

Facsimile of *Maxim 21*, written in the hieratic script, in the *Instructions of Ptahhotep*, wisdom text which dates from the Middle Kingdom (circa. 2040-1650 B.C.). This text has been written on a papyrus roll now commonly referred to as *Papyrus Prisse* housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. *Maxim 21* in *Le Papyrus Prisse* beginning toward the end of line 8 to the end of line 12 (in *Le Papyrus Prisse et ses variantes*, Paris, 1911, pl. VI, p.10.)

☐ A new interpretation of the image of Women in Maxim 21 of the Instructions of Ptahhotep : A grammatical and cultural analysis

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Abstract : *In the translation of Maxim 21 in the Instructions of Ptahhotep, all Egyptologists have used the most comprehensive presentation of this wisdom text which dates from the Middle Kingdom (ca.2040-1650 B.C.E.) written in the hieratic script on a papyrus roll now commonly referred to as Papyrus Prisse housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The translation and interpretation of Maxim 21 in the Instructions of Ptahhotep has historically been a very difficult passage for Egyptologists. This difficulty manifests in both problems of grammatical analysis and cultural interpretation. The author begins by providing a transcription and transliteration of Maxim 21 from the Egyptian text. Following this, he submits his own original translation of the passage compared to the translations of other Egyptologists and then proceed to grammatical and cultural commentary. Through a close grammatical analysis of this maxim, this article shows that the image of women in this maxim is overwhelmingly positive without any traces of a negative view. The article concludes by suggesting that Ancient Egyptian women should be analyzed inside their own cultural paradigm of Maat which is fundamentally and deeply African in both essence and scope.*

Résumé : *Une nouvelle interprétation de l'image de la femme dans la Maxime 21 des Instructions de Ptahhotep – Un commentaire grammatical et culturel. Les Maximes de Ptahhotep constituent un texte de sagesse de l'Égypte ancienne datant du Moyen Empire (circa 2040-1650 avant notre ère). Ce texte a été écrit en hiéroglyphes sur un papyrus connu aujourd'hui sous la dénomination Papyrus Prisse, actuellement conservé à la Bibliothèque nationale de France, à Paris. La traduction et l'interprétation de la maxime 21 de ce papyrus, relative à l'image de la femme, pose un double problème, historiquement connu des égyptologues, respectivement au plan de l'analyse grammaticale et celui de l'interprétation culturelle. Partant directement du texte égyptien, l'auteur propose sa propre traduction qu'il confronte à celle d'autres égyptologues. Il apporte ensuite un commentaire qui renouvelle l'interprétation de la maxime traduite, prenant pour cadre le paradigme culturel africain de la Maât. Il en ressort une image tout à fait positive de la femme contrairement au commentaire établi par d'autres auteurs.*

The translation and interpretation of Maxim 21 in the *Instructions of Ptahhotep* has historically been a very difficult passage for Egyptologists. This difficulty manifests in both problems of grammatical analysis and cultural interpretation. Despite the difficulties in translation, some Egyptologists have viewed this maxim as containing both a positive and negative view of women. Through a close grammatical analysis of this maxim, the purpose of this article is to show that the image of women in this maxim is overwhelmingly positive without any traces of a negative view. The article concludes by suggesting that Ancient Egyptian women should be analyzed inside their own cultural paradigm of Maat which is fundamentally and deeply African in both essence and scope.

In the translation of Maxim 21 in the *Instructions of Ptahhotep*, all Egyptologists have used the most comprehensive presentation of this wisdom text which dates from the Middle Kingdom (ca.2040-1650 B.C.E.) written on a papyrus roll now commonly referred to as *Papyrus Prisse* housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.² I have provided the facsimile of this passage written in the hieratic script for the benefit of the reader. Since all Egyptologists have relied on this version of the text for translation, I will primarily use the *Papyrus Prisse* as the foundation for my analysis, but I will also make references to two partial fragments of the text, both housed in the British Museum. For the presentation of the hieroglyphs, the work by Zybnek Zaba entitled *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep* has been indispensable.³

I will begin by providing a transcription and transliteration of Maxim 21. Following this, I will submit my own original translation of the passage compared to the translations of other Egyptologists and then proceed to grammatical and cultural commentary.

¹ It is with deep gratitude that I submit this article to the ka of one of my great teachers and mentors, Dr. Jacob H. Carruthers. He founded the Kemetic Institute in 1978 and was a co-founder of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC) in 1984. These organizations represent the first systematic, institutionalized attempts among African-Americans to study Ancient Egypt and other African Civilizations. He also served as a member of my doctoral dissertation committee at Temple University.

² G. Jéquier, *Le Papyrus Prisse et Ses Variantes* (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1911).

³ Zybnek Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep* (Prague: Éditions De L'Académie Tchèque Slovaque Des Sciences, 1956).

Maxim 21

Line 1:



ir ikr.k grg.k pr.k

Line 2:



mr(y).k hmt.k m hn

Line 3:



mh ht.s hbs s3.s

Line 4:



phrt pw nt h'w.s mrht

Line 5:



s3wi ib.s tr n wnnt.k

Line 6:



3ht pw 3ht n nb.s

Line 7:



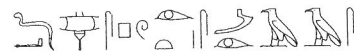
imi.k wd' s(y) rwt

Line 8:



shr s(y) r shm 3rdi s(y)

Line 9:



d^c.s pw irt.s m33.s

Line 10:



sw3h.s pw m pr.k

Line 11:



sn^cy.k s(y) mw pw

Line 12:



k3t dlt.s n wy.s

Line 13:



snnt.s ir n.s mr

My Translation:

1. If you are excellent, you will establish your household
2. and you shall love your wife with ardor.

3. Fill her belly, clothe her back.
4. Ointment is the prescription for her limbs.
5. Gladden her heart as long as you live.
6. She is a profitable field for her lord.
7. You should not judge her,
8. remove her from power, or restrain her.
9. Her eye is her storm-wind when she sees.
10. It means she shall endure in your house.
11. When you repulse her, she is water.
12. A vagina is what she gives for her condition.
13. What she questions is one who will make a canal for her.

