverty—the condition of lower strata relative to higher strata—should be understood not only as resource deprivation but also, in the words of analyst J.C.

³¹ See Townsend, “Poverty as Relative Deprivation.”; idem. “Deprivation,” *JSP* 16.2(1987): 125-146; and idem. *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979).

³² “Poverty,” *A Dictionary of Sociology* (3rd Ed.; Ed. J. Scott and G. Marshall; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 513.

Kincaid, as “an inability to control the circumstances of one’s life in the face of more powerful groups in society.”³³

2.2 Functions of Folklore

In “Four Functions of Folklore,” W.R. Bascom parses the social function of folklore, distinguishing four related functions, escape, validation, education, and social control, which may themselves be grouped together as fulfilling “the single function of maintaining the stability of culture.”³⁴ In doing so, paradoxically, not all folklore accurately reflects those social institutions:

There is no difficulty of course in finding instances in folklore where laziness, complacency or the lack of ambition and initiative are condemned, but are there any which suggest that the individual destroy or even disregard the institutions and conventions of his society?³⁵

By ‘function,’ Bascom seems to mean the unintended consequences of the sharing of folklore; Bascom at no point indicates that individuals who create, modify, and circulate folklore have these four functions in mind, although he does indicate folklore may nevertheless be understood in terms of these consequences. Viewed in this light, Bascom’s approach is characterized by E. Oring as ‘traditional functionalism:’

a particular theoretical orientation which asserts that (1) sociocultural patterns have consequences which are independent of the conscious intentions of the actors who perform them, (2) these patterns may be explained or understood in terms of these consequences, and (3) these consequences are explanatory only if they contribute and are necessary to the proper integration and functioning of the individual or society.³⁶

Oring is quick to point out that although this model may succeed in explaining the socio-cultural consequences of folklore, it does little to explain the origins of folklore and may

³³ J.C. Kincaid. *Poverty and Equality in Britain: a Study of Social Security and Taxation* (Harmandsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 171.

³⁴ Bascom, “Four Functions,” 338.

³⁵ Bascom, “Four Functions,” 349.

³⁶ E. Oring. “Three Functions of Folklore: Traditional Functionalism as Explanation in Folkloristics,” *JAF* 89(1976): 70.

be more valuable as a means of describing, rather than explaining, how some socio-cultural institutions were preserved at given points in history.

There is, Oring cautions, no necessary connection between socio-cultural institutions and folklore.³⁷ A folktale may be shared in circumstances that are different from those that surrounded its genesis and in those circumstances its function may be different. The fact that a stone may function as a paperweight does not explain how or why that stone came to be in geological prehistory. Folktales are no different; consider, for example, Cinderella's migration from the oral folktales collected as AT-510A to the pages of Charles Perrault's version in 1697 to the 1950 Disney animated film.³⁸ Even within cultures, which are dynamic and multifaceted, a given folktale may function differently in different communities of readers. Finally, folktales often outlast the institutions that they may have once preserved. The existence of folklore that functions to inculcate values at particular times as an unintended consequence of its sharing does not, however, mean that it is necessary to the existence of values. All this does not obviate the necessity of inquiring into the messages of folktales, but it does require one to be somewhat more cautious in assessing their functions.

2.3 Social Stratification and the Functions of PMN and EP

Bearing these considerations in mind, Bascom's functional conceptualization could be profitably restricted to an interest in the socio-cultural consequences that folklore may have had for different facets of different cultures at different points in history. The function of folklore, that is, the institution or institutions that it preserves from change, may well have had a hand in the development and survival of a given folktale, as Bascom implies, but so too might any number of factors, including enjoyment, artistry, tradition, etc.

In a socially stratified society, such as Middle Kingdom Egypt or Old Babylonian Mesopotamia, it would be reasonable to expect, in light of the analyses of Bascom and

³⁷ Oring, "Three Functions."

³⁸ Compare Perrault's "Cendrillon," in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (Bruxelles: B. Le Francq, 1786; repr. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2003) with Disney. *Walt Disney's Cinderella* (1950).

Oring, that there may be folklore that reinforce social and economic cleavages between the wealthy and less wealthy. At the very least, one would expect folktales that touch upon social stratification to have that effect. While PMN and EP do not focus exclusively on social stratification, they make it very clear that the abuse of Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup is made possible by their poverty relative to their oppressors, and the subject of social stratification is at the very least an important aspect of the two tales.

Both Egypt and Mesopotamia were fairly rigidly stratified societies, which divided carefully between classes and allowed for only a limited degree of social mobility.³⁹ That neither PMN nor EP seems to reflect the archaeologically constructed reality of their social matrix says only that they are fictional (or fictionalized) literary representations. Following Bascom, such discrepancies may be understood at least partly as mechanisms of escape from the everyday hardships faced by those who shared folklore as a result of social stratification. Accordingly, PMN and EP may be read as artifacts of the culture that produced them rather than as historical records.

Bearing in mind these general considerations concerning poverty, social stratification, and the functions of folklore, it will be possible to read PMN and EP with a sensitivity to the ways in which the authors play with social location in the reality that they construct in their tales. By engaging these aspects of the world of the folktales, as

³⁹ On Mesopotamia see I.M. Diakonoff. "Socio-economic Classes in Babylonia and the Babylonian Concept of Social Stratification," *Gesellschaftsklassen im Alten Zweistromland und in den angrenzenden Gebieten: XVIII. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (ed. E.O. Edzard; München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1972), p. 41-52; G. Galil. *Lower Stratum Families*; I.J. Gelb. "From Freedom to Slavery," *Gesellschaftsklassen im Alten Zweistromland und in den angrenzenden Gebieten: XVIII. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (ed. E.O. Edzard; München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1972), p. 81-92; idem. "Response to I.M. Diakonoff," *Gesellschaftsklassen im Alten Zweistromland und in den angrenzenden Gebieten: XVIII. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (ed. E.O. Edzard; München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1972b), p. 49-51; V.A. Jakobson. "The Social-structure of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Ancient Mesopotamia: Socio-economic History, a Collection of Studies by Soviet Scholars* (Moscow: "Nauka" Pub. House, Central Dept. of Oriental Literature, 1969), p. 277-295; N. Postgate. "The ownership and exploitation of land in Assyria in the 1st Millennium B.C.," *Reflets des deux fleuves: Volume de mélanges offerts à André Finet*. (Eds. M. Lebeau and Ph. Talon; Akkadica Suppl. 6; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), p. 141-152.

On Egypt see S.L.D. Katary. "Wealth," *OEA*, III:485-487; D. Lorton. "Legal and Social Institutions of Pharaonic Egypt," *CANE*, 345-362; J.E. Richards. "Ancient Egyptian Mortuary Practice and the Study of Socioeconomic Differentiation," *Anthropology and Egyptology: A Developing Dialogue* (ed. J. Lustig; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 33-42; T.A.H. Wilkinson. "Social Stratification," *OEA*, III:301-305.

well as the worlds that are constructed within the folktales themselves, the forthcoming analysis will illuminate aspects of the characterizations of the protagonists, including the ways that their responses to adversity are similar and different, as well as the way that the authors of the texts conveyed different messages by means of similar protagonists. Moreover, we will also read PMN and EP in light of Bascom's identification of the function of folklore as a tool to inculcate values and ensure cultural continuity through successive generations. Considering the social class hierarchies in the two tales, we will analyze the representations of the poor protagonists and ask if and how the two folktales, in the words of Bascom, "preserve the institutions from direct attack and change."⁴⁰

⁴⁰Bascom, "Four Functions," 349.

CHAPTER III: POVERTY AND EXPLOITATION IN PMN AND EP

At the risk of oversimplifying the drama of PMN and EP, it may be observed that on a very basic level the two tales have similarly structured plots. Both tales begin with the unjust confiscation of their protagonist's property, follow their ultimately successful quests for redress, and end with the justification of their retribution. Both protagonists are members of lower social strata than their antagonists, and both would be in serious trouble were they to lose the property that is confiscated unjustly. Beyond these general similarities, however, there are a number of significant differences between the tales, including, among other things, the vastly different approaches employed by Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup to resolve their respective crises. While Gimil-Ninurta lashes out violently against the mayor of Nippur, Khunanup's surprisingly eloquent response to his abuse brings about a second crisis, the postponement of justice. Significantly, the plots of both tales emphasize the poverty of their protagonists, which motivates their different responses to adversity and established the context for the progression of their plots. In the sections to follow, a comparison of PMN and EP is undertaken with the goal of illuminating the relativity of poverty in these tales and contributing to our understanding of how the poor have been represented in ancient Near Eastern literary texts.

3.1 Poverty in PMN and EP: Absolutely Relative

One of the most obvious differences between PMN and EP is that Gimil-Ninurta, the Poor Man of Nippur, is a great deal poorer than Khunanup, a farmer-trader whose crisis is brought about in part by the high value of his cargo. Of all the characters in the two tales, Gimil-Ninurta comes the closest to living in absolute poverty.⁴¹ In fact, the first ten lines of PMN appear to be at pains to show the abject poverty of Gimil-Ninurta:

⁴¹ Poverty, it may be remembered, is a condition resulting from limited access to the necessities of life. Although poverty must be understood relative to the normative access to resources, it may also be understood in absolute terms as the inability to survive, that is, to access the conditions of life. All except the uppermost members of socially stratified populations are relatively poor, including the absolutely poor.

There was a man of Nippur, poor and humble,
 Gimil-Ninurta was his name, a miserable man.
 In his city Nippur wearily he sat.
 He had no silver, the pride of his people,
 he possessed no gold, the pride of mankind.
 His store-room thirsted for the pure grain.
 With craving for bread his liver was oppressed,
 with craving for meat and beer his face was disfigured.
 Daily for lack of food he used to lie hungry.
 He was clad in garments for which he had no change.⁴² (1-10)

Note that in lines 1-10 no aspect of Gimil-Ninurta is mentioned without making reference to his poverty, hunger, and low social status relative to his community. The fact that he is somehow able to survive, however meagerly, is a part of the hyperbolic fantasy of the tale. Gimil-Ninurta is a caricature of a poor person: he an overblown sort of poor, deprived of all things in a way that is entirely unrealistic.⁴³ Accordingly it would be fair to classify Gimil-Ninurta as being absolutely poor, a condition, it is noted, that will enable him to act with complete abandon as he seeks revenge on his tormentor.

The first two lines tell a great deal about Gimil-Ninurta. Gimil-Ninurta is identified as being extremely poor, of course; but he is introduced using the traditional Mesopotamian introduction for a hero and he is located in the city of Nippur. Comparing PMN with *The Tale of the Illiterate Doctor in Nippur*—and contradicting Gurney’s suggestion that PMN was an unparalleled Akkadian tale—E. Reiner notes several similarities, including most importantly the setting of a trickster story in Nippur.⁴⁴ More than any other city in ancient Mesopotamian city, Nippur occurs as a setting for tales about swindlers, in much the same way that the Polish city Chelm came to be known in Jewish folklore for the comic naiveté of its inhabitants (the “Wise Men of Chelm”).⁴⁵ Reiner concludes that Gimil-Ninurta’s place of residence may have indicated to readers that he was a trickster-hero. On another level, it may have been surprising to see a hero described as so vividly indigent. Acknowledging the Poor Man’s place of residence from

Absolute poverty is somewhat more difficult to identify than relative poverty, in large part because the conditions of life are not always clear or consistent.

⁴²My analysis of PMN follows the translation in Gurney, “Poor Man of Nippur.”

⁴³ See also Lion, “La conception de la pauvreté.”

⁴⁴ Reiner, “Why Do You Cuss Me?”

