

Ptahhotep maxim 32
(P. Prisse 14, 4–14, 6)

Emil Buzov

The maxim 32 of The Teaching of Ptahhotep is frequently discussed in the field of Egyptology. The purpose of this paper is to show another possible point of view for this obscure passage.

Lines 457-462 (P. Prisse 14, 4–6) raise many problems because of the expression *hmt-hrd*, which occurs only in this text. There are a few translations of this compound:

“unreifes Madchen” (Wb. III, 76, 21);

“Woman with a child (one that is pregnant)” (A. Erman)¹;

“femme-enfant” (F. Lexa; Z. Žaba)²;

“woman-boy (H. Goedicke)³;

The term is examined in detail by Hans Goedicke, who as Z. Žaba, compares it to the expression *hmt-t3y*, which according to him must be understood as “prostitute” and interpreted *hmt-hrd* as “vulva of a boy or vulva-boy”⁴. This leads him to the point of this maxim as “an admonition to abstain from making pederasty”⁵. In the years following the appearance of his article, everybody who translates or examines The Teaching of Ptahhotep acknowledges his opinion. F. Kammerzell and M. Rueda propose another possible meaning for the expression *hmt hrd*. They understand it as two parallel objects and translate it as “Frau und/or Knabe”⁶. A year latter, in a brilliant article Goedicke rejects this allegation⁷. The strongest evidence for the theory of Goedicke is the use of the masculine suffix *f* in the following sentences, which

¹ Erman, 1995: 62.

² Žaba, 1956: 155-156.

³ Goedicke, 1967: 100.

⁴ *ibid.*, 100.

⁵ *ibid.*, 100.

⁶ Kammerzell; Rueda, (2003): 63-78.

⁷ Goedicke, (2004): 105-107.

cannot be explained in another way. Nevertheless, if the term refers to a boy as a woman, i.e. anal contact, it is not clear why Ptahhotep used the neutral noun *hrd*. It would be better to say *t3y-hmt* (men – woman or man as woman) to express a person with homosexual propensity.

The term *hmt hrd* may have another explanation: to describe a person (*hmt*), who must be illustrated by another noun (*hrd*) in order to clarify the age, not the sex. A good example of a similar term is *hrd-t3* ‘child - chick, i.e. little child, kiddy’⁸. Then the term would mean woman – child, i.e. little girl.

Line 458 presents us another difficulty – *rh.n.k hsfwt r mw h3t.f*. Goedicke is correct to take it as relative past in the sense of “after you have learned” and *hsfwt* as noun⁹. The problem is what *h3t* means here. It is obvious that it is not “heart”, “breast” or “Antlitz”. *H3t* with determinative “peace of flash” means “front” in general. It is hard to believe that this *h3t* here has a metaphorical sense for “phallus”. As Goedicke alludes, in such case we must expect another determinative¹⁰. We know at least two words phallus that could be used here – *b3h* and *hnn*. In my opinion, it is more likely that here this *h3t* means female sexual organ. Of course, there exist specific words for this anatomical organ but here Ptahhotep describes a sexual organ of a little girl not of a woman. That is why he used the neutral “front”. According to Goedicke, “water” is “liquid with the specific connotation semen”¹¹. If we accept that *hmt hrd* means little girl, then this water or liquid must be result of her sexual organ. There are examples where the word *mw* “water” is used for such kind of liquid. In P. Med. London XIV, 8-14 the goddess Isis saves her son Horus with *irtt.j m mw snbw imjtw mntj.j* “milk and healthy water, which is between my thighs”¹².

Line 460 *imj.f swhw r ir.t hst* “He/She shall not spend the night to make objections” would mean that she – the little girl, will not be able to oppose to him who attacks her and may be it will be a pleasure for her. But this action will lead to upset of her heart (*hd ib*) – line 462. After finishing the sexual act, she will become calm and peaceful but her heart will be injured.

Of course the problem with the masculine suffix remains. It can be explained only with mistake of the clerk. If we accept this possibility the translation of maxim 32 will be:

⁸ Петровский, (1970): 275.

⁹ Goedicke, (1967): 100.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 101, n.31.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 101.

¹² Grapow, (1958): 372. According to Grapow it is not *mntj* “thighs” but *mndw(j)* “breast”. In hieratic the two signs are similar. The use of preposition *imjtw* “between; in the midst of” proposes something which is between two things not inside. That is why I follow translation based upon work of J. Assmann. Assmann, (1977): 24-25.

“You shall not copulate with a little girl,
after you learn objection to the water in his/her front.
It shall not be calm what is in his/her womb
and he/she shall be calm (only) after he/she upset his/her heart.”

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