Parkinson Translation #1:

1. If you are excellently well off, you should establish your household
2. and love your wife with proper ardor:
3. fill her belly, clothe her back!
4. Perfume is a restorative for her limbs.
5. Make her joyful as long as you live!
6. She is a field, good for her lord.
7. You should not have her judged.
8. Remove her from power, suppress her!
9. When she sees anything her eye is a storm-wind to her.
10. Restraining her is how to make her remain in your house.
11. a female who is under her control is rainwater:
12. No translation
13. when one enquires after her, she has flown away.⁴

Parkinson Translation #2:

1. If you are excellent, you shall establish your household,
2. and love your wife according to her standard:
3. fill her belly, clothe her back;
4. perfume is a prescription for her limbs.
5. Make her happy as long as you live!
6. She a field, good for her lord.
7. You shall not pass judgement on her.
8. Remove her from power, suppress her;
9. her eye when she sees (anything) is her stormwind.
10. This is how to make her endure in your house:
11. you shall restrain her. A female
12. who is in her own hands is like the rainwater:

⁴ R.B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940-1640 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 257.

13. she is sought, and she has flown away.⁵

Faulkner Translation

1. If you are well-to-do and can maintain your household
2. love your wife in your home (according to good) custom.
3. Fill her belly, clothe her back;
4. oil is the panacea for her body
5. Make her happy while you are alive
6. for she is a land profitable to her lord.
7. Neither judge her nor raise her to a position of power.
8. her eye is a stormwind when she sees
9. Soothe her heart with what has accrued to you
10. it means that she will continue to dwell in your house.
11. If you repulse her, it means [tears].
12. A vagina is what she gives for her condition;
13. what she asks about is who will make a canal for her.⁶

Erman Translation

1. If thou art a man of note, found for thyself an household,
2. and love thy wife at home, as it beseemeth.
3. Fill her belly, clothe her back;
4. unguent is the remedy for her limbs.
5. Gladden her heart, so long as she liveth;
6. she is a goodly field for her lord.

A summary is provided for the remainder of the passage:

“To this, apparently, another warning is appended: hold her back from getting the mastery and the like.”⁷

Lichtheim Translation

1. When you prosper and found your house,
2. And love your wife with ardor,
3. Fill her belly, clothe her back,
4. Ointment soothes her body.

⁵ R.B. Parkinson, *Voices From Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Middle Kingdom Writings* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 69-70.

⁶ William Kelly Simpson (Ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 167.

⁷ Adolf Erman (Ed.), *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of Their Writings* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966), 61.

5. Gladden her heart as long as you live,
6. She is a fertile field for her lord.
7. Do not contend with her in court,
8. Keep her from power, restrain her-
9. Her eye is her storm when she gazes-
10. Thus will you make her stay in your house.⁸

Lichtheim does not attempt a translation of the final three lines, exclaiming that “the final three sentences are very obscure.”⁹

Zaba Translation

1. Si tu es notable, fonde-toi un foyer;
2. épouse une femme légitimement(?),
3. remplis son estomac et endues sont teint de pomades.
4. l’onguent est un remède pour son corps.
5. Réjouis son coeur aussi longtemps que tu existes;
6. C’est un champ utile à son maitre.
7. Tu ne dois pas la condamner;
8. éloigne-la (cependant) du pouvoir et restrains-la
9. si c’est un (litt. «son») orage que son oeil quand elle regarde;
10. c’est faire qu’elle prospère dans ta maison.
11. Si tu la repousses, elle est (comme) eau(?);
12. une garce, on la laisse (litt. «donne») à ses bras(?);
13. quand elle est fâchée(?), fais(?) un canal(?) pour elle.¹⁰

Grammatical and Cultural Commentary

This maxim is grammatically introduced by the particle *ir* “if” which is commonly used to introduce conditional sentences. The particle *ir* is placed before the *sdm.f* form. The predicate is adjectival (*ikr*) and hence, the *sdm.f* form of the adjective-verb (*ikr.k*) is used.¹¹ I translate the beginning part of the conditional sentence as “If you are excellent.”¹² The term *ikr* has semantic nuances evidenced in the *Instructions of Ptahhotep* and it is used in the beginning of maxims 10, 12, and 24 to describe the

⁸ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 69.
























⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰ Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 87-88.

¹¹ See § 50 in Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (London, Oxford University Press, 1957). Allen suggests that in forming the protasis of a conditional clause, the *sdm.f* form placed after the particle *ir* is either Gardiner’s archaic prospective *sdm.f* or the subjunctive *sdm.f*. See § 19.7 and § 21.6 in James Allen, *Middle Egyptian*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² Miriam Lichtheim is the only Egyptologist who did not translate Line 1 as a conditional sentence, opting for “When you prosper and found your house.”

characteristics and virtues of a *s ikr* “a man of excellence.” In the context of this wisdom text, it is clear that “a man of excellence” was not only materially prosperous, he also possessed knowledge and he had to master how to judiciously communicate this knowledge in council in order to solve problems. Another characteristic of a “man of excellence” is attention to family life. In the text, “a man of excellence” wishes to produce a good son by the grace of God so that he may pass on his material and intellectual wealth to the next generation. In Parkinson’s translation #1 of *ikr* as “excellently well-off” and Faulkner’s translation of “well-to-do” both lay too much stress on the idea of material acquisitions and wealth in their translation as the essence of *ikr* which neglects the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of this concept which should be simultaneously felt. Zaba’s French translation of *ikr* as “notable” is also too limited. In his article on the *Stele of Iritisen*, Obenga more accurately translates *ikr* as “parfait”, “accompli”, and “excellent” and says it suggests both “qualités intellectuelles et vertus (qualités morales).”¹³ In addition to moral qualities and virtues, this maxim suggests that in order to be “a man of excellence” also necessitates building a strong family life which commences with establishing a household (*grg pr*). In conditional sentences, the if-clause expresses the condition which must be met. What comes after expresses the result if the condition is met. Hence, “if you are excellent (*ikr*), you shall establish a household.” Establishing a household is not contingent upon being “excellently well-off” or “well-to-do” in an exclusively material sense, but it is seen as a common character trait of a person who manifests “excellence.” Thus, if you do not establish a household, the philosophical implication is that you are not “excellent.”