⁴⁵See, for example S. Simon *The Wise Men of Helm and Their Merry Tales* (New York: Behrman House Publishing, 1995); A.-L. Kalish, “Chelm in Jewish Folklore,” *EJ*, IV:588-589.

the very beginning would have fostered a sense of anticipation and excitement; at this early juncture in the narrative, however, there has been no trickery and it unclear who will dupe whom.

Whatever associations the city of Nippur may have had for the tale's ancient audience, it is important not to confuse the Nippur depicted in PMN with the actual ancient Mesopotamian urban center of this name. As noted, the very existence of a man as poor as Gimil-Ninurta may have indicated that the tale takes place in a fantastic world. His family, unable to provide anything special for the feast (lines 20 and 49), may have been able to support him but he does not seem to have any loyalty to them, and although he does seem to have shelter (the "courtyard" from lines 17 and 46), he has only one possession, his tunic, which he exchanges for a goat. The Nippur of the tale is a place where dirty, threadbare clothing would be worth the equivalent of a female goat; naked paupers would be given audiences with the mayor and the king; kings would dispense chariots and royal clothing to citizens without question or hesitation; simple disguises would completely hide individuals' identities; and so on.

Compared with Gimil-Ninurta, Khunanup seems to have been relatively wealthy. EP begins by recalling that:

There was once a man
Called Khunanup
he was a peasant of Wadi Natrun,
whose wife was called Meret.⁴⁶ (R1.1-2)

Wadi Natrun, which R.B. Parkinson identifies with Khunau's home, "Salt-Field," is an oasis 300 miles west of present-day Cairo and was far removed—spatially and conceptually—from the political center of the Middle Kingdom.⁴⁷ Just as Gimil-Ninurta was assumed to have been a trickster by virtue of hailing from Nippur, it may be assumed that Khunanup was both a geographical and a political outsider, whether or not one identifies "Salt-Field" with Wadi Natrun. Although it is clear from his place of residence that Khunanup, "a peasant of Wadi Natrun" (R1.1), lives far from the center of

⁴⁶ My analysis follows Parkinson, "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant."

⁴⁷ Parkinson, "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant," 58, 75 n.1; Cf. D. Devauchelle, Didier Devauchelle, "Le *paysan* déraciné," *CdÉ* 70 (1995): 34-40. I have retained Parkinson's use of the designation Wadi Natrun in my analysis because I follow his translation (1997); a more cautious analysis might avoid this potential anachronism and follow Tobin (2003) or Lichtheim (1973).

Hierakonpolitan Egypt, the period in which the tale is set (Dynasties 9 and 10), it should be noted that the term rendered as “peasant” (*sxtj*) is perhaps less than appropriate, given the nature of Khunanup’s relative wealth and the worth of his cargo.

After Khunanup is introduced, he announces that he is going to Egypt to buy provisions for his children. Meret, Khunanup’s wife, is sent to measure grain for his journey and for her own use at home, setting aside amounts that, as R.B. Parkinson notes, are “rather low.” We shall soon see they are also insufficient to last the duration of his search for legal redress, which was extended repeatedly by Rensi, the High Steward and lord of the land on which Khunanup was abused.⁴⁸ Conversing with his wife in R1.3-4, Khunanup uses the colloquial Egyptian pronominal *p3/t3/n3* series of demonstratives, which J.P. Allen identifies as being colloquial Middle Egyptian.⁴⁹ In contrast to the surprising eloquence of his petitions, Parkinson understands the use of *p3* to be the language of the lower strata of society. Indeed, while it does create an interesting contrast with the nine petitions, because the section of text containing *p3* is attested only in R1, a manuscript that contains no petitions, there is no way to know whether the use of *p3* was not just a feature of R1 alone.⁵⁰

It is Khunanup’s journey that will create the condition for the tale’s crisis.

Khunaup:

... loaded his asses with reeds and fan palms,
natron and salt,
sticks from [...]itu,
and staffs from Farafra,
leopard skins,
and wolf hides
[pebbles] and [serpentine]
wild mint-plants and inbi-fruits
tebu- and uben- plants—
—with all the fair produce of Wadi Natrun (B1 1-15).

Khunanup’s cargo will play a central role in EP, as it is coveted by Nemtinakht en route to Hierakonpolis. It should be observed that of the Peasant’s cargo only natron and salt

⁴⁸ Parkinson, “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” 75 n.1

⁴⁹ J.P. Allen “Colloquial Middle Egyptian: Some Observations on the Language of Heka-Nakht,” *LingAeg* 4 (1994): 1-12.

⁵⁰ R.B. Parkinson “Imposing Words: The Entrapment of Language in the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” *LingAeg* 8(2000): 27-51.

are native to Wadi Natrun; the staffs are imported from Farafa, a nearby oasis; inbi is not native to Natrun, and tebu, and uben are unidentified. The “peasant” could not have grown all of the products to which the tale refers.⁵¹

Considering the worth and inventory of Khunanup’s cargo, Parkinson concludes that “The list of goods shows that he is a trader, not a farmer.”⁵² O. Berlev agrees, asserting that calling Khunanup and Meret “peasants” is “singularly inappropriate.”⁵³ The Egyptian *sxtj* not an exact cognate of the English “peasant,” a nonevaluative term denoting an agriculturalist from the countryside.⁵⁴ There is no reason, however, to conclude that a farmer could not also trade. The Egyptian *sxtj* may be better understood, in light of the character of Kunanup, as a farmer-trader whose social standing is markedly below Nemtinakht and Rensi.

At the very least, the so-called eloquent peasant is poor relative to Nemtinakht and Rensi the High Steward, creating an organizing hierarchical relationship that parallels that in PMN. Nemtinakht’s position and social status relative to the peasant is indicated by the initial success of his confiscation of Khunanup’s cargo and by the circumstances of the tale that bring Khunanup to petition High Steward, who seems to have jurisdiction over the territory in which he was wronged.⁵⁵

It should also be remembered that whatever status was ascribed to Khunanup before the confiscation of his goods, he had allotted a relatively meager portion to sustain himself and his wife. Until they are accorded a stipend by the King, the tale does not indicate what savings the peasant and his wife had accumulated or what resources they may have had available to live from. That the tale feels it necessary to describe the allocation of a stipend may indicate—in addition to the fact that no harm ultimately befell Khunanup and his wife—that Khunanup and Meret had no other means of survival. If

⁵¹ R.B. Parkinson. “Literary Form and the “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” *JEA* 78(1992): 58.

⁵² Parkinson, “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” 75 n. 9.

⁵³ O. Berlev. “The Date of the «Eloquent Peasant»,” *Form und Mass: Beitrage zur Literatur, Sprache und Kunst des Alten Aegypten. Festschrift fuer Gerhard Fecht* (ÄAT 12; Ed. J. Osing and G Dreyer; Wiesbaden: Horassowitz Verlag, 1987), p. 76-83.

⁵⁴ G. Fecht, “Bauerngeschichte,” *LÄ*, I.638; Parkinson, “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” 168. See also S. Allam, “Social and Legal Aspects Regarding the Trader from the Oasis,” *LingAeg* 8 (2000): 83-92.

⁵⁵ Berlev, “The Date of the «Eloquent Peasant»”

A. Loprieno. “Literature as Mirror of Social Institutions: The Case of The Eloquent Peasant,” *LingAeg* 8(2001): 183-198.

the peasant was not poor before, he most certainly was for the time between the confiscation of his goods and his being assigned a stipend.

Unlike Gimil-Ninurta, whose indigence is described in great detail in PMN, EP depends to a certain extent on Khunanup not being poor, at least initially; were he too poor, his cargo would not have attracted the attention of Nemtinakht. Both protagonists were, however, poorer than their antagonists (and became poorer still at their antagonists' hands), creating a social dynamic that the tales play with and use to advance their narrative. What is important is the relationship between social class and oppression in the two tales: poverty must be understood relative to wealth, and both EP and PMN retell the story of the oppression and retribution of a poorer person against a wealthier person. The question that will occupy the remainder of this study concerns the role of the social location of the protagonists and its significance for these tales.

3.2 Poverty and Crisis in PMN and EP

Although Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup face similar adversity at the hands of similar antagonists, beyond their mutual state of poverty relative to those that abuse them, their characters are very different, and we shall see them respond in vastly different ways according to their means and the varied circumstances of their mistreatment.

Gimil-Ninurta is a comically impoverished resident of a fantastic, dangerous, and overblown version of the city of Nippur. Although his tale is naturalistic in the sense that he does not appeal to the supernatural and the problem that he faces is not unbelievable, the tale is crafted carefully out of carnivalesque reversals, improbabilities, and surprises and must therefore be read accordingly. The crisis faced by Gimil-Ninurta has two main dimensions: the goat confiscated by the mayor represented the Poor Man's entire livelihood, putting him at great risk of starvation, and the rejection of his gift was disrespectful and demanded a response. EP is equally naturalistic, in the sense that there is no supernatural intrusion into the plot, but it is a great deal more realistic: Khunanup is a very realistic character, who, although not a real person in the historical sense, faces a very believable problem. While Khunanup's treatment at the hands of Rensi is, as we

shall see, ironic and comically overblown, Khunanup responds in believable, if not equally overblown, ways that bring about a second crisis not paralleled in PMN.

3.2.1 Poverty and Crisis in PMN

The story of Gimil-Ninurta's mistreatment begins with his purchase of a goat in the market, follows the Poor Man to the house of the mayor, and ends with him standing outside the mayor's gate, hungry and abused. When Gimil-Ninurta brings his newly procured goat to the mayoral compound and offers it to the mayor, the official responds by confiscating the goat, beating the Poor Man, and ejecting him from the compound with only gristle and third-rate beer to show for his efforts. Gimil-Ninurta, disrespected by the mayor, is deprived of his only possession and livelihood. When the Poor Man vows to visit threefold revenge upon his oppressor, the mayor "laughed all day" (69), an expression of arrogance that indicates that the mayor did not take the Poor Man's vow seriously, enabling Gimil-Ninurta to retain access to the mayor and to realize his vow of revenge. When the mayor does not laugh after the second ruse, Gimil-Ninurta becomes worried and revises his tactics.

The crisis faced by Gimil-Ninurta therefore has two facets: the Poor Man, deprived of his only possession, is at risk of starvation, and has been disrespected by the rejection and confiscation of his gift. Gimil-Ninurta's response, we shall see, will address both aspects of his crisis. The first and perhaps most immediate crisis facing Gimil-Ninurta is one of survival. Before losing his goat Gimil-Ninurta was, as noted, extremely poor. Cooper notes that Gimil-Ninurta's purchase of a nanny goat may serve to underscore his poverty, which was earlier observed to be more miserable than other characters in the tale.⁵⁶ It is abundantly clear from the opening sequence of the tale that Gimil-Ninurta is located in the lowest stratum of the Nippur society that it constructs in the folktale. More significantly, however, it creates questions about Gimil-Ninurta's judgment. For a man teetering on the edge of starvation, a goat may have been an attractive but impractical consumption choice. Although meat played an important role in the ancient Near Eastern diet, it was rarely available to the lower strata of society and it

⁵⁶ Cooper, "Structure, Humor, and Satire," 167.

was only in the rarest of situations that a man as poor as Gimil-Ninurta would have access to it.⁵⁷

The fact that Gimil-Ninurta exchanged his last possession for the goat would have meant that under “real-world” conditions this would have been his last meal. Nights in Nippur are cold, and it is unclear whether he would have been able to survive without a garment.⁵⁸ At the same time, however, the Poor Man would have been without a garment even if he had not lost his goat. As noted, the fact that our protagonist is from Nippur would have prepared audiences to expect a trick and they might have expected Gimil-Ninurta to find a way to survive.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the purchase of a goat may not have been the most practical expense, but considering Gimil-Ninurta indigence it is easy to understand how tempting the prospect of a feast featuring a goat may have been. Poverty, then, may be said to underlie the very conditions of his abuse. Gimil-Ninurta’s crisis of survival was very real—even if he did bring it upon himself by purchasing the goat—and the loss of his goat would have impeded any tricks that might have enabled his survival. What is clear beyond any doubt is that Gimil-Ninurta was in grave danger.

