

# THE SHEPHERDESS<sup>\*</sup>

translated by

**Rosemary E. Bancroft-Marcus**

1. To a deep gorge, remote and wild,  
I went one day to mind my sheepflock,  
Past wooded uplands, meadows, streams,  
And damp green rush-beds, fresh and tender.

2. Among the blossom-laden trees,  
Where hungry little fawns were browsing  
On dewy turf and herb-rich grass,  
While small birds sang and sweetly warbled,

3. A lovely girl, a lovely maid  
Of cheerful aspect, kind and comely,  
Was guarding some few sheep she owned;  
Bright as the sunbeams shone her beauty.

4. Blonde was the hair about her head;  
A pride and glory was her figure.  
The dress she wore, of purest white,  
Shimmered like starlight in the heavens.

5. I looked into her eyes, gazed deep —  
And my heart shattered in three pieces!  
For in her eyes lurked Cupids, armed  
With bows and arrows set to shoot me.

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\* TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The following translation is based on the text prepared from the 1627 edition by the late Stylianos Alexiou (1971), *Μπεργαδής Απόκοπος* (and) *Η Βοσκοπούλα*, Athens: Ερμής. An earlier translation into more antiquated but rhyming English was made by F.H. Marshall (1929) in *Three Cretan Plays*, Cambridge: C.U.P.: 324ff. An illustrated new edition of the work, with accompanying Greek prose translation, has just appeared by Alfred Vincent (ed) (2016), *Η Βοσκοπούλα*, Thessaloniki: Ινστιτούτο Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών.

6. The Cupids, seeing me draw near,  
With zealous haste had seized their weapons  
And to their crossbows fitted bolts,  
To smite me with eternal torment.

7. Full in my heart their arrows struck;  
I told myself my case was hopeless.  
My eyes dimmed, and my sight grew dark;  
I drowned in waves of burning fever.

8. There, by the spring, I swooned and fell!  
The poor girl was convinced I'd perished.  
She said: "My eyes, their sportive darts,  
Have slain the shepherd on the instant!"

9. Approaching me, she quickly saw  
I'd only fainted, and took comfort,  
Relieved and glad — kind-hearted girl,  
My pretty dove, my white-plumed darling!

10. She took cold water from the spring  
To bathe me with, and brought it over;  
My face she sprinkled and bedewed,  
Convinced that this would work my healing.

11. She bathed my face a second time  
To bring me round from dizzy faintness.  
As the drops rained, I felt them clear  
My giddiness of mind and senses.

12. Then, from the ground, she picked for me  
Some aromatic herbs and blossoms.  
Their flower-blooms breathed such a scent  
That I was raised to life from Hades.

13. Perplexed, I wondered how to start,  
How best I could begin to thank her  
For the kind act of charity  
She'd shown me in my hour of peril.

14. I said to her: "How can I hope  
To recompense your kind compassion?  
What can I do, to ease my mind  
And not seem thankless for this favour?"

15. "Were I to give you my heart's blood,  
I could not pay the debt I owe you;  
Nor, for such kindness as you've shown,  
Are words of thanks sufficient payment."

16. The damsel, in return, replied  
Saying: "Your life, here in the forest,  
Was placed in danger, at great risk;  
Seeing this, could I fail to help you?"

17. "What human being would approve,  
And what god could forgive me for it?  
What girl would not have censured me  
For heartlessness, at such a moment?"

18. "The hard rocks would have growled at me  
If I'd gone off, left you untended;  
My shadow would have loathed me, too,  
If I'd refused to show right judgement."

19. "Heartless and bad I'd have been termed;  
All, great or humble, would have loathed me;  
My sheepflock would have run away;  
No one would want me for companion."

20. "I could have made no other choice;  
Sooner would I have set to counting  
The grains of sand, with sweat and toil,  
Than not assist so fair a shepherd!"

21. "A handsome shepherd, charming, wise,  
Was seized by overwhelming anguish;  
I was obliged to lend him aid,  
And make an effort to revive him."

22. "But, shepherd, by your grateful thanks,  
So courteously, so gently spoken,  
You've filled me with such love for you  
That I'm yours, at your disposition!

23. "I can't think straight; I've lost all will  
To go on following my sheepflock.  
I'd gladly linger in this glade,  
So that we two could stay together."