I translate Line 2 as “and you shall love your wife with ardor.” My translation concurs with both Lichtheim and Parkinson #1. I read *mr(y).k* as a subjunctive *sdm.f* used in a dependent clause after the conditional particle *ir*.¹⁴ There is disagreement among scholars in translating the adverbial phrase *m hn* “with ardor.” In his notes on the text, Zaba states that “Je propose de voir dans  le mot  (Wb. III, 367, II) qui signifie “brûlure (causée par soleil)” dans le sens métaphorique “ardeur”.¹⁵ I concur with this argument because it is clear from the original hieratic text that this is the word and I do not think that it is a scribal error. Devaud views it as a scribal error and proposed to emend the text as                     

fragmentary versions in the British Museum, these versions do add a powerful nuance to the text. The “man of excellence” must not only “love his wife,” but he must also interact with her according to **her** standard (*r tp-ḥsb.s*), not **his** standard. In the prologue of the *Instructions of Ptahhotep*, the whole wisdom teaching is described as teaching the ignorant to know the *tp-ḥsb n mdt nfrt* “standard of good speech.”¹⁸ Through the use of the concept of *tp-ḥsb*, the Ancient Egyptians communicate the ideals of the social order. In the context of Ancient Egypt, the ideal of love (*mr*) is critical to an understanding of the Ancient Egyptian worldview. We see this ideal so heavily emphasized on stele, on monuments, and in the whole corpus of Egyptian texts that it is easy for the modern reader to overlook the power of this ideal in governing social interactions and relationships. These other versions stress the idea that the “man of excellence” not only has standards he must be measured against and among these are to “love his wife”, but he must also harmonize his personality with the standards of his wife (*tp-ḥsb.s*). This fits coherently within the framework of the Ancient Egyptian worldview when we note that the wife is often referred to as *nbt pr* “lady of the house,” but there exists no concept in the Egyptian language of a *nb pr* or “lord of the house.” The “man of excellence” is exhorted to take a wife and establish a household with a deeply felt love at the center of the marriage and the ability to be measured against the standards of his wife just as he is willing to be measured against the norms and standards of the society.

Line 3 of the maxim is universally translated by Egyptologists in the same manner. All see the verbs *mḥ* “fill” and *ḥbs* “clothe” as imperative verb forms urging the reader or hearer to action, either in the form of a command or as an instruction. It is more direct than the subjunctive *sdm.f* forms in Line 1 and 2. Hence, the translation is “fill her belly, clothe her back.”

I translate line 4 as “oil is the prescription for her limbs.” This is a nominal sentence where the element *pw* is in a sentence where both subject and predicate are nouns. In this construction, the noun that precedes *pw* serves as the predicate and the noun that follows is in apposition to *pw*, serving as the subject.¹⁹ In this example, *phrt nt ḥꜣw.s* “the prescription for her limbs” is the predicate and *mrḥt* “oil” is the subject. When the predicate that comes before *pw* consists of several words, the element *pw* can move forward before an adjective, a prepositional phrase, or a genitive after a noun. In this line, that means *pw* is placed before the prepositional phrase *nt ḥꜣw.s* “for her limbs.” Most scholars translate the passage generally in the same way with the same semantic sense. Lichtheim’s translation as “ointment soothes her body” captures the spirit of the passage, but it does not reflect the actual grammatical construction.

I translate line 5 as “gladden her heart as long as you live.” The verb *sꜣwi* “lengthen” or “make long” is a causative 3ae inf. verb used in this sentence as an imperative verb with *ib.s* “her heart” as the nominal object. The literal translation of “make her heart long” can

¹⁸ See Line 47 and 48 in Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 19-20.

¹⁹ See § 130 in Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*. Gardiner presents this line as one of the examples to explain the use of *pw* in sentences with both subject and predicate are nouns.

be translated into English as an idiomatic expression meaning to “make glad.”²⁰ The adverbial phrase *tr n wnnt.k* literally translates to “the time for that which you exist.” I read *wnnt.k* as an imperfective relative form. Hence, the literal translation of the line is “make her heart long the time for that which you exist.” The translation into English as “gladden her heart as long as you live” captures the essence of the passage nicely and this translation, with little deviation, is appropriately rendered by scholars.

I translate line 6 as “she is a profitable field for her lord.” This is another nominal sentence with the element *pw*. In this example, the predicate is *3ht* “field” and the element *pw* is placed before an adjective *3ht* “profitable” or “useful” which modifies the noun *3ht* “field.” In this line, Ptahhotep metaphorically uses the idea of a “field” to describe a spouse. But this is just not any “field,” it is a “useful” and “profitable” field. This agricultural metaphor suggests that when you properly plant seeds, till the soil, and cultivate the land, your harvest is a “profitable” one. I concur with Zaba who asserts in analyzing this line that “Il me paraît impossible de croire ici à une métaphore des relations sexuelles.”²¹ Without proper context or commentary, Lichtheim’s translation as “she is a fertile field for her lord” borders on sexual innuendo. To read this line as an elaborate metaphor for sexual relations is short-sighted and limited. An important philosophical question to ask is what actually makes her a “profitable field,” his actions or her actions? In this maxim, we can conceptualize the preceding lines as the good seeds that must be planted and cultivated that are the actual catalyst for a “profitable field.” In other words, Ptahhotep indicates that when a “man of excellence” deeply loves his wife according to her standard, provides for her materially and does all that he can in his life to make her happy, the results of these actions, these seeds that are planted, will inevitably harvest into a “profitable field,” a field where the woman becomes a harmonious co-builder of the relationship. If he did not strive to provide for her spiritually and materially, the implication then is she would not be a “profitable field” meaning that she would not be happy and deeply satisfied with the relationship and support all activities in order to make it grow and prosper. The translations by Parkinson as “she is a field, good for her lord” does not accurately capture the essence of the passage. The adjective *nfrt* “good” was not used to modify the noun *3ht* “field.” For a field to be “profitable” means that you have to invest time and work in order to receive a proper return. In the context of advice for the “man of excellence,” this simply means that if you give love to your wife, you will receive love, and if you support her, she will support you in all that you do.