Gimil-Ninurta’s decision to offer his goat to the mayor also made his mistreatment possible; had he not done so he would have enjoyed a meager but safe meal with his poor family and neighbors.⁶⁰ Indeed, kin and tribal groups functioned as the basic structures of Neo-Assyrian society. A.K. Grayson asserts that the “fundamental motives for every Assyrian’s life were the protection and propagation of his family and tribe.”⁶¹ It might be expected, then, that under these conditions Gimil-Ninurta would share his meat with his family and the kin-group, as well as the neighborhood.⁶²

Accordingly, it is not surprising that Gimil-Ninurta thinks aloud:

I might indeed slaughter the goat in my plantation;
(but then) there will be no feast : where will be the beer?
The friends at my gate will hear of it and will be angry,
my kinsmen and relations will be furious with me (17-20).

⁵⁷ L. Milano. “Aspects of Meat Consumption in Mesopotamia and the Food Paradigm of the Poor Man of Nippur,” *SAAB* XII.2(1998): 111-127.

⁵⁸ cf. Exodus 22:26

⁵⁹ Reiner, “Why Do You Cuss Me?”

⁶⁰ The mingling of social classes is, as I shall later discuss, a feature of carnivalesque literature.

⁶¹ A.K. Grayson. “Mesopotamia, History of (Assyria),” *ABD* II:732-755.

⁶² *Ibid.*

If PMN took place in the world of ancient Mesopotamia then the failure to share the goat with the family might be a place where Gimil-Ninurta misstepped, but because the text constructs its own reality and sets it in Nippur—a city known in literature for its dubious morality—it is difficult to conclude whether or not Gimil-Ninurta erred in taking the goat to the mayor’s compound. That Gimil-Ninurta was willing to risk alienating his friends and family—“the fundamental motives for every Assyrian’s life”⁶³—he may have had a plan and point unequivocally to the poverty and moral flexibility of Gimil-Ninurta and his family. Had they been able to provide accoutrements to complement Gimil-Ninurta’s goat he would not have felt compelled to offer it to the mayor—a morally questionable action—and he would never have been abused.

3.2.1.1 “A Good and Fair Greeting”: Gimil-Ninurta’s Crisis of Honor

It is interesting that Gimil-Ninurta at no point indicates exactly why he sets out to the mayoral compound with his goat, creating an ambiguity that will help the plot move forward. The audience is told only that his family would not be able to provide sufficient food and drink for the feast and so it must be assumed that the mayor, as a member of the upper stratum of society, would be expected to provide the necessary additions to complete the meal. Here again, the poverty of Gimil-Ninurta’s family drives him to confront the mayor. As he sets out for the mayoral compound, the Poor Man says:

I will go and bring the goat to the house of the mayor.
A good and fair greeting I will devise (for him) (21-22).

Lines 21 and 22 will be important to remember as the analysis proceeds, especially in light of the association of Nippur with tricksters. Although no one knows at this point what will befall the Poor Man and his newly purchased goat, Gimil-Ninurta will behave in such a way as to make this equivocal but meaningful couplet come to pass.

Goat in hand, Gimil-Ninurta proceeds to the mayoral compound, expecting, perhaps naively and perhaps cunningly, to devise a “good and fair greeting” for the mayor and to eat at his table. If Nippur is a city of swindlers and swindled and the audience expects Gimil-Ninurta to be a swindler, they must also suspect that the mayor was a swindler; at this point in the tale it is not yet clear who is dupe and who is rascal.

⁶³ Ibid.

The combination of one swindler visiting another swindler bearing a gift of some kind would have been a carefully orchestrated farce with no certain outcome.

At first, perhaps surprisingly, it looks as if the Poor Man's plan might be successful. Against all odds, the naked Poor Man is given an audience with the mayor when the doorman announces that a citizen of Nippur (*mār nippurim*) is at the gate bearing a "present" (*šulmanum*). In fact, Gimil-Ninurta is introduced at the very beginning of the tale as "citizen of Nippur" (line 1) and again before his ejection from the mayoral compound (line 39). We will later see the mayor refer to himself as a *mār nippurim* as he begs the disguised Poor Man for mercy in line 105, leading to the conclusion that citizenship is a special status, at least according to the internal logic of the tale.⁶⁴

Although Gimil-Ninurta does not specify exactly why he brings the mayor his goat, the doorman announces that he had brought a present. R. Westbrook suggests that this element of the tale indicates that he is presenting his goat in an effort to establish a patron-client relationship.⁶⁵ Gurney translates the term as "present" (29), although it should be noted that the term denotes a gift given as a "retaining fee" or "gratuity" in order to secure support, as well as regular gifts, and the former have political implications by creating indebtedness.⁶⁶ Gimil-Ninurta does not object to the identification of his goat in this way, but the text is careful not to indicate the specific nature of the gift.

At all events, the text makes it clear that Gimil-Ninurta greets the mayor appropriately with his right hand, explaining that he held the goat—whatever its intended meaning—with his left:

When Gimil-Ninurta entered into the presence of the Mayor
[in] his left hand he grasped the neck of his goat,
while with his right he greeted the Mayor (34-36).

Knowing that Gimil-Ninurta came before the mayor with a goat, the text needed to clarify how the greeting took place and whether it was conducted appropriately, although somewhat less warmly than he will later greet the King (lines 72-75). Because the text

⁶⁴ "*mārum*," *CAD*, X.1: 308-316.

⁶⁵ R. Westbrook. "Patronage in the Ancient Near East," *JESHO* 48(2005): 210-33.

⁶⁶ "*šulmanum*," *CAD* Š/3, :246.

already indicated that Gimil-Ninurta had the goat in his hand (line 23) it was necessary to make it clear that he greeted the mayor with the appropriate level of formality. This care echoes lines 21-22, which are worth repeating:

I will go and bring the goat to the house of the mayor.
A good and fair greeting I will devise (for him).

Indeed, building on this association, Gimil-Ninurta proceeds, greeting the mayor appropriately and invoking the proper blessings:

May Enlil and the city of Nippur bless the Mayor!
May Adad and Nusku cause him to prosper greatly! (37-38)

When the mayor asks why Gimil-Ninurta has brought his gift, the Poor Man responds by explaining his thought process; the text repeats lines 17-21, with compensatory tense changes:

[(and) to] my miserable heart thus I spoke:
[I might indeed] slaughter the goat in my plantation;
[but then there will be no] feast; where will be the beer?
The friends at my gate [will hear of it and] will be angry,
[my kinsmen and rel]ations will be furious with me.
I will bring the goat [to the house of] the Mayor (45-50).

Note that Gimil-Ninurta again makes no claims about what the nature of his gift to the mayor is beyond his desire to share a feast; this would be an ideal time for Gimil-Ninurta to deny explicitly that it was a bribe. He does not do so, however, allowing the status of the goat to remain ambiguous. Where Gimil-Ninurta's inner monologue indicates that he plans to devise a proper and fair greeting (lines 21-22), in his account to the mayor he goes off on a tangent that, unfortunately for contemporary readers, is not preserved save for a few scattered signs (lines 52-57). Cooper reconstructs the slaughtering of the goat, a reading that is more or less in accord with folklore parallels.⁶⁷ When the text is again discernable, the mayor orders that Gimil-Ninurta be ejected from the compound and given bone, sinew, and third-rate beer.

Analyzing the ethnopoetic structure of PMN, Jason identifies three primary roles

⁶⁷ Cooper, "Structure, Humor, and Satire," 171; O.R. Gurney "The Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur and Its Folklore Parallels," *AnSt* 22(1972): 149-158.

in the folktale: rascal, dupe, and helper. In PMN, as in all “swindler novellas,” the rascal dupes the dupe and may be helped by the helper; in the case of the present tale Tukulti-Enlil the gatekeeper, the king, the king’s men and women, and the man in a third ruse help move the plot along by allying themselves (advertently or not) with Gimil-Ninurta against the mayor. In the case of PMN, “The qualities of characters in folktales are not stable throughout the entire story, but are tailored according to the needs of the role they play...” Jason explains, continuing:

Gimil-Ninurta seems to be naive to the point of stupidity in the first episode, where he fills the role of Dupe, and clever and shrewd in the three following episodes, where he is Rascal; the mayor is shrewd in the first episode—being Rascal—and credulous to the point of stupidity in the subsequent episodes, being Dupe.⁶⁸

To conclude, with Jason, that the Poor Man was naïve or stupid to bring his goat to the mayor may, however, require readers to overlook the twice repeated silence of the tale concerning the nature of the goat and the sometimes equivocal speech of Gimil-Ninurta that enabled this deliberate comedy of errors.

All that is clear is that Gimil-Ninurta brings the goat in an effort to devise a “good and fair” greeting and comes from Nippur, a city with a reputation for trickery. Although what is “good and fair” in Nippur is unlikely to be “good and fair” elsewhere, it is not possible to ascertain exactly what Gimil-Ninurta meant by bringing his goat to the mayor. Gimil-Ninurta’s greeting will turn out to be both “good and fair,” but not in the way that readers may assume at lines 21-22. By means of this equivocation, the storyteller is foreshadowing the mayor’s fate; the tale is playing with the audience and may be putting meaningful equivocations in the Poor Man’s mouth. Gimil-Ninurta is either naïve or very clever, but he is definitely not stupid.

3.2.1.2 Gimil-Ninurta’s Vow and the Threat of Resolutions

Ejected from the mayoral compound, beaten, and given sinew and third-rate beer instead of choice cuts of meat and quality beer, Gimil-Ninurta was incensed. The mayor had confiscated his entire capital, leaving him unquestionably absolutely poor. Standing in the mayor’s gate, Gimil-Ninurta turns to Tukulti-Enlil the gatekeeper and, addressing

⁶⁸ Jason, “Ethnopoetic Analysis,” 192.

him formally, exclaims: “The blessings [also “abundance”] of the gods on your master!”
(66) Cooper explains that:

One would normally understand a wish for divine abundance as something positive, but the following lines (67ff.) reveal that the abundance will consist of three acts of vengeance for the one instance of mistreatment suffered at the mayor's hands.⁶⁹

Recalling his commitment to give the mayor a “good and fair” greeting, in response to his being treated unfairly, Gimil-Ninurta vows to avenge his treatment, threatening the mayor:

For the one load which you [put] upon me,
I will pay you back three times for one (67-68).

How we interpret this vow depends in part on how we interpret the treatment of Gimil-Ninurta; inasmuch as it seems to be the case that Gimil-Ninurta was mistreated, this vow represents the last recourse of the wronged and follows logically from his promise to devise a “good and fair” greeting for the mayor.

In response to Gimil-Ninurta’s vow, the mayor “laughed all day” (69), a response that we will see repeated after Gimil-Ninurta’s first ruse in line 114 and that enables the first as well as the second ruse. Although laughter can be a response to a number of stimuli—including amusement, humor, incongruity, relief, and a sense of well-being—it is clear that this is laughter of mocking disbelief: the mayor seems amused by the Poor Man’s determination.⁷⁰ Two lines of evidence suggest this: (1) the mayor does not laugh after the second ruse, troubling Gimil-Ninurta and compelling him to change his tactics, and (2) when Gimil-Ninurta fulfills his vow in line 160 the mayor does not laugh and instead, “entered the city more dead than alive.”