24. I leave my readers free to guess  
What joy I felt, there in the forest,  
Telling of love-struck fever-pangs  
With soul-mate pliant to my wishes.

25. Whose joy could match my own that day?  
The keen delight that filled my body  
No other happy swain has felt,  
Nor fish rejoicing in the Ocean!

26. I said: "The darts in your sweet eyes  
Have split my heart in triple fragments.  
It's hard to credit, past belief,  
That stabbing knife may heal a stab-wound!

27. "If only your sweet charity,  
So well begun, could be perfected;  
I wish your fair self would consent  
To let me sleep this night beside you!

28. "Too distant is my dwelling-place  
Where every night I milk my sheepflock.  
We cannot go so far tonight,  
So let's bed down here, in the grasses."

29. Sweetly the damsel made reply  
In words to make me glad, exultant;  
Sweet was her answer, sugar-sweet,  
Responding to what I'd requested.

30. She said: "The day is fading fast,  
And soon, dear lad, the sun will leave us;  
The dark of night is closing in;  
The forest chill falls damp upon us.

31. "So follow me, and let us go  
To my own cave nearby for shelter;  
You'll eat, and drink, and cheer your heart,  
And take your ease on humble mattress.

32. "We'll find enjoyment and delight  
In singing songs, in bread and victuals.  
My flock can stay alone out here,  
And pasture in the grassy meadow.

33. "Leave your flock, too, alone to graze;  
Let them be happy for their shepherd!  
Your sheep, the other beasts you own,  
May stay here, close beside my sheepflock."

34. Most eagerly we both set off,  
In haste to find her cavern-dwelling.  
We held hands as we walked along,  
Wending our way with jubilation.

35. Along our way, in a small grove,  
I cut a twiglet from a bay-tree.  
Swiftly I shaped a pretty ring  
To give to her, and she did likewise.

36. With playful games we went our way.  
The trees were covered with spring blossom,  
Cascading petals all around,  
Enhancing my sweet lady's beauty.

37. The sky was bright with twinkling stars,  
And a refreshing breeze was blowing,  
When suddenly we reached the cave,  
With laughter, joy, and playful frolics.

38. On one side of the cave, a hearth  
Held fire preserved, banked down from morning.  
The damsel soon revived the blaze  
With sticks she'd carried from the forest.

40. I gazed, examining the cave  
And all its beautiful surroundings.  
Above it hung an ivy-vine,  
Whose fronds we wove to form a curtain.

41. Outside, with myrtle, rosemary,  
St John's wort, violets, and lilies,  
The damsel had adorned her home;  
They filled the poor cave with their fragrance.

39. On upturned dish she'd placed a lamp;  
Its radiance was a joy and glory.  
My pretty dear, my white-plumed dove!  
All her belongings gave me pleasure.

42. Cleverly, neatly, she'd disposed  
Each piece; I viewed one, then another,  
Marvelling silently at such  
Good order, cleanliness, and prudence.

43. Prettily, neatly, all was stowed;  
Her cooking-pots hung on the cave-walls,  
While near them stood the pail of bronze  
She used to milk her flock each evening.

44. In pride of place, I saw a bed  
Which was a very joy and glory;  
A lowly couch, but neatly spread,  
Perfect for loving hearts and frolics!

45. I asked her, "Have you brothers here,  
Or father? Who's the cavern's owner?  
(For I'd perceived a sharpened knife  
Hung by a brand-new belt and buckle!)

46. She said: "I have an aged sire;  
Since yesterday, he's at the quarry  
Cutting fresh stone to build a fold;  
He left me with no male companion.

47. He won't return within the week;  
So you have seven days of freedom.  
I'm on my own here in the cave;  
You need have no fear of my menfolk!

48. Brothers and mother have I none;  
I did, but long ago they perished.  
I and my father live alone  
Here in this cave; we are its owners."

49. She put ricotta, bread and cheese,  
And cold lamb on a stone outcropping  
That served as table, setting out  
With bustling zeal our evening dinner.

50. She kept a little dry white wine  
In a small ornamented flagon.  
She mixed it with cold water first,  
Tasted it, then called me to drink it.

51. I said, "Mistress, no wine I'll drink,  
Nor of this cold lamb eat one morsel,  
Unless your lovely self consents  
To grant a kiss as invitation."

52. At this, her face went pink, then paled;  
She blushed like oleander blossom.  
The roses deepened in her cheeks,  
Crimson as torchfire seen in darkness.