I translate line 7 as “you should not judge her.” This sentence begins with the form of the negative verb *imi* which is used in the *sdm.f* form to express a negative wish or command.²² Allen says that this negative verb form is used as a subjunctive in a main clause and translates to “should not, may not.”²³ In this line, the suffix pronoun *.k* is the subject and hence, the translation “you should not” (*imi.k*). Following the negative verb form *imi.k*, we have the verb *wdꜥ* “to judge” which serves as the negative complement

²⁰ See Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute Ashmolean Museum, 1991), 209.

²¹ See Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 145.

²² See § 345 in Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*.

²³ See § 19.11.2 in Allen, *Middle Egyptian*.

and takes a dependent pronoun *s(y)* as its object. The word *wḏꜥ-rwt* means “to judge.”²⁴ The Ancient Egyptians clearly place the dependent pronoun *s(y)* before *rwt* because basic Egyptian word order dictates that pronouns come before nouns.²⁵ How are we to interpret this passage? Zaba makes an interesting observation when he suggests that the word *wḏꜥt* means a “divorced woman” and perhaps one can understand it as “ne divorce pas d’avec elle”²⁶ Despite this suggestion, he opts for the more technical translation of “tu ne dois pas la condamner.” Lichtheim’s translation as “do not contend with her in court” clearly attempts to emend the word  *ryt* in the text to  *rwy* “court of law.”²⁷ Unlike Lichtheim, I do not see a scribal error in the text, but nevertheless, the translation by Lichtheim raises an important question. How should we contextualize the use of the word *wḏꜥ-rwt* “judge” in this line? Should we see it in the context of a formal court of law as Lichtheim does? Should we perhaps view it as an oblique reference to advise against divorce as Zaba suggests? I think the most accurate way to view the meaning of this line and what comes after it is in the context of the beginning of this maxim with advice for the “man of excellence” in establishing a household (*grg pr*). In this context, I assert that the exhortation of “you should not judge her” refers to primarily the management and direction of the household and household affairs. This sentiment is powerfully felt in the *Instructions of Any* and I believe captures the same spirit of this line:

Do not control your wife in her house,
When you know she is efficient;
Don’t say to her: “Where is it? Get it!”
When she has put it in the right place.
Let your eye observe in silence,
Then you recognize her skill;
It is joy when your hand is with her,
There are many who don’t know this.
If a man desists from strife at home,
He will not encounter its beginning.
Every man who founds a household
Should hold back the hasty heart.²⁸

To judge a woman in the context of the management of the household was clearly viewed as a negative character trait. To judge a woman in this context meant that one would attempt to impose their method and way of doing things on his spouse as opposed to adhering to her method and her standard (*tp-ḥsb*) of doing things. To pass judgement on another person is more than merely a critique. To judge connotes establishing boundaries between ideas of “right” and “wrong” and using these ideas to assess and change behavior that is perceived as out of order. For the Egyptians, they clearly stress the idea

²⁴ See Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 76.

²⁵ See § 14.6 in Allen, *Middle Egyptian*.

²⁶ See Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 145.


²⁷ See Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 148.

²⁸ See Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. II: The New Kingdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 143.

that wives should establish the order for the conduct of the household and husbands should revere her and support her in that role, not negatively judge her.




Regardless of differences in translation, Egyptologists have universally viewed the first seven lines of this maxim as conveying a positive view of women, but the existing translations of line 8 mark the beginnings of a sudden shift toward a negative view of women. How and why did this change happen so suddenly and dramatically? I see the essence of the problem as one of grammar and not the basic translation of the line. I translate this line as “remove her from power or restrain her.” Parkinson’s translation as “remove her from power, suppress her!” grammatically views the causative 3ae inf. verb *shri* “to remove” as an imperative verb form that marks the beginning of a main clause. This is why he places an exclamation point (!) after the sentence to emphasize the idea that this is a command to the “man of excellence.” Lichtheim’s translation as “keep her from power, restrain her-” also clearly sees this as a main clause by placing a hyphen (-) after “restrain her.” Faulkner translates lines 7 and 8 as “neither judge her nor raise her to a position of power.” His translation is grammatically too imprecise here and it’s ironic that he translates the verb *shri* as “to raise” when his dictionary definition of *shri* as “to remove” or “to exorcise” does not provide any evidence that this verb can be defined as “to raise.”²⁹ Despite the imprecise translation, Faulkner’s translation does attempt to see lines 7 and 8 as a cohesive grammatical unit, not separate main clauses. Seeing lines 7 and 8 together as opposed to separate is critical to not only an accurate translation, but more importantly, to feel the semantic intent of the maxim. Line 8 is to be seen as a dependent or subordinate clause, not a main clause! Allen states that “the use of the subjunctive in an unmarked noun clause as the object of a verb is one of the prime examples of contextual subordination in Middle Egyptian. In each case, the clause with the subjunctive could be a main clause or independent sentence in its own right, but it is subordinate because of the context in which it is used.”³⁰ Thus, the translation as “remove her from power, suppress her!” could be read grammatically as a main clause, but it is clear that this line reflects the dynamic that Allen refers to as “contextual subordination.” Thus, the accurate translation of lines 7 and 8 is “you should not judge her, remove her from power or restrain her.” When this line is viewed as a main clause, it inevitably yields the turn toward a negative view of women, but when it is viewed more accurately as a subordinate clause, it inevitably continues the positive view of women.