The mayor’s bemused response to Gimil-Ninurta’s threat is inflected—and may well have been determined—by the dynamics of social class. Had the Poor Man been of a higher social class there is reason to suspect that the mayor’s response may have been different. In Gimil-Ninurta’s first act of revenge upon the mayor (line 104), which will be discussed in greater detail later on, the Poor Man disguises himself as an official of the

⁶⁹ Cooper, “Structure, Humor, and Satire,” 168.

⁷⁰ D.W. Black. “Laughter,” *JAMA* 252.21(1984): 2995-2998.

king and accuses the mayor of wrongdoing, a cunning role reversal that causes the mayor to beg for mercy. It is the perceived status of the disguised Gimil-Ninurta that scares the mayor. At the beginning of the tale, however, Gimil-Ninurta is so clearly a member of the lower stratum of society that the mayor cannot take his threat seriously. Because Gimil-Ninurta is poor at this juncture the mayor laughs at him and the story is able to progress; poverty, which is a condition of his abuse, here begins to enable and empower his response.

Gimil-Ninurta's vow functions as the fulcrum of the tale; not quite a climax—that will come when the vow is fulfilled—but the condition for the possibility of the climax that is laid out in lines 21-22. In a number of ways, Gimil-Ninurta needed to be poor for the confiscation of his goat to have been so serious a matter. While being careful not to conflate poverty with starvation, it may be remembered that among the first things that we learn about Gimil-Ninurta, is that:

His store-room thirsted for the pure grain.
With craving for bread his liver was oppressed,
with craving for meat and beer his face was disfigured.
Daily for lack of food he used to lie hungry.
He was clad in garments for which he had no change (6-10).⁷¹

Lines 6-9 illustrate the depth of Gimil-Ninurta's hunger and line 10 foreshadows the sale of his garment. Gimil-Ninurta's vow was born of desperation and poverty. He literally had nothing left to live for. Gimil-Ninurta has only his quest for justice or revenge, which we shall see makes his continued survival possible. Gimil-Ninurta ends the tale having earned one or two minas of red gold. The Poor Man, we shall see, needed to lose everything in the short term in order to survive in the long term.

3.2.2 Poverty and Crisis in EP

The crisis that Khunanup faces has two parts: (1) the confiscation of his cargo by Nemtinakht, and (2) the deliberate postponement of justice by Rensi, effected, ironically, in order to continue hearing the peasant's petitions on the nature of Ma'at (Justice). The first crisis occupies the bulk of the narrative introduction to the tale, and is perpetuated by the peasant's commitment to proper behavior. The second crisis—which partially

⁷¹Gurney, "Poor Man of Nippur," 151.

resolves the first crisis—begins in the narrative introduction and continues through the nine poetic petitions to Rensi the High Steward that occupy most of the tale, made possible by Khunanup’s social position and driven by his excellent use of accepted channels of appeal.

3.2.2.1 Crisis I: Livelihood Lost

After leaving his wife and loading his donkey with “all the fair produce of Wadi Natrun” (B1 15), Khunanup sets out along the public road to Hierakonpolis to purchase food for his family. Before leaving he arranges for his wife to set aside rations of grain for his journey and to sustain their family until his return. The tale is careful to note that a relatively meager amount of food is set aside, and it may be assumed that the peasant does not have an excess of resources. This observation is later confirmed by the King’s insistence that “one of those peasants only comes to Egypt when his house is all but empty” (B1 112-113). What should be noted is that the tale introduces Khunanup as an itinerant farmer-trader of limited means whose cargo represents the bulk of his capital. Necessity, then, from the very beginning of the tale, is the reason for Khunanup’s journey.

En route to the market, Khunanup follows a narrow road that passes through the area of Per-Fefo, north of Mednit, where he met Nemtinakht, a “liegeman” of Rensi the High Steward. Coveting Khunanup’s cargo, Nemtinakht devises a plan to steal the peasant’s belongings, requesting somewhat cryptically that his servant bring him a garment.⁷²

When the garment arrived, Nemtinakht laid it across the narrow path “And its fringe rested on the water, with its hem on the barley” (B1 30-31). When “this peasant”—it is significant that Khunanup is referred to repeatedly by this title because it highlights the centrality of hierarchy in the tale—approaches the garment, Nemtinakht warns him not to step on his garment. The peasant replies:

My way is good,
for the bank is high and the way is under barley,
and you block our path with clothes.
Won’t you even let us go past the path? (B1 37-40)

⁷² Parkinson “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” 59.

At that exact moment, Khunanup's donkey bit off a mouthful of barley from Rensi's field. While the animal's consumption of Nemtinakht's barley was unlawful, the text seems at pains to show that Khunanup did not have the *mens rea*. V.A. Tobin suggests that by saying "my way 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"⁷³

N. Shupak notes additionally that the garment laid down by Nemtinakht was symbolically significant, explaining that "A man's garment contains his identity and symbolizes it; it has magical properties and symbolic legal significance. Damaging, grasping, or tearing a man's garment were considered acts which caused its owner shame."⁷⁴ As such, stepping on Nemtinakht's garment was unacceptable not only because it was the property of a social superior, but also because of it may have been imbued with ritual significance. It is significant that Khunanup does not do this. He will continue to follow procedure throughout the tale, which will continue, however, to get him into trouble.

Whether or not Khunanup tread on Nemtinakht's garment, the farmer was in trouble. It may be concluded that Nemtinakht's plan all along was to entrap the farmer, either by forcing him to tread on the garment or by delaying him long enough by the barley to give the donkey time to eat. Indeed, the tale foreshadows this conclusion by noting that the road:

...was narrow; it was not broad
but only as wide as a kilt.
One of its sides was under water,
and the other under grain (B1 26-28).

Either way, Khunanup would have provided Nemtinakht with a pretext for the confiscation of his donkey and cargo. It might be noted here that the tone of Khunanup's

⁷³ Tobin, "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant," 27 n.7.

⁷⁴ N. Shupak. "A New Source for the Study of the Judiciary and Law of Ancient Egypt: "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant," *JNES* 51.1(1992): 7.

response to Nemtinakht becomes increasingly formal, as he shifts from using the language of commoners (with his wife) to the formal language of appeal.⁷⁵

After entrapping Khunanup, Nemtinakht declares that he will confiscate the peasant's donkey for its having eaten a mouthful of barley. The peasant protests:

My way is good;
one clump is destroyed—
one destroying ten!
For ten units I bought my ass
and you seize it for a mouthful
of a clump of grain! (B1 44-46)

Again, by saying that his “way is good,” a line that will be repeated three times in the dialogue between Khunanup and Rensi, the peasant is highlighting the opposition between justice and injustice—good and bad—that is the subject of the injustice and his petitions. Not only is his way good, but it may be inferred, based on the symbolic significance of the garment, that Nemtinakht's way is evil. The more symbolic value one assigns to garments the more malicious his laying it across the road before Khunanup becomes, although its being the property of a social superior would no doubt have had the same effect.

The repetition of the designation “peasant” is not incidental; even if we choose not to understand *sxtj* as “peasant,” it is clear that the tale is highlighting Khunanup's social status, which is beneath Nemtinakht and Rensi and makes him relatively poorer and definitely deprived of power. When Khunanup invokes the name Rensi and his reputation for maintaining justice on his land, Nemtinakht responds by reciting a proverb—a saying that he explains, “people [i.e. “peasants”] say” (B1 50)—that “a wretch's name is uttered only because of his master” (B1 51), meaning that a peasant like Khunanup is of value only in his relationship to his master.⁷⁶ The proverb has the dual function of highlighting the role of relative social status in the tale and placing Nemtinakht (the master) above and apart from the (wretched) masses, which include Khunanup. Social class—however one chooses to render *sxtj*—is a central focus of the tale.

⁷⁵ Parkinson, “Imposing Words”; Allen, “Colloquial Middle Egyptian.”

⁷⁶ Tobin, “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” 28 n. 8; Parkinson, “The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” 76 n. 9.

As the tale proceeds, Nemtinakht beats Khunanup with a stick of fresh tamarisk for invoking the name of Rensi and confiscates the peasant's ass for its consumption of barley. When Khunanup raises his voice in complaint he is silenced by Nemtinakht:

And the peasant now wept very much,
for the pain of what was being done to him.
And this Nemtinakht said, "Don't raise your voice peasant,
or, look, you're for the harbour of the Lord of Silence [=Osiris]!"
And this peasant said, "You beat me and steal my belongings?
And then you'll rob my mouth of complaint?" (B1 55-61)

The final line of this passage is of decisive significance. We shall see the peasant take excellent advantage of the instrument of appeal (his voice). For ten days—one Egyptian week—Khanunup petitions Nemtinakht but does not succeed in attracting his attention, or at least does not motivate him to act.

Facing the threat of starvation, Khunanup approaches the High Steward Rensi on the street. The fact that the peasant attained an audience with the lord of the land only by accosting him on the street is significant and may reflect the inability of one of his social class to attain an audience with the High Steward in court under normal circumstances.

3.2.2.2 Resolution I/Crisis II: Justice Postponed

At this early stage in the tale it might be noted that the text sets up sharp oppositions between good and bad, justice and injustice, and rich and poor. The peasant's "way is good," his cargo is "fair," and his behavior is just. In contrast, Nemtinakht takes advantage of the peasant's good nature, entrapping him in order to seize his cargo. The only reason that the peasant found himself in distress was that Nemtinakht saw his donkey and was tempted by his cargo. The peasant can hardly be blamed from bringing high quality goods to sell at market and he cannot be blamed for *not* treading on Nemtinakht's garment.

If Khunanup was so obviously in the right—as he puts it again and again, "my way is good"—it is legitimate to ask why he stopped in the first place. Khunanup's detention serves at least two purposes in the tale: (1) it confirms social hierarchy, with Nemtinakht above Khunanup, and (2) it shows that Khunanup is a well-meaning person who did not intend any wrong by stepping on the garment or accidentally causing

consumption of the barley of Nemtinakht. Had Khunanup tread on Nemtinakht's garment he would have been in the wrong for stepping on his social superior's property—not only was it the property of a social superior but it may have also been symbolically significant—and the donkey's consumption of barley shows that he would have been equally culpable had he tread on the field. Khunanup is clever and his first response to this adversity is to try to reason with his tormentor, a response that forced his donkey—an animal with no sense of personal property—to wait beside edible grains that it could not understand were not its to eat.

Although it is correct to question the appropriateness of the designation “peasant” for Khunanup, it should not be forgotten that his journey to Hierakonpolis was for the purpose of buying food for his family. One does not undertake a journey to buy food if one has access to a sufficient supply close to home. Noting as well that the rations set aside by Khunanup for himself and his wife are fairly limited, as the King observes, it may be concluded that the peasant and his wife would not have had enough food to compensate for the lost cargo.⁷⁷ The threat of starvation adds an urgency to the peasant's appeals and heightens the severity of Nemtinakht's wrongdoing at the same time as Khunanup's wealth restrains his response: Khunanup had much to lose by reacting to Nemtinakht violently, including his right to appeal, which ironically brings upon him his second crisis.

The second crisis that Khunanup must resolve takes place as a result of his eloquent response to his oppression at the hands of Nemtinakht, in the court of his master Rensi, and is not paralleled in PMN. Following the confiscation of his cargo (also the result of following proper procedure) and his inability to gain an audience with Nemtinakht, Khunanup met with a representative of Rensi, who concludes condescendingly that Khunanup was a runaway serf of Nemtinakht, but that if he had lost cargo Nemtinakht should remunerate him accordingly. The follower's response highlights the class dynamics in the tale and is worth considering in full:

Surely it's only a peasant of his
who's run off to someone else.
Look, this is what people do to their peasants

⁷⁷ Cf. D. Mueller. “Some Remarks on Wage Rates in the Middle Kingdom,” *JNES* 34.4 (1975): 249-263.

who run off to others,
Is there cause to punish Nemtinakht
for a little natron
and a little salt?
Order him to repay it, and he'll repay it (B1 75-80).