53. With lowered eyes, she answered thus:  
"It would be wrong of me, immodest,  
To act as brazenly as that!  
I ought to scold you for your boldness.

54. "You're master here; drink! Deal with me  
As you like, willing or unwilling.  
I'll do what you wish and command;  
You know I've shown you no reluctance!"

55. We drank once, twice; our sips of wine  
(Poor silly souls!) were intermingled  
With kisses, in the cool night air,  
And holding hands, one with the other.

56. Regaining speech, I said "Dear maid,  
I'm weary from my mountain-walking.  
I'd like us, if you'll be so good,  
To go to bed at once together."

57. Eagerly we drew near the bed,  
And lay down side by side, embracing . . .  
The dawn, while yet we laughed and played,  
Across the eastern sky blushed rosy,

58. And all too soon, we saw the Sun  
Reaching his beams inside the cavern.  
We greeted him, still close-entwined;  
Then left the cave to seek our sheepflocks.

59. That night again, at the same place,  
We met up, cleverly contriving  
To get there unbeknownst to all,  
Averting any risk of gossip.

60. The sad and bitter hour arrived  
When her old father was expected.  
My sweetheart said to me, that night:  
"This was our last day as companions.

61. "Tomorrow I await my sire;  
I won't be stirring from the cavern.  
You seek your sheepfold; go back home;  
Think of me in one month — remember!



62. Come back here then to this same place;  
Never forsake me — do not fail me!  
By then, my father will have gone  
To do more cutting in the quarry.”

63. That night, I lay down sore at heart,  
Perturbed about our separation.  
I even prayed to God to grant  
Less speedy dawnrise in the morning!

64. But soon I told my gentle dove:  
“I bear a grudge against the daylight,  
Because this night, more than the rest,  
Had fled too swiftly, just to part us!”

65. Towards the Sun, my former friend,  
I cried with bitter grief, complaining:  
“O Sun, you brought me once such joy;  
Why steal it now, and leave me joyless?”

66. I rose before her from our bed,  
And left her lying there recumbent.  
I drew near, bent to kiss her brow,  
And sighing, wished her farewell blessings:

67. “I leave you health and wish you joy!  
Be sure of this, my pretty partridge:  
If I survive, in one month’s time  
I’ll come to find your angel-beauty.”

68. She turned to face me, and began  
To rail at her unlucky fortune.  
The teardrops coursing from her eyes  
Flowed to bedew her lips of coral.

69. “A curse on you, black Fate, who kept  
Reserved for me this bitter future:  
You snuffed the candle I’d just lit,  
Leaving me lost in murky darkness!”

70. She rose to speak her parting words;  
Her lips, so honey-sweet, were trembling,  
And from her weeping, one could sense  
Her heavy weight of pain and sorrow.

71. She said: "Go, shepherd! Pride and joy  
Be yours, wherever you may wander.  
Even in foreign parts, my mind  
Will go with you, to live or perish.

72. "Of your true love, whose light of life  
You are — who chose you for companion —  
Be mindful! Don't abandon her,  
And come back quickly to reclaim her."

73. — "When you see black-plumed crows turn white,  
And Dawn-Star usher in grey evening,  
And corpses walk without their souls,  
Only then shall I have renounced you!

74. "Sooner would dry land nurture fish,  
Or Eros lose his bow and arrows,  
Or Night give up its stars and dew,  
Than I'd forsake my shepherd-damsel.

75. "But since, alas, it's written that  
I must depart for distant regions,  
I leave you this request — to keep  
Me cherished in your mind forever!"

76. Weeping myself, I left the cave,  
And went off to locate my sheepflock,  
Then slowly tore myself away,  
Tormented, sad, with dragging footsteps.

77. A month passed by; the time arrived  
For me to seek my lovely damsel.  
But Fate, alas, willed otherwise  
Than I, poor lover, had expected;

78. For I fell ill, confined to bed,  
My strength and vigour sadly weakened.  
Until I was restored to health,  
I could not make so long a journey.

79. I lay bedridden for a month;  
Another passed, ere I was able  
To walk at all, take shaky steps,  
To find her and explain my absence.

80. Within two months, I felt some strength  
Returning to my feeble body.  
Most eagerly I set out then,  
Hobbling along with cane to lean on.