When viewed in this light, this is a very important passage. The “man of excellence” is advised against removing his wife from power (*r shm*). Again, the ideal for establishing a household (*grg pr*) is for the power (*shm*) to be invested in the wife, not the husband. In the context of the household, the power of the “man of excellence” was manifested in love, material and spiritual support of his wife, not dominance. This speaks to a self-conscious cultural recognition of the power (*shm*) that women as wives and mothers should have in the household.

I translate the last part of line 8 as “restrain her.” In the text, we see  *3rdi s(y)* where *3rdi* “restrain” is clearly the verb and *s(y)* “her” is a dependent pronoun used as a

²⁹ Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 238.

³⁰ See § 19.9 in Allen, *Middle Egyptian*.

pronominal object. Zaba sees in this word a possible scribal error because the word as it appears is not attested in the *Wörterbuch* dictionary.³¹ He proposes to emend  3rdi s(y) to  3r s(y) which translates to “restrains-la.” Although my translation is exactly the same as Zaba’s, I would like to suggest a way to arrive at this translation without viewing the orthographic writing  3rdi s(y) as a scribal error. Although the Wb. dictionary nor Faulkner’s dictionary give this word, the hieroglyphic dictionary by Budge does actually give this word. He suggests that this word in Coptic is $\omega\rho\chi$ which means to “be safe, sure, security.”³² In the *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, Cerny defines $\omega\rho\chi$ as “confirm, fasten, imprison” and “make firm, secure, protect.” He also gives the earlier Demotic $\text{r}\dot{\text{d}}$.³³ Although Cerny does not provide a Middle Egyptian word, I believe it is quite plausible to see the verb 3rdi as the origin of Coptic $\omega\rho\chi$. Nevertheless, my perspective on this point does not alter the basic meaning of the passage because the verb 3r translates essentially the same as 3rdi, the only difference being I suggest that there may have been no scribal error in the writing.

I translate line 9 as “her eye is her storm-wind when she sees.” This is another nominal sentence when the element *pw* is placed between two nouns. In this example, the noun phrase that precedes *pw* is $\dot{\text{d}}^{\text{c}}.s$ “her storm-wind” and functions as the logical predicate and the noun phrase that follows *pw* is *irt.s* “her eye” which functions as the subject. I have essentially the same translations as Lichtheim and Faulkner for this line. Parkinson’s translation #1 as “when she sees anything her eye is a storm-wind to her” is not an accurate rendering in placing the word “anything” in the translation and “to her” as a prepositional phrase after storm-wind which I think detracts from understanding the grammatical construction here. Parkinson’s translation #2 is better with “her eye when she sees (anything) is her stormwind.” With this translation, he recognizes the placement of the word “anything” as a logical nexus to convey meaning is not part of the actual passage. From this passage, Parkinson inaccurately deduces that “a wife grows stormy and unsettled when she sees anything, and so should be kept under control. This is because, otherwise, a woman is like water: when she is wanted she will have gone away.”³⁴ In this passage, I assert that the Egyptians continue to provide us with metaphors of their natural environment to understand human relationships. The eye of the wife (*irt.s*) when she sees (*m33.s*) is conceptualized as a storm-wind ($\dot{\text{d}}^{\text{c}}$). A storm-wind is a very powerful metaphor. For example, we encounter this word twice in the Middle Egyptian story called the *Shipwrecked Sailor*. The narrator asserts that the sailors were so good at their duties that they could actually predict a storm-wind ($\dot{\text{d}}^{\text{c}}$) before it came. Despite the ability to predict it, a storm-wind ($\dot{\text{d}}^{\text{c}}$) actually came up (*pr.w*) while they

³¹ See Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 145.

³² See E.A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary, Vol. I* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1978), 7. Budge provides the following reference for defining the word in this way: *Revue Égyptologie publiée sous la direction de MM. Brugsch, F. Chabas, and Eug. Revillout. Première Année. Paris, 1880.*

³³ See Jaroslav Cerny, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 229.

³⁴ See Parkinson, *Voices From Ancient Egypt*, 70.

were sailing and destroyed the ship before they could reach land.³⁵ I think that the fact that her eye (*irt.s*) is viewed as her storm-wind (*dʿ.s*) alludes to the power of a type of non-verbal communication. Her mouth is not her storm-wind, but her eye is her storm-wind. Implicit in this line is the idea that facial expressions connote meaning. In fact, they are a form of speech. In the *Instructions of Ptahhotep*, he emphasizes the power of silence (*gr*) when used appropriately is able to win disputes and not escalate heated situations. Just as silence can be a powerful form of non-verbal communication, so too can facial expressions that emanate with the eyes. In the context of the maxim, this line suggests that if the “man of excellence” judges his wife, removes her from power, or restrains her, he will inevitably have to face her “storm-wind” when “she sees” and reacts to the reality of a situation where she is not treated with respect and reverence.