Because Nemtinakht is of a member of the upper social stratum, Rensi's representative immediately sympathizes with his position. If Nemtinakht committed a wrong, however, the tale is clear that he was not above the law and would have to repay the confiscation. A punishment, however, would be excessive. Comparing this response to Nemtnakht's punishment of the peasant for his donkey's consumption of a mouthful of barley, it would seem to be the case that the tale presumes different standards for the rich and poor. Although Knunanup's punishment was, admittedly overblown, proceeding autoreferentially, it establishes a class dynamic that sets the tone for the remainder of the tale.

When the representative of Rensi reports Khunanup's case to him in this way, the tale is careful to point out that Rensi did not respond to either the peasant or the representative. This silence—which will be mandated by the King in subsequent petitions, would have seemed to indicate indecision to Rensi's fictional audience (the representative who first read Khunanup's complaint). At all events, the peasant comes before Rensi and pleads his case. Rensi again remains silent, although it is important to note that his silence at this juncture is of his own volition and so it will mean something very different than what it comes to mean when it is mandated by the King:

The High Steward Meru's son Rensi
then went before his Majesty
then said, "My lord, I have found one of the peasants,
whose speech is truly perfect, and whose goods have been stolen
And, look, he had come to me to appeal about it" (B1 105-109).

It is not clear exactly why Rensi brings the problem to the King, but seems to be the case that he acknowledges that a wrong has been perpetrated against Khunanup and seems ready to make amends. The King responds:

As you wish to see me in health
you shall delay him here,
without answering anything he says!

For the sake of his speaking be quiet!
Then we shall be brought it in writing, and we shall hear it.
But provide sustenance for his wife and children!
Look, one of those peasants only comes to Egypt when his house is all but
empty.
Also provide sustenance for this peasant himself!
You shall have the provisions given to him
Without letting him know that you are giving him them! (B1 109-115)

Following the King's orders, Rensi arranges provisions for the peasant and his wife; interestingly, they are more generous than those that Khunanup set aside for himself and his wife in the first place, but not exceptional in compared to other Middle Kingdom examples.⁷⁸ Their rations resolve the immediacy of the first crisis, but not its cause, the unjust confiscation of property. In the next section we will discuss the nature of Khunanup's petitions, so for now it will be best to focus on the injustice of his very detainment in court, a situation that recalls the injustices perpetrated by Joseph upon his brothers when they go down to Egypt to purchase food in Genesis 42-45.

Rensi seems ready to judge the case in favor of the peasant, at the very least following the suggestion of his representative who suggested equal remuneration. The fact the Rensi went before the King and declared that a peasant had been wronged—not claims to have been wronged—indicates that he accepts the truth of Khunanup's claims. Although the immediate danger of starvation caused by the confiscation of Khunanup's property was resolved—thus relieving the consequences of the first crisis—Khanunup is made to think that the rations are dispensed at the pleasure of a friend of Rensi. Consequently, Khunanup remains unaware of Rensi's apparent sympathy and is able to continue delivering artful and motivated petitions. Because Khunanup also does not know that Rensi's silence was ordered by the king in order to continue the petitions, the peasant was, as far as he knew, poorer than he was before the confiscation of his property and at risk of starvation; he remains socially and economically powerless and, for the time being, socially and economically inferior to Nemtinakht, Rensi, and the King. The peasant does not know how long he will continue to be supported and the tale does not make it clear whether or not he was aware that his wife and children were receiving similar support.

⁷⁸ Mueller, "Wage Rates in the Middle Kingdom."

3.2.2.3 Crisis II and Genesis 42-45

Rensi's detainment of Khunanup under false charges and with an ulterior motive finds an interesting parallel in the story of Joseph in Genesis 42-45. It opens in Canaan, where he—the favored son and eldest of two by Rachel—has transparent dreams that his older brothers and parents will serve him. Angered, the brothers leave him for dead in the wilderness; but he is picked up by traders and sold as a slave in Egypt. There, Joseph acquires a reputation for interpreting dreams, among them Pharaoh's. When he predicts famine for Egypt and suggests a solution, Pharaoh's moves him to the top of his administration. The famine reaches into Canaan, forcing Joseph's brothers—all but Benjamin—to travel to Egypt to buy food. On meeting Joseph they fail to recognize him.

Joseph proceeds to harass his brothers, charging them with espionage and demanding that they bring Benjamin—the only remaining son of Rachel—down to Egypt, and twice planting stolen property in their belongings. Eventually they admit to themselves that they are being punished for their crime against their brother. Facing potential loss of brothers and sons, they grow to share their father's anguish at the loss of a beloved. This is cue for Joseph to recognize divine providence. After hearing a heartfelt plea by Judah, he reveals his identity and rewards his brothers.

Joseph, like Rensi, detained members of lower social strata under false pretences. Joseph's brothers, like Khunanup, responded to adversity by following procedure—returning with Benjamin and petitioning Joseph (Genesis 45:18-33)—and, like Rensi, Joseph ultimately rewards his brothers. The social location of Joseph puts him in control of his brothers, who were, like Khunanup, close to starvation and definitely situated below the social level of the vizier of Egypt. Like Rensi, Joseph's deception was made possible by his privilege and Joseph's brothers, like Khunanup, were vulnerable because of their needs. Genesis 42-45 allows for the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams in which his brothers serve him. Rensi's detainment of Khunanup was at least well-meaning, in the sense that it reflected awe at Khunanup's eloquence and was accompanied by care for him and his wife; Joseph's detention of his brother, however, is manifestly more cruel, far beyond what is needed to substantiate his dreams. Nowhere does the text make any attempt to justify the anguish that Joseph's actions unleash on his father. In this respect while the initially dignified behavior of Joseph's brother's recalls Khunanup's eloquent

adherence to procedure in form and spirit, Joseph's realization of his own triumph echoes Gimil-Ninurta's exultation on administering just retributions.

3.2.3 The Exploitation of Poverty

Considering the first and second crises that befall Khunanup, it seems fair to conclude that his social location left him particularly vulnerable to Nemtinakht and Rensi's abuses. As was noted in connection with Gimil-Ninurta in PMN, poverty underlies the conditions of Khunanup's abuse. If Khunanup was of a higher social stratum he would not have gone to trade his goods for food, obviating the circumstances of the crisis in the first place. Even if Khunanup had been a member of an upper social stratum and had been journeying with cargo that attracted the attention of Nemtinakht, he would still have been forbidden from treading on Nemtinakht's garment. It is doubtful, however, that Nemtinakht would have placed a garment across the narrow path before someone of an equal or higher social rank. Nemtinakht seems to be of the opinion that, as the folk saying goes, "a wretch's name is uttered only because of his master" (B1 51), and that members of lower social strata are disposable. Reinforced by the constant repetition of the phrase "this peasant," it seems fair to conclude that Khunanup's social location enabled his abuse on a number of levels.

Significantly, it may also be noted that Rensi's surprise is directed at the fine rhetoric of the outsider "peasant." As the High Steward explains, "I have found one of the peasants, whose speech is truly perfect..." (B1 106-107) Had Khunanup been a member of an upper social stratum, it is unlikely that his case would have been brought to the king and that he would have been thus detained in court, the second mistreatment that, ironically resolves the first. It seems likely that the High Steward expected Khunanup to speak in the manner of members of his social stratum, as he does at the beginning of the tale with his wife (R1.3-4).

Although Khunanup's cargo—"all the fair produce of Wadi Natrun" (B1 15)—situates him somewhat above Gimil-Ninurta, the "poor and humble" (1) citizen of Nippur, both characters struggle under the same immense pressure to redeem their property. Gimil-Ninurta, it may be concluded from the range of adjectives heaped upon him in lines 1-10, had no choice but to seek revenge upon the mayor and, it will be

argued, nothing to lose by doing so. He purchased his goat with his only garment, at the same time his only possession. Although one might ask what he had planned to do after consuming the goat, without assuming “real world” conditions, there would be no answer to the question. The tale is fabulous and the characters are caricatures; Gimil-Ninurta follows his gut feelings and purchases a goat.

Whereas Rensi’s response creates a new crisis for Khunanup, the response of the mayor of Nippur in PMN enables the continuation of the ruses and the fulfillment of Gimil-Ninurta’s vow. Both responses to adversity, interestingly, allow for the betterment of the lives of the abused protagonists in the long term. That said, the initial crisis that Khunanup faces finds a striking, if not incidental, parallel in the abuse of Gimil-Ninurta, and Rensi’s postponement of justice recalls the circumstances—but not underlying motivations of—Joseph’s mistreatment of his brothers. Both Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup risk starvation as a result of the loss of their property. The pressure on the two protagonists to resolve their crises is both acute and overwhelming.

3.3 Resolutions and the Justification of Retribution

As the circumstances of their abuses differed, Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup responded to their adversity in different ways that reflected their individual and social contexts. Gimil-Ninurta, it has been observed, is a great deal poorer than Khunanup, although both characters indeed find themselves dangerously close to starvation when members of the upper stratum of society confiscate their property. The goat that the mayor of Nippur confiscates from Gimil-Ninurta represents his entire capital. In EP, Khunanup finds himself forced to resolve two related crises: (1) the risk of starvation caused by the confiscation of his livelihood, and (2) the deliberate postponement of justice. Gimil-Ninurta’s response seems to have been conditioned by his overblown poverty: he had nothing to lose and, as we shall see, everything to gain from his vengeance. When PMN ends, Gimil-Ninurta finds himself with the means not only to survive but also to thrive. Compared with Gimil-Ninurta, Khunanup had a great deal more to lose, but, again, without his cargo, he had no means of sustaining himself and his family. The most significant structural difference between the two tales is that while

Gimil-Ninurta's crisis is easily, although unpredictably, resolved, Khunanup's exemplary response to the first crisis—his petition to Rensi—effects, ironically, the second crisis (the postponement of justice) in partial resolution of the first crisis. That too, however, will allow for Khunanup to live the rest of his life as a member of the upper stratum, without having to fear starvation.

3.3.1 PMN: Drastic Times—Drastic Measures

Gimil-Ninurta set out from his courtyard having exchanged his only suit of clothing for a three-year-old nanny-goat. After deciding not to share his goat with his family, the trickster heads to the mayoral compound with the equivocal mandate of devising for this official a “good and fair greeting.” Because the Poor Man enters the mayoral compound after rejecting the possibility of a meal with his family and friends on the grounds that they would be unable to provide other contributions to the meal—underscoring the Poor Man's poverty—readers presume that he is going to share a feast with the mayor, but the gatekeeper assumes that he has brought a *šulmanum* (=gift or bribe); the mayor responds as if it is a bribe and the Poor Man does not correct him. When the mayor confiscates the bribe, as head of a morally deficient town such as Nippur might be expected to do, Gimil-Ninurta vows threefold revenge on the mayor, as one would expect a pauper from Nippur to do in such a situation. Gimil-Ninurta's vow, it was observed, cunningly fulfills his mandate to devise a fitting greeting for the mayor, but not in the way that was initially supposed.

After declaring his vow before Tukulti-Enlil the gatekeeper, Gimil-Ninurta “set his face toward the palace of the King,” believing that, “on the orders of the King, prince and governor [should] give fair judgment” (70-71). This statement reveals two aspects of the hierarchy of authority operative in the fantasy world of the text: (1) the authority of the King supersedes that of the mayor, and (2) the Poor Man has reason to expect, against all “real world” expectations, that he will be given an audience with the king. The naked Poor Man did not even bring a *šulmanum* to present the king, as he had to the mayoral compound.