I translate line 10 as “it means she shall endure in your house.” This is yet another nominal sentence, but unlike the other nominal sentences we have encountered in this maxim, this sentence does not have a nominal subject placed after the copula *pw*. In this nominal sentence, the copula *pw* functions as the subject. Gardiner refers to this construction as the *sdm.f pw* construction where the copula *pw* is best translated as “this means.”³⁶ In the predicate position, I read *sw3h.s* as a subjunctive *sdm.f* form meaning “she shall endure.” The causative verb *sw3h* “endure” is used here intransitively. In this line, the copula *pw* is moved forward before the prepositional phrase *m pr.k* “in your house.” Faulkner’s translation as “it means that she will continue to dwell in your house” captures the essence of the line and comes closest to my translation. Zaba’s translation as “c’est faire qu’elle prospère dans ta maison” is also an accurate one. Parkinson’s translation #1 as “restraining her is how to make her remain in your house” is not accurate because there is no word or idea of “restraint” in this line. This translation is clearly an outgrowth of his paradigm shift in translation after line 7. He attempts to import a negative sense into the line that is simply not there. Parkinson’s translation #2 as “this is how to make her endure in your house” mistakenly reads the causative verb *sw3h* “endure” in its transitive use and takes the dependent pronoun *s(y)* “her” as the pronominal object. The causative verb *sw3h* which literally means “cause to endure” is both transitive and intransitive in use, but it is clear in this line that it is used intransitively. Lichtheim offers a similar translation as “thus will you make her stay in your house.” In this translation, she makes a similar mistake as Parkinson and she also inserts an unwarranted suffix pronoun *.k* “you” into the translation that is not in the line.

Why are these grammatical issues so important here? A translation that misreads the causative verb *sw3h* in its transitive use yields a translation that gives the strong sense that the wives’ role in the household is one that is forced upon her (*sy*) and she, indeed, is “made to endure” this situation. My translation that reads the causative verb *sw3h* as an intransitive verb with a suffix pronoun (*.s*) stresses the fact that the husband or the “man of excellence” does not force his wife to stay in the house. This is a decision that is attributed to the woman. Clearly, all of the foregoing lines of this maxim logically build

³⁵ For the English translation, see Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. I*, 212. For the actual hieroglyphic text, see Aylward Blackman, *Middle-Egyptian Stories* (Bruxelles: Édition De La Fondation Égyptologie Reine Élisabeth, 1972), 42.

³⁶ See § 189 in Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*.

up to this sentence. If a “man of excellence” loves his wife, materially and spiritually supports her, does not attempt to remove her from power(*shṃ*) in the household, and does not judge her or restrain her, this behavior reflects the characteristics of a “man of excellence” that convinces the wife to “endure” or to “last long” in his house. Clearly, the sense is in this line that the wife has the decision-making capacity to stay or not to stay in the household. Parkinson’s and Lichtheim’s translations do not match the reality of daily life in Ancient Egypt. A divorced woman in Ancient Egypt was called a *wḏt*.³⁷ Embedded in this word is the notion that Ancient Egyptian women had to freedom to “judge” whether or not the marriage was working. Hence, when they “judged” that the problems were too grave, she had the ability to part with her husband. Another fragmentary version of the text in the British Museum actually has another line **before** this line which is not in the *Papyrus Prisse* which is the one under discussion. This fragment has the line that translates as “soothe her heart with what has accrued to you.”³⁸ Faulkner is the only scholar who makes this line part of his translation and this is undoubtedly the reason why he translates the line under discussion as “it means that she will continue to dwell in your house.” Because of the further clarification from this fragmentary version, Faulkner easily saw the line we are analyzing as conveying a positive view of women and not a negative view. Even without this clarification by Faulkner, it should not have been viewed as a negative passage, but certainly with this additional line, it strengthens my argument even more.

The last three lines of this maxim have caused difficult problems in translation. Lichtheim did not attempt to translate them, exclaiming that they are “very obscure.” Zaba attempts a translation, but he too notes that “ces vers sont très difficiles à cause de mots et des expressions que les dictionnaires n’expliquent pas suffisamment.”³⁹ I concur with these sentiments, but it is still important to attempt a translation so that the reader can see the various ways that scholars have read these lines. I translate line 11 as “when you repulse her, she is water.” I read the verb *šnʿy* “repulse” as a subjunctive in a main clause. The suffix *.k* is the subject and hence the translation, “you shall repulse.” The dependent pronoun *s(y)* “her” is used as the direct object of the verb *šnʿy* “repulse.” Because of the nominal sentence that follows this construction, it is necessary to provide a logical nexus. I choose the word “when” for this purpose.⁴⁰ What follows is a nominal sentence where the copula *pw* functions as the subject. I translate this nominal sentence *mw pw* as “she is water.” For this line, my translation is essentially the same as Faulkner’s who reads “If you repulse her, it means [tears].” The only differences between our renditions is that he uses another logical nexus “if” and he translates the nominal predicate *mw* “water” as “tears,” suggesting perhaps an idiom. I did not view this as a conditional sentence, therefore I chose not to use the logical nexus “if.” I chose to keep the literal translation of the nominal sentence as “she is water.” Zaba’s translation is also basically the same as “si tu la repousses, elle est (comme) eau(?)” Since Lichtheim submits no translation, Parkinson’s translation is the one that radically departs from my translation and those of Faulkner and Zaba. Parkinson’s translation #1 reads “a female

³⁷ See Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 76.

³⁸ For the hieroglyphic text of the line, see Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 42.

³⁹ Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 146.

⁴⁰ See § 167 in Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*.

who is under her control is rainwater.” His translation #2 reads “a female who is in her own hands is like the rainwater.” How does he arrive at this translation? He clearly attempts to combine lines 11 and 12 and see them as a cohesive unit. His reading of “female” as opposed to “vagina” is based upon a fragmentary version of the text which is not in Papyrus Prisse.⁴¹ He tries to translate line 12 as a nominal subject *st* “female” with an elaborate subordinate relative clause. From a grammatical view, it is clear that both of his translations have grave problems because in order to arrive at these translations, he had to skip translating the phrase *dit.s* “she gives” in line 12. In attempting to translate line 12 as “a female who is under her control,” I see the application of no Egyptian grammatical rules. His translation as “a female who is in her own hands” is also very problematic. In short, he attempts to translate the spirit of this passage into English and the result is not an accurate rendition neither based on grammar, context, or semantics.