Surprisingly, the naked, empty-handed pauper is given an audience with the King, as he predicted, and, perhaps more surprisingly, once admitted he behaves with all the

formality that one would expect of a petitioner in the royal court. Gimil-Ninurta kisses the ground before the King and greets him with both hands, which serves to remind the audience that the Poor Man is no longer burdened with the task of leading a goat and to indicate an elevated level of greeting. Interestingly, we do not see Gimil-Ninurta mention any details of his case to the King, as we shall see Khunanup do in EP. Nevertheless, the Poor Man speaks with eloquence that reminded Oppenheim of Khunanup:⁷⁹

Lord, strength of the people, King whom the guardian spirit makes glorious!
Let them give me a single chariot at thy command,
So that for one day, whatever I may intend, I may attain my desire.
For my one day my payment shall be one mina of red gold (75-78).

Perhaps acknowledging the improbability of the situation, the narrator intrudes on the tale to observe that the King did not inquire why Gimil-Ninurta requested to rent the chariot (on credit, no less), where he might have acquired one mina of red gold, or even what he desired to achieve by means of those markers of status. It is clear from the King's response that Gimil-Ninurta behaved appropriately, at least according to the standards of etiquette assumed in the world crafted by the folktale. It is moreover indicative of the fantasy world created by the tale that Gimil-Ninurta, a pauper with, literally, nothing in the world, knew the appropriate way to address a king. In any event, it is significant that the King fulfilled his moral obligation to protect the poor without even realizing why or how he was doing so.⁸⁰

Outfitted by the King and clothed for the first time since line 14, Gimil-Ninurta turns his attention toward Nippur and the compound of the mayor. It should be observed that at this point in the tale it is not at all clear what Gimil-Ninurta has planned, although it may be assumed that he gathered these supplies (lines 71-82) in order to fulfill his vow because it immediately follows its declaration (lines 66-70). Along the way, he catches two birds and places them in a sealed cashbox, perhaps increasing the wonder of the audience; as the tale continues, "He (then) proceeded to the gate of the Mayor of Nippur" (87). Box (and birds) in hand, the Poor Man posed as an official of the King bearing a donation of gold (the birds) for the temple of Enlil. In honor of his arrival, the mayor,

⁷⁹ Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*.

⁸⁰ Lion, "La conception de la pauvreté."

apparently fooled by the Poor Man's upper class disguise, slaughters a highly valued pasillu-sheep, providing Gimil-Ninurta with the meat he earlier sought (compare line 13 with 92).

Milano notes that PMN is a tale of reversals: Gimil-Ninurta visits the mayor in an effort to obtain meat and fine beer and receives only gristle and third-rate beer while when in disguise he brings a worthless box and receives the feast he sought earlier.⁸¹ Role reversals are one of three devices used in the tale with what Cooper identifies as humorous effects and the present review will analyze in relation to its social status significance. We should not, however, expect the sharing of a sheep to temper Gimil-Ninurta's lust for vengeance because all along his goal had been to bring the mayor a "good and fair greeting" (22). When his goat was confiscated the tale ceased to be about meat and the pasillu-sheep emphasizes that Gimil-Ninurta's retribution seeks recompense for more than lost property (3.2.1.1).

After Gimil-Ninurta lulls the mayor to sleep, he releases the birds that he had earlier trapped and put in the cashbox. Feigning surprise, the Poor Man woke the mayor and accused him of stealing the King's donation to the temple. In another dramatic reversal, the Poor Man tears the clothing lent to him by the King, which he did not have the last time that he entered the mayoral compound. The mayor begs the Poor Man not to "destroy a citizen of Nippur" (105), which is exactly what the mayor had done earlier to the Poor Man, surprising as it may have been that he was named a citizen in the first line of the tale.⁸² So Gimil-Ninurta inflicts a severe and comic beating on the mayor and is rewarded with two minas of red gold and a suit of replacement clothes, building further on the reversal because he had sold his clothes to purchase what the mayor took away. As Gimil-Ninurta leaves the mayoral compound, he repeats his vow to the gatekeeper. When the mayor heard that it was the Poor Man who beat him, he again laughed all day, perhaps playing with laughter's various meanings. It is not clear exactly what the mayor means by his laughter, for, it will be remembered, that laughter can be a sign of amusement, humor, incongruity, relief, anxiety, or a release from tension.⁸³

⁸¹ Milano, "Aspects of Meat Consumption."

⁸² Cooper, "Structure, Humor, and Satire."

⁸³ Black, "Laughter."

Following the second ruse in fulfillment of Gimil-Ninurta's vow, the Poor Man has fully made the character shift from being the dupe (when he brought the goat to the mayor) to the rascal (duping the mayor), which he achieves by fulfilling his vow. If it were not already clear, it should by now be obvious that the Poor Man and the mayor are caricatures of themselves. Gimil-Ninurta, the poor victim was wronged (duped) and is bent on revenge (as a rascal) and the rich official, originally a rascal, cannot bring himself to take the threat of the poor man seriously, allowing himself to be duped twice more. The role of the mayor in the story is as a dupe to Gimil-Ninurta's rascal. The Poor Man, on the other hand, is the trickster whose cause is the restoration of justice by means of three-fold reciprocation.

Having completed the first ruse, Gimil-Ninurta immediately goes to visit a barber, who shaves his head in the style worn by physicians. Again the tale gives readers no insight into the rascal's plan. Minimally disguised, the Poor Man returns to the mayoral compound and introduces himself to Tukulti-Enlil the gatekeeper as a doctor from Isin, recalling Reiner's "Tale of the Illiterate Doctor in Nippur."⁸⁴ Tukulti-Enlil either fails to recognize Gimil-Ninurta or wishes to bring more distress on his master the mayor, because he allows him entrance—perhaps remembering the mayor's chastisement for having kept the Poor Man, a citizen of Nippur, at the gate (line 31)—and the "physician" enters the presence of the mayor undetected. The mayor exclaims to his attendants "the doctor is clever" (126), and he is correct: just not in the way that he apparently means. If Nippur had a reputation for swindlers, Isin—the city of Gula the healing goddess—had a reputation for healing. Gimil-Ninurta tells him that his cures are administered only in the dark, and the mayor follows him far away from the eyes and ears of his attendants. Shrouded by darkness, away from the attention of anyone who could help the mayor, Gimil-Ninurta administers a second comic beating to his abuser.

As Gimil-Ninurta leaves the presence of the mayor, he declares a second time to Tukulti-Enlil:

The abundance of the gods on your master! Give him this message:
For the one load which you put upon me
I have paid off the second score; there remains one (137-139).

⁸⁴ Reiner, "Why Do You Cuss Me?"

Having disguised his identity from the mayor twice, Gimil-Ninurta was sure that he would not be able to do so again: the mayor did not laugh at the Poor Man after the second beating and it may be the case that he was beginning to take Gimil-Ninurta's vow seriously. Thus, in order to fulfill the third and final act of his promise of revenge, Gimil-Ninurta employs the assistance of a bystander to draw the mayor out of his compound by posing as "the man with the goat" (146) and announcing that his third revenge was coming. Whereas before Gimil-Ninurta disguised himself, now he disguises others as himself, in another reversal of roles. Ever the dupe, the mayor follows the bystander to where the rascal Poor Man lay in wait. Gimil-Ninurta beats the mayor a third and final time, fulfilling his goal of devising a "good and fair" greeting for the mayor.

It should be noted that Gimil-Ninurta emerges from the fulfillment of his vow earning a profit of two minas of red gold, one of which he owed to the King as payment for the chariot and clothing that he used in his first ruse. It is not revealed that the Poor Man actually returned the articles lent to him by the King, so he may have retained the chariot and garments as well as both minas of red gold, although tales such as this do not need to tie up loose ends. It is this gold—either one or two minas—that readers presume would allow the Poor Man to survive. It is his persistent and utter poverty in the scenes leading up to his ejection from the mayoral compound that enables the complete abandon that he displays in the fulfillment of his vow, even as it fed his rage. The goat that the mayor confiscated was, literally, everything that he had in the world. For the same reasons, readers might question exactly why Gimil-Ninurta decided to exchange his garment for a goat, although, as has been noted, one can understand the way that a starving man may be tempted by the prospect of a feast. It was the Poor Man's desperate hunger that compelled him to make a purchase as extravagant as a goat, adding further importance to the poverty of Gimil-Ninurta. Indeed, Gimil-Ninurta's poverty raises the stakes of his crisis at the same time as it enables him to fulfill his vow to visit threefold vengeance upon his abuser. Gimil-Ninurta had, literally, nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Moreover, the mayor's laughing response to the first two declarations of the Poor Man's vow enable the first two acts of revenge and plays a fundamental role in the progression of the narrative.

3.3.1.1 PMN and Bakhtin's Carnival

PMN exhibits a number of aspects of the carnivalesque, a term devised by Russian literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin “to describe various manifestations of popular humour and cultural resistance to the restraints of official cultural hierarchies.”⁸⁵ Bakhtin first observed the carnivalesque in the writing of François Rabelais, a French Renaissance writer whose work, Bakhtin holds, exhibited the qualities of medieval carnivals—role reversals and social inversions, profanation, parody and satire, folk humor, comic violence, and often food. Bakhtin also observed the carnival mode in the work of Dostoyevsky and Roman satires, leading him to the conclusion that carnival literature is a transhistorical phenomenon.⁸⁶

Bakhtin explains in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* that medieval carnivals were a mode of life “turned inside out,” and were rooted deeply in the “primordial order and primordial thinking of man.”⁸⁷ Carnival was not a spectacle, he explains, noting that it:

does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.⁸⁸

Carnivals were both destructive and productive, allowing society to overturn and renew social convention. Destructively, carnival functions to create the world of inversions:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is non-carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ “Carnavalesque,” *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (ed. M. Drabble; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁸⁶ M. M. Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World* (Trans. Helene Iswolsky; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Idem. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Trans. Caryl Emerson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

⁸⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems*, 122.

⁸⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems*, 7-8.

⁸⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems*, 122-123.

Productively, carnival—and by extension carnivalesque literature—allows for the creation of:

a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life. The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in non-carnival life, and thus from the vantage point of carnival life become eccentric and inappropriate.⁹⁰

The productive aspect of carnival is made possible by the destructive aspect. At the same time as carnivals turned cultures upside down, however, as T. Eagleton points out, they were not fundamentally countercultural:

Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare's Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.⁹¹

As much as it may turn society on its head, carnival was an accepted aspect of medieval society that was a part of the mainstream, an insight that would be good to remember when Bascom's vision of folklore is discussed later on in this analysis.

As noted, PMN displays a number of characteristics of carnivalesque literature. Most prominently, instances of comic violence move the plot and are the way that Gimil-Ninurta avenges his injustice at the hands of the mayor. Three thorough beatings are administered and organized in ways that lampoon the intelligence and integrity of the civic administration. The beatings are made possible because the mayor, a caricature of individuals in his position, unjustly confiscates the Poor Man's goat and ejects him from the compound, and his revenge is made possible by the mayor's comic inability to recognize danger, even when something as unlikely occurs as the arrival of a doctor from a far away city at the exact moment that he needed medical attention.⁹² Besides comic violence, humanity's basic functions are highlighted in the tale—the desire to eat is the primary factor that leads Gimil-Ninurta to the mayoral compound. It is Gimil-Ninurta's

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ T. Eagleton. *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: NLB, 1981), p. 148.

⁹² Cf. S.B. Noegl, review of H. Avalos, *Illness and Healthcare in the Ancient Near East*, *AJS Review* 22.1(1997): 107-109.

extreme and comic poverty that leads him to make so impractical a decision as to sell his garment, purchase a goat, and attack a mayor.

The frequently observed role reversals in PMN help to create the fantasy world of the text, one that, to use Bakhtin's description of carnival itself, might be called *monde à l'envers*, "life turned inside out" or "the reverse side of the world."⁹³ The plot of the story depends of the mingling of classes, what Bakhtin calls the "free and familiar mingling of people" when he observes it manifested in carnival. Through the destruction of class barriers in the world of the tale, Gimil-Ninurta is admitted to see the mayor and the King even though he is naked. It is the (perhaps shocking) familiarity that the Poor Man displays towards the institutions of his day that recalls the syncretic pageantry of carnival. The carnivalesque tone of the tale is entirely dependent on Gimil-Ninurta's poverty, which underlies his behavior and enables his abuse at the same time as it allows him to fulfill his vow by keeping the mayor from taking him seriously. As Eagleton reminds readers, carnival is "a permissible rupture of hegemony,"⁹⁴ and as such PMN may be understood in Bascom's terms as an escape that reinforces cultural norms of social stratification by breaking them down in the world of the tale.

3.3.2 EP: Drastic Times—Measured Response

After having his livelihood confiscated by Nemtinakht—the first crisis—and unsuccessfully appealing his case to his abuser Nemtinakht, Khunanup brings his complaint to the next level of authority, Nemtinakht's lord, Rensi the High Steward. The majority of EP details the nine petitions of Khunanup to Rensi. First the peasant, accosting the High Steward on the street, is granted an audience with one of Rensi's officials. After hearing the injustice of Khunanup's case, Rensi, duly impressed by the outsider's eloquence, approaches the King. Apparently intrigued, the King orders Rensi to detain the peasant as long as possible in order to hear and record as many petitions as he is able to craft. The peasant's rhetorical skill—combined, of course, with the King's unscrupulous but devoted love of rhetoric—ironically becomes the reason for Khunanup's second crisis, partially resolving the first crisis and highlighting the

⁹³ Bakhtin, *Problems*, 122.

⁹⁴ Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 148.

importance of rhetoric in ancient Egyptian society. Because this aspect of the tale's plot differs so markedly from PMN it bears mention again: the partial resolution to the first crisis brings upon the second, the resolution of which will resolve what remained unresolved from the first crisis as well. The King's decree remains unknown to Khunanup, who proceeds to appeal his case eloquently eight additional times before becoming frustrated with the process and storming out of the court. As far as Khunanup knew, the second crisis was caused by the misunderstanding of his case, as expressed by the silence of his fictional audience (Rensi), and Khunanup's nine petitions wax eloquently about the nature of Ma'at. Ultimately, the danger of starvation that seems to motivate Khunanup's petitions will lead to his elevation to the upper stratum of society.

3.3.2.1 Resolution II: An Eloquent Peasant?

A.H. Gardiner argued in 1923 that Rensi's postponement of justice hinged on the High Steward's disdain for the petitions of the peasant, which he described as being:

clumsy and turgid in their expression. The metaphors of the boat and of the balance are harped upon with nauseous insistency, and the repetition of the same words in close proximity with different meanings shows that the author was anything but a literary artist.⁹⁵

Recent scholarship has cast a much more favorable light on Khunanup's petitions, the eloquence of which allow for understanding the grand artistry of the tale. As Parkinson notes, "the petitions display a high level of rhetoric, and their motivation turns the plot from a simple sequence of events into something more elaborate and ironic."⁹⁶ Lichtheim agrees, describing EP as "a parable on the utility of fine speech."⁹⁷

Khunanup's petitions are well crafted in a way that is entirely unexpected of such a social and political outsider, an incongruity that may have guided Gardiner's negative evaluation. This is indicated in the text by: (1) Khunanup's use of colloquial, "low" language in communication with his wife, (2) the repeated emphasis on the peasant's class during his altercations with Nemtinakht and petitions, and (3) Rensi's

⁹⁵ Gardiner, "Eloquent Peasant," 7-8.

⁹⁶ R.B. Parkinson. *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt: A Dark Side to Perfection* (New York: Continuum, 2002): 168.

⁹⁷ Lichtheim, *AEL*, 169.

communication with the King, which emphasizes the unexpectedness of the peasants well-crafted speeches.

Noting the length of the petitions, M.V. Fox observed that there are a number of aspects of Khunanup's rhetoric that defy what is normally expected of petitioners, including the length of petitions 2-9.⁹⁸ Parkinson agrees, observing that petitioning in ancient Egypt tends to have been a concise affair, comparing Khunanup's lengthy appeals to the Seventeenth Dynasty Karnak Juridical Stela, which records a petition that occupied no more than one sentence.⁹⁹ It bears mentioning as well that Khunanup's petitions were a great deal more poetic than the terse complaints referred to by Parkinson. It may be concluded, therefore, that Khunanup's petitions are exemplary in every respect, even though they may not be accurate reflections of the etiquette of petitioning. They stand in sharp relief with the way that he communicates with his wife and they seem to defy the expectations of Rensi and the King. They are phenomenal and overblown versions of petitions, crafted carefully to exemplify the excellence of the peasant.

The peasant's first petition to Rensi begins by extolling the virtues of Ma'at, a term which Tobin chooses leave untranslated to better reflect its Egyptian dual aspect.¹⁰⁰

E. Teeter explains that the term Ma'at refers both to:

The ethical conceptions of "truth," "order," and "cosmic balance" ...and the personification of those principles is the goddess Maat... The goddess represented the divine harmony and balance of the universe, including the unending cycles of the rising and setting of the sun, the inundation of the Nile River, the resulting fertility of the land, and the enduring office of kingship; she was considered to be the force that kept chaos (isft) the antithesis of order, from overwhelming the world.¹⁰¹

The peasant's discourse on Ma'at begins in the very first line of his first petition, which Parkinson explains:

is enjoined and its efficacy is described in gnomic statements, as are the results of its presence and absence (e.g. 'Look, Maat flees...', B1 128-9). The eulogistic sections allude similarly to Maat as the basis for the ideal official they acclaim

⁹⁸ M.V. Fox "Ancient Egyptian Rhetoric" *Rhetorica* 1.1(1983): 12-15.

⁹⁹ Parkinson, "Imposing Words," 32.

¹⁰⁰ Tobin, "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant," 25.

¹⁰¹ E. Teeter. "Maat," *OEA*, II:319; In German, see J. Assmann. *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (C.H. Beck, 1990), p. 58-91.

His articulation of Maat draws on cosmic, social and ethical aspects, progressively emphasizing their interrelationship.¹⁰²

Khunanup's first petition speaks of Ma'at using the terminology of navigation and sets the stage for subsequent appeals. It is the first petition that attracts Rensi's attention. The rhetoric of this petition is exceptional, and entirely unexpected of an itinerant trader like Khunanup.

The fifth petition represents what Parkinson calls "a condensed statement of the tale's social aspect."¹⁰³ Khunanup entreats the High Steward to consider his case:

Do not rob the wretch of his belongings!
Hopelessness—you know what it is:
a pauper's belongings are his breath—
taking them is suffocating him... (B1 262-265)

The general sentiment of the fifth petition is captured exquisitely by its closing three lines, which feature another occurrence of the water imagery:

You were appointed as a dyke for the pauper—
beware lest he drown
Look, you are his lake, you who drag under! (B1 268-270)

One would expect a great deal of exaggeration in a petition such as this, and, as we noted earlier, there is no reason to conclude that Khunanup was actually a pauper. Indeed, the narrative introduction indicated quite the reverse. By means of this hyperbolic passage, the rhetorician, exaggerating actual petitions, was highlighting the social dynamic (the relative poverty of Khunanup) and making reference to his obvious need for the necessities of life that are deprived him by Nemtinakht. Similarly, the term "slave" occurs frequently in communications between individuals, especially when petitioners are appealing to their social superiors.¹⁰⁴ Contrary to Gardiner's assertion, which we observe was far from universally accepted, Khunanup's eloquence does attract the admiration of the King and it is justifiably praised: the peasant's speech was crafted by a fine rhetorician, leading Jason, among others, to conclude that although the tale was adapted

¹⁰² Parkinson, *Dark Side to Perfection*, 169.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ S. Allam. "Slaves," *OEA*, III:293-296.

from an oral original, like PMN, it was much further removed from its oral source than the rhetorically simpler tale of Gimil-Ninurta.¹⁰⁵

What does Khunanup's social location do for the rhetorical speeches? Rensi, surprised by the peasant's petitions, goes to the King and notes explicitly that a peasant pleaded his case eloquently; the King is also surprised. As noted, members of particular social strata are often believed to have particular attributes (2.1.2), and it would seem that eloquence was not expected in an outsider like Khunanup. The peasant's poverty and his unlikely eloquence lead the King to demand Rensi's silence and provide the basis for the subsequent development of the tale. The relatively low social status and relative poverty of the peasant affect the message about rhetoric. The message conveyed by EP is that one should reward skill wherever one finds it, a sentiment that echoes The Instruction of Merikare in which Merikare is instructed:

Do not prefer the wellborn to the commoner
Choose a man on account of his skills,
Then all crafts are done ---...¹⁰⁶

Whether the author of the instruction was exaggerating is a matter of debate; the central point to be remembered is that upward mobility was both possible and a feat to be proud of. It also notes that skills—including, for example, rhetoric—were acknowledged to reside not only in the wellborn in the Middle Kingdom and that nobility are advised to reward ability rather than rank. This, Parkinson notes, is one major theme in Middle Kingdom literature, alongside the solitary hero—in our tale, Khunanup—both of which figure prominently in EP.¹⁰⁷

It was earlier observed that the first crisis that Khunanup faces, starvation after the confiscation of his cargo, is partly resolved when the King orders Rensi to provide him and his family with stipends. Ironically, however, this stipend is delivered only as long as Khunanup continues to petition the High Steward to bring Nemtinakht to justice for confiscating his livelihood. Khunanup's ninth and final petition to Rensi proceeds much like those that precede it, beginning by focusing on the supernatural aspect of Ma'at, contrasting it in the second half with the social aspect of Ma'at. Khunanup ends his

¹⁰⁵ Jason, *Ethnopoetic Analysis*, 194.

¹⁰⁶ Lichtheim, *AEL*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Parkinson, *Dark Side to Perfection*, 129-138.

petitions with a tacit acceptance that justice sometimes does not come from this world, substantially heightening the suspense in the audience that knows Rensi's sympathy for Khunanup's case, by appealing to the god Anubis:

Look, I am pleading to you, and you do not hear—
I will go to plead about you to Anubis (B2 113-114).

With that, Khunanup leaves the court not to return with new petitions, appealing to a higher authority just as he had earlier when he began appealing to Rensi over Nemtinakht.

Khunanup does not attempt to make contact again with Rensi. Instead he is called back, and to his surprise—but in a plot movement that seems foregone to readers—the peasant is read back his petitions and they are sent to the King.

And they seemed more perfect to his [= the King's] heart
than anything in the entire land (B2 131-132).

Consequently, Nemtinakht was given to Khunanup as a slave, along with his property and his position. With this, the first part of Khunanup's initial crisis—loss of property, rather than starvation—is resolved, along with the complete second crisis. There remains some degree of moral ambiguity concerning the treatment of the peasant, but all is set right in the end. Indeed, it might be argued that the peasant is much better off than he was before. The return of property effects a resolution of those elements of the first crisis that remained unresolved—the injustice of Nemtinakht's confiscation of Khunanup's property—and the complete resolution of the second crisis.

3.3.2.2 Some Functions of EP

The nine petitions of Nemtinakht artfully consider the nature of Ma'at, a discourse that would have seemed somewhat surprising coming from a social outsider like Khunanup. The so-called eloquent peasant was remarkable, despite Gardiner's contempt, for precisely this reason. On a very basic level, then, EP artfully considers the nature of Ma'at. That Ma'at becomes the subject of the peasant's petitions as a result of injustice perpetrated through the abuse of power indicates that the tale may have also functioned as a warning against abuse of lower strata, conveying the ethical imperative of

protecting weak members of society. The placement of the petitions in the mouth of a social outsider recalls the Instruction of Merikare's injunction to reward skill wherever one finds it.