In translating line 11 as “when you repulse her, she is water,” what dynamic are the Egyptians alluding to in comparing the wife to “water.” As noted, Faulkner, idiomatically translated the word *mw* “water” as perhaps “tears.” Faulkner says that this is “presumably the result of not making it up after a quarrel.”⁴² Parkinson translates the word as “rainwater” and sees in it a reference to “inadequate rainwater, which damages crops.”⁴³ I see a deeper cultural meaning at play here. For the Ancient Egyptians, their lives and livelihood depended upon water and successfully managing this resource for the benefit of the nation. Water is constantly moving, symbolizing the constant flow of human life. Water both makes life possible and preserves life for creation. Water is at the center of Egyptian existence both in a divine and material sense. As the ever-flowing waters of the Nile river give birth to Ancient Egyptian civilization, so too do women, metaphorically associated with water, give birth to the civilization. Since water is constantly moving, it can be both smooth flowing and work for you or it can work against you by not adequately flowing or overflowing. When water works against you, it can be terrifying in the form of both droughts and floods. The Ancient Egyptians knew this well. This line is suggesting that the woman, metaphorically seen as “water,” will appropriately respond to any attempts to “repulse her.” This means that she will not submit to negative behavior, but like water, she has the potential and freedom to flow, respond to a negative situation and work against her spouse or divorce him and leave. Again, we see the power (*shṃ*) of women as wives and mothers as central to the maintenance of an optimal household.

I translate line 12 as “a vagina is what she gives for her condition.” My translation is exactly the same as Faulkner’s. I translate the verb *dit.s* “what she gives” as a perfective relative form which has an expressed nominal subject *k3t* “vagina” in a main clause. In the other fragmentary version of this line, the expressed nominal subject is *st* “woman.” I translate the prepositional phrase *n ʿwy.s* as “for her condition.”⁴⁴ I have already discussed the problems of Parkinson’s translation of this line. With the use of both *k3t* “vagina” and *st* “woman” as subjects, I think that the Ancient Egyptians are emphasizing

⁴¹ See Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 42.

⁴² See Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 167.

⁴³ See Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 269.

⁴⁴ For the translation of *ʿwy* as “condition” or “state,” see the reference under the word *ʿ* “arm” in Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 36.

the deep connection between “woman,” “vagina,” and the very essence of life itself. In the African cultural universe, life is a continuum between the unborn, earthly life, and ancestral life, all actualized within and through the *k3t* “vagina.” The vagina (*k3t*) is the source and point of departure for life and all of its complexities and potentialities. Symbolizing a watery, ever-flowing connection between physical life and ancestral life, the woman (*st*) maintains the cycle of life. In other words, “what she gives for her condition” is life itself. This is why the “man of excellence” is advised to ensure that he does all that is necessary in terms of love, material and spiritual support “for her condition” to be good so they will have an optimal household. The acceptance of the power (*sh̄m*) of women is essential to the perpetuation of life.

I translate line 13 as “what she questions is one who will make a canal for her.” I read *š̄nnt.s* “what she questions” as an imperfective relative form. The verb form here comes from the 3ae inf. verb *š̄ni* which can be translated as “to inquire into, question, litigate, curse” and the like.⁴⁵ I read *ir* “one who makes” as a perfective active participle used as an object of the imperfective relative form where the resulting pronominal dative *n.s* “for her” and nominal object *mr* “canal” serve as the adverbial predicate. In Zaba’s grammatical commentary, he does not try to read *š̄nnt.s* “what she questions” as an imperfective relative form. He is ambivalent on the matter, but provides possible renderings as a imperfect *š̄dm.f* of the verb *š̄ni* which would translate to “quand elle est questionnée” or perhaps a *š̄dm.n.f* form of the verb *š̄ni* which translates to “elle a été questionnée.”⁴⁶ This yields his translation of the verb form as “quand elle est fâchée(?)” which is questionable by his own rendering. The translations by Parkinson are even more questionable. In his translation #1 he reads “when one enquires after her, she has flown away.” His translation #2 reads “she is sought, and she has flown away.” In translation #1, Parkinson attempts to read *š̄nnt* as an imperfective active participle with the dependent pronoun *s(y)* as the object. In translation #2 he submits “she is sought” and from both the view of Egyptian grammar and vocabulary, I do not know how he arrived at this translation. There are also serious problems with his translation of *ir n.s mr* as “she has flown away.” I can only assume that he tried to read *ir.n.s* as a *š̄dm.n.f* form and took the verb *ir* “to do, to make” along with the noun *mr* “canal” as some type of idiomatic expression. From any point of view of Egyptian grammar, this translation is seriously flawed and unintelligible. My translation is essentially the same as Faulkner’s with one important difference. Faulkner translates “what she asks about is who will make a canal for her.” He says that this suggests that “her one anxiety is that she may be properly fed and clothed.”⁴⁷ In his dictionary, Faulkner does not translate the verb *š̄ni* as “to ask.” He translates it as “to inquire, question, litigate, or curse” depending upon context. Another prominent verb in Middle Egyptian is *nd̄* which Faulkner translates as “to take counsel, ask advice, consult, or enquire about” depending upon context.⁴⁸ There is an important distinction between the verbs *š̄ni* and *nd̄*. If the translator wants to translate both of these verbs as “to ask” we have to be aware that there is a critical semantic nuance between these verbs. The verb *nd̄* emphasizes the **inquisitive** aspect of “asking”

⁴⁵ See Ibid., 268.

⁴⁶ See Zaba, *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, 146.

⁴⁷ See Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 167.

⁴⁸ See Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 143.

while the verb *šni* stresses the **intrusive** aspect of “asking.” In this line, it is the intrusive aspect of asking that is emphasized. Hence, I choose the word “question” because I want to stress a dynamic that is more active and intrusive than “asking” is able to convey in the English language. Thus, “what she questions” is “one who makes a canal for her.” This is a beautiful and powerful end to this maxim. We have already noted that the woman has been metaphorically viewed as “water” and now we see at the end that the wife is against “one who will make a canal for her.” What is a canal? It is an artificial watercourse that is constructed to manage the movement of water! This is simply a very profound juxtaposition of metaphors in this maxim. The meaning of this last line conveys the idea that the “man of excellence” must not seek to “make a canal” for his wife. If the wife is “water,” she must have the power and ability to flow and create her own standard (*tp-ḥsb*) in the context of the household that is unencumbered by the husband. Thus, we have all of the advice to the “man of excellence” to not judge his wife, restrain her, or remove her from power (*šhm*). All of these potential negative behaviors amount to “making a canal” for his wife. All of the positive behaviors of love, material and spiritual support do not “make a canal” for his wife and contribute to the wife continuing to help the marriage and family optimally grow and develop. Positive behaviors convince the wife to endure (*swʒh*) in the household while negative behaviors that amount to “making a canal” for her provide evidence for her to see (*mʒʒ*) the reality of a bad situation and potentially leave.

This is a maxim that emphasizes the central role and importance of women and wives in the establishing and maintaining of a household. Based upon his seriously flawed translation of this maxim, Parkinson asserts that in this maxim “the restricted role of women in Egyptian society is reflected here. The first half of the maxim asserts the benefits of a wife to her husband, while the second asserts the need to keep a woman under control. Being *judged* alludes to divorce proceedings. Both halves of the maxim mobilize agricultural imagery, but the prosperity of a well-irrigated *field* (an image with sexual overtones) becomes *storm-wind* and inadequate *rainwater*, which damages crops.”⁴⁹ Depla in her article entitled “Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature, uses Parkinson’s translation to make the following analysis: “These 13 lines encapsulate the dualistic nature of women acknowledged in Egyptian society; what might be termed the conflict between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ woman. Women who conform to the role demanded them by society, namely (heroic) mother and loyal wife, were to be highly favored and were deemed good. Women were not, however, suited to positions of authority outside the home because of their unpredictability and intransigence- the image of the storm wind (line 9) indicates loss of control, an attitude synonymous with *Isft* and unacceptable in a career-minded male.”⁵⁰

I cited the above interpretations in full to provide you with a glimpse of the type of flawed analysis that results from a misreading of Ancient Egyptian grammar and culture. It is difficult for scholars operating within the Western cultural paradigm to feel the power of family, women, and motherhood in African societies. Because of the oppression

⁴⁹ Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 268-269.

⁵⁰ Annette Depla, “Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature” in Léonie J. Archer, Susan Fischler, and Maria Wyke (Eds), *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 33.

of women within the Western cultural paradigm, family is often viewed as a badge of servitude, the home as the site of oppression, and the husband as inevitably a domineering and dominating patriarch. The paradigm is not equipped to see the power of women within the context of African cultures. This sense of cultural alienation leads modern women who adhere to the Western cultural paradigm to create an identity as individuals outside of the context of family and culture. Thus, the public/private split becomes important for them. Activity in the private domain of the home and household is conceptualized as inherently oppressive and activity outside the home is viewed as inherently liberating. What are the consequences of this public/private split? The obvious consequence is that the idea of a mother and wife is a priori rendered powerless regardless of the positive and powerful cultural meanings attached to them. To be a mother and a wife is a deficit in the feminist framework of the Western cultural paradigm.

To be a mother and wife in the context of an African cultural universe was very powerful. Oyewumi states that “what emerges from the African household and family organizations is the importance of motherhood, of mother-derived ties as the most significant, and of mothers as powerful. Because fundamentally motherhood is not constructed in tandem with fatherhood, the idea that mothers are powerful- literally and metaphysically, particularly the regard to the well being of the child- is very much a defining characteristic of the institution. Mothers are the pivot around which family is structured and family life rotates.” She goes on to say that “in this family system, unlike the nuclear family, motherhood is the most important source and model of solidarity, and being a mother is perceived as an attractive and desirable goal to achieve. The privileging of motherhood in the African family organization contrasts with the ambivalence about motherhood in feminism, and the deliberate elevation there of sisterhood as the only positive female relationship model.”⁵¹

Oyewumi’s comments provide a great summary for the ideals that are evidenced in Maxim 21 of the *Instructions of Ptahhotep*. For the Ancient Egyptians, Maat is the fundamental concept that is the foundation and gives direction to all order in the created world, cosmic order and balance, and is the basis for life in a social sense. Maat is the norm that should govern all actions, the standard by which all deeds should be measured or judged against. Maat is not a social utopia. People had problems in relationships just like any other human society, but Maat is an *ideal* to be measured against. The African cultural universe of Maat has the *ideal* of women as central and powerful in the society; the Western cultural paradigm does not.

Maxim 21 of the *Instructions of Ptahhotep* speak to advice given to the “man of excellence” in the context of establishing a household. The concept of family and household provides us with an understanding of how a society structures kinship and social relationships and how these structures and values carry the culture of a people. The family initiates members into a societal order forging a collective consciousness which

⁵¹ Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Ties that (Un)Bind: Feminism, Sisterhood, and other Foreign Relations,” *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, Vol.1, no.1 (2001), 5. www.jendajournal.com (10 February 2003).

guides their thoughts and actions. The family builds character, consciousness, and commitment to perpetuating the values of the nation. Family guides the choices we make and the ideals that we strive in “establishing a household.” The quest for self-knowledge begins in the context of the family. When children eagerly and inquisitively ask “Who am I?”, the initial answers to this query begin in the context of the family. Maxim 21 in the *Instructions of Ptahhotep* profoundly reflect an African cultural universe that self-consciously recognizes, respects, and reveres the central and signal importance and power of women as wives and mothers in the Egyptian household and society.



Isis allaitant Horus. Bronze.
Basse Époque. Musée de Berlin.