It also bears mention that, although Khunanup was not so poor that his cargo was unattractive, he was poor enough that he was powerless when abused. (Additionally, were Khunanup of a higher social standing, it is unclear whether he would have made the trip by himself, but speculation like this tends to be unproductive.) Unlike the Poor Man of Nippur, Khunanup had a great deal to lose, and he had a great deal to gain by winning it back properly. Throughout the tale, Khunanup—for all he knew, disastrously—followed procedure, but in the end his proper behavior is rewarded. It is ironic, we noted, that Khunanup's excellent petitions caused him so much grief, but in the end they also elevated him to the upper stratum of society and led to the enslavement of his abuser. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Khunanup responding to Nemtinakht with the same abandon harnessed so productively (and destructively) by Gimil-Ninurta. Khunanup had more to lose, and in any event his tale ends with a reversal that depends on Khunanup's proper conduct. All along the peasant behaved impeccably—as he repeats to Nemtinakht, “my way is good”—and his lower social status is ultimately elevated to reflect that conduct even as Nemtinakht's is status downgraded to reflect his amoral behavior.

As for the High Steward and the King, their devotion to rhetoric is exemplary, if morally questionable. The tale is careful to indicate that no harm befell Khunanup at their hands—the postponement of justice was inconvenient and inconsiderate but partially resolved the first crisis and ultimately led to the doing of justice. That said, from the perspective of Khunanup it might be asked whether the ends justified the means; that is, does his eventual reward make the elongation of his suffering acceptable, and that question has a great deal of validity and remains open at the end of the tale.

EP reinforces the value of proper behavior: although Khunanup believes Rensi to be unsympathetic, the peasant's exemplary response is eventually rewarded and Nemtinakht's abuse of power is ultimately punished. Not only did Nemtinakht lose the social status and power that enabled him to take advantage of Khunanup, but he was reduced to a social position (Khanunup's slave) well below that originally held by his

victim (and new master), while Khunanup was given his abuser's position and property.

Bascom asks whether it is possible to find a folktale that works against the perpetuation of social norms. Tales that seem to do this, he maintains, should be understood as escapes from the everyday hardships faced by the creators and audiences of folktales. EP, it would seem, contains elements that reinforce social norms in a very straightforward way—proper behavior, the rewarding of skill, respecting one's social superiors, judging fairly members of lower social strata, and devotion to rhetoric—and elements that would seem to defy convention, primarily the postponement of justice. Ultimately, however, the postponement of justice serves to heighten suspense in a narrative that conveys very positive messages. It may thus be seen as an escape that serves to reinforce social norms, not only by defying them in fantasy as “a compensatory escape,” but also by aiding the transmission and inculcation of social norms.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Bascom, “Four Functions,” 349.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS

Structurally and substantively, PMN and EP have a great deal in common. Both tales tell the stories of lower stratum protagonists whose livelihoods are confiscated unjustly by members of the upper strata of society. Although Khunanup is less poor than Gimil-Ninurta, they are both far poorer than their antagonists, and their poverty establishes a context of need in which the tales play with social location to advance their plots. The relative poverty of the two protagonists raises the stakes in both tales and leaves them vulnerable to the abuse of members of the upper stratum. If either Khunanup or Gimil-Ninurta were to fail in their quests for justice, there is reason to believe that they would not have survived, and indeed it is the success of their quest for justice that enables them to do so. By means of contrasting the two tales, the present analysis has explored the crises faced by Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup and the resolutions that they found, while considering the central role played by need in the progression of the narrative.

The abuse suffered by Gimil-Ninurta, the caricature of a pauper who is abused at the hands of the mayor in PMN, is made possible by his extreme poverty—outlined in the opening ten lines of the tale—which, paradoxically allows for the fulfillment of his vow for threefold revenge, against all “real world” expectations, by allowing him to slip under the guard of his abuser who assumes, on the basis of Gimil-Ninurta’s social location, that he does not pose a threat. Extreme poverty drove the Poor Man to make the less than sensible decision to purchase a goat at the beginning of the tale, and his poverty drove him to offer it to the mayor in hopes of parlaying the goat into a feast. Poverty left Gimil-Ninurta vulnerable to the mayor’s abuse and it fueled the mayor’s indifference to the threat posed by his vow, enabling the Poor Man to fulfill it. Gimil-Ninurta’s poverty moreover creates a carnivalesque atmosphere that enables the mingling of social classes. His poverty, it has been observed, heightens the stakes in his quest for justice and permits him to take great risks in its pursuit.

In contrast, Khunanup’s more moderate response is that of someone with much to lose. Khunanup seems to have been an itinerant trader whose stock was of some value. His excellent use of accepted channels of appeal, however, is both surprising and

disastrous: Rensi is so taken by the peasant's rhetoric that he brings his case to the King, and postpones justice at his command in order to continue hearing his appeals. Poverty, however, left the peasant vulnerable to the conniving of Nemtinakht and fostered his indifference when the peasant tried to plead his case. When finally the peasant gains a sympathetic audience in Rensi, his surprising rhetoric brings on another crisis, the postponement of justice. This second crisis, which has an interesting parallel in Genesis 42-45, resolves the immediate threat of starvation—a byproduct of the first crisis—but does not resolve the injustice perpetrated by Nemtinakht. Like Rensi, Joseph uses his position as a member of the upper stratum of Egyptian society to detain his brothers under false pretences in Genesis 42-45, charging them with espionage and dealing very harshly with them. While the biblical tale fulfils the promise that Joseph would lord over his brothers, Joseph's excessive punishment of his brothers and abuse of his father recalls the sentiment of Gimil-Ninurta's threefold retribution. Rensi's intentions were good, while Joseph went beyond the assumption of dominion over his brothers to agonize their father.

In view of what befell Khunanup, it is perhaps understandable why Gimil-Ninurta acted so dramatically to resolve his crisis, although again, Gimil-Ninurta had nothing to lose and everything to gain. The mayor had already shown himself to be unscrupulous by confiscating the Poor Man's gift and Gimil-Ninurta's response may well have been his only recourse. Although Khunanup is provided with a stipend, effectively preventing any real harm from befalling him or his family, the perceived threat of harm that Khunanup must deal with is substantial and, as far as he knows, he is fighting for his very survival. Similarly, although Joseph's brothers do not recognize the Egyptian vizier responsible for their anguish as their brother, the audience knows that it is Joseph. In Egypt, Joseph lords over his brothers in fulfillment of the dreams that led to his expulsion from Canaan. Going one step further, however, Joseph antagonizes his brothers and their father, perhaps excessively, echoing the spirit of Gimil-Ninurta's call for threefold revenge.

The end result of PMN, EP, and Genesis 42-45 is the same: their lower stratum characters are elevated to higher strata. In the case of Khunanup, the eloquent peasant is given the property of his abuser Nemtinakht, and indeed is awarded the person of Nemtinakht as a slave. Gimil-Ninurta finds himself in possession of one or two minas of

red gold, and, possibly, a chariot and suit of the mayor's clothing. His reward, however, was acquired on his own and somewhat illegally, although not necessarily amorally, while Khunanup's was bestowed upon him by Rensi and through accepted channels. Joseph's brothers, finally, are given land in Goshen and supplies for the duration of the famine. Although their elevation to the upper stratum of society will be short lived, and their very presence outside of the land of Canaan puts into question God's promise to Abraham that his descendants will be numerous and possess the land of Canaan, Joseph successfully resolved the immediate crisis facing Joseph's family (starvation).

Because Joseph's intentions are not clear, his abuse of his brothers is very different from the postponement of justice by Rensi. In EP no actual lasting harm, as opposed to perceived harm, was done to Khunanup. The tale makes it clear to the audience very early on that Rensi sympathizes with Khunanup's case and that his silence is a ploy to continue hearing the peasant's petitions. In addition, Khunanup's second crisis, the postponement of justice, makes possible his elevation to the upper stratum of society.

The messages of the tales are not as clear as some have assumed. Whether one lauds PMN for its implied social criticism, with Oppenheim in Ancient Mesopotamia, or dismisses it, following Bascom, as a mechanism "to escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon him [and her] by society"¹⁰⁹ depends, ultimately on the orientation of the reader. One can as easily criticize Gimil-Ninurta for reacting radically as one can laud him for taking decisive action. Although PMN is clear that the mayor was wrong, whether Gimil-Ninurta was right to respond in the way that he did is another question entirely. While the values of social hierarchy are challenged comically, other values are reinforced, including, among others, reciprocity and fair treatment of those less fortunate. The tale itself does not evaluate the behavior of the peasant and functions as a carnivalesque escape from the hardships of the real world.

The message conveyed by EP is perhaps less straightforward. Khunanup's response to adversity followed accepted channels of appeal and he was punished for doing so. Although EP is careful to show that no real physical harm—as opposed to threatened harm—was inflicted upon Khunanup at the hands of Rensi, the High

¹⁰⁹ Bascom, "Four Functions," 343.

Steward's commitment to rhetoric, at the expense of Khunanup, is at the very least morally questionable. The postponement of justice underscores the importance of rhetoric, even though it at times seems to defy the moral imperative of taking care of the poor. Ultimately the postponement of justice functions to heighten suspense and irony in the tale, and may thus be said to support the perpetuation of social norms by making EP a more engaging story and by providing a sanctioned outlet of escape, especially for individuals involved with the court.

Both PMN and EP tell the story of exceptional lower stratum protagonists; it is precisely because their actions are remarkable that their stories are worth telling. Neither character, it has been noted, conforms exactly to the norms of their social matrices. Conveniently, Bascom's proposal accounts for all contingencies: if the tale diverges from accepted societal norms, as Gimil-Ninurta's vow and Rensi's devotion to rhetoric would seem to, then it functions as a mechanism of escape from the pressures of everyday ("non-carnival") life. If, on the other hand, the folktale inculcates accepted norms, such as fighting injustice, with whatever lack of proportion, in the case of Gimil-Ninurta, or following procedure or rewarding skill wherever one finds it, in the case of EP, then the tales may be said to reinforce accepted norms. Although poverty and the quest for justice play an absolutely central role in the progression of PMN and EP, it is only possible to speculate about exactly what function the tales may have served in their social contexts, whether it be escape or reinforcement of social norms. And, at all events, that functions of the tales no doubt evolved as they migrated into different social and historical environments.

The unique contribution of PMN and EP among other ancient Near Eastern texts that talk about the poor is in the way that their storytellers represent lower strata characters, and as such the tales serve as indispensable artifacts of ancient life even if they cannot necessarily be relied upon as historical records. Speiser was indeed correct to stress with Gurney that PMN presents Mesopotamians in a lighthearted mood, and the text, along with EP, plays with poverty in a way that is also unexpected.¹¹⁰ Poverty functions as an important underlying condition of the abuse of Gimil-Ninurta and Khunanup that empowers and motivates their very different reactions. Khunanup and

¹¹⁰ Speiser, "Sultantepe Tablet 38 73 and Enuma Eliš Iii 69."

Gimil-Ninurta are caricatures of themselves and cannot, of course, be considered accurate descriptions of lower strata people. Accordingly, little from PMN and EP can be assumed to reflect the everyday speech and mores of lower strata Mesopotamians and Egyptians; indeed, Khunanup got into trouble precisely because his speech exceeded expectations! In this sense, PMN and EP reflect the imaginations of their storytellers, whose tales, as Bascom has argued, function to reinforce social norms.

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