81. Though fearful for the shepherdess,  
I was still weak, not quite recovered;  
For I fell down and broke my staff,  
And had to limp back to my refuge.

[81A. More time elapsed before I could  
Resume my interrupted journey;  
But though my frame was healed, my mind  
Was prey to ominous forebodings.]

82. Three [owl-]shrieks woke me [late one night]  
From a sweet sleep, and terrified me;  
Then vicious dogs tried to devour  
The small pet lamb my sweetheart gave me.

83. In the wood near her cave, I heard  
The crystal stream cry tearful warning  
That my long illness, my delay,  
Would sear my heart with scorching cinders.

84. I dreaded what I was to find;  
Fear filled my mind, as I drew closer.  
I could not cheer my heavy heart,  
Nor raise my eyes to look about me.

85. I found her cave — all spider's-webs,  
Dirty and mired with muddy puddles!  
The poor cave welcomed me in guise  
Quite altered from its former aspect.

86. High on a hilltop, on a rock,  
I spied an aged shepherd seated,  
Guarding his few sheep, poor old soul;  
He looked thin, and wore mourning garments.

87. I whistled, shouted, cried good-day,  
And asked about the shepherd-damsel.  
With fear I told my tale of woe,  
And heard the news that I'd been dreading.

88. The old man sighed first, then began  
To curse his Fate, his bitter fortune.  
Weeping, he said: "Your heart's desire  
Has died, gone far away and left you!

89. The maid you seek was my own child,  
My hope, alas, and my sole comfort;  
But Charos stole her from my side,  
Darkened my eyes, and dimmed my vision.

90. Kind-hearted always, fount of joy,  
To my old age she brought great solace;  
But a nocturnal deep distress  
Brought her before her time to Hades.

91. She spent all day, all night, in tears,  
Heaping on Fate a thousand curses;  
As a lit candle melts, she pined  
And dwindled; now she's dead and buried.

92. She never had a good night's sleep,  
And would not eat at noon or evening.  
She drove away from her the sheep  
Who'd always been her close companions.

93. Often in sleep she'd start with fear;  
All by herself she'd talk and mutter,  
Turning this way and that, to clasp  
Some swain she'd once met in the forest.

94. I'd wake her up then, and enquire  
Why all her dreams were sad and heavy,  
And what she talked of in her sleep.  
At once she'd start to cry, protesting:

95. "Father, you do me grievous harm  
By waking me with talk and questions,  
Just when I see, in blissful dream,  
The shepherd who is my beloved!"

96. "Yesterday was her ninth-day feast;  
Ten days ago, she spoke, when dying,  
This last injunction: 'Through these woods  
Will pass, one day, a handsome shepherd;

97. "Dark-skinned he is, merry and slim,  
Brown-eyed and young, of pleasing aspect;  
And he'll enquire of you for news  
Of her who's passed away and perished.

98. "You are to tell him of her death;  
Say, though, the dead girl won't forget him;  
Let him lament her piteous fate,  
Dye his clothes black for her, and mourn her.

99. "Tell him the reason for his loss:  
A month had passed without his coming.  
He'd soon forgotten her, poor girl;  
That's why she died — of bitter sorrow!"

100. "You'll be that shepherd, from your looks;  
My heart laments your sad bereavement.  
I'd hoped you'd be my son-in-law;  
We'd talked of you two getting married."

101. My own heart wept with bitter grief  
While I took in this tragic message.  
I could not look up, see or hear;  
My legs shook under me; I tottered.

102. I too began to curse my Fate,  
And heaped upon it imprecations.  
Perfidious Eros, too, I cursed,  
And thenceforth cared no more for living.

103. "Dear father, sir," I said, "I beg,  
Do not refuse to grant me escort  
A short way to my sweetheart's tomb,  
To satisfy my heart's desiring.

104. "In some dark cave I'll go to dwell;  
Never shall I know consolation;  
Alone I'll wander all my days,  
And keep my eyes forever downcast.

105. "Without a cloak, barefoot I'll roam  
In thorny places, cold and snowbound,  
Half-clad, dishevelled in men's sight,  
For all to think me demon-crazy.

106. "Through my misfortunes, my own fault,  
I drove my sweetheart down to Hades.  
If only she still lived, to learn  
That I've been ill, and suffered sorely!

107. "The truth is, she's rejected me  
To fall asleep on couch of cobwebs.  
Alas! I cannot wake you now  
To talk to you, or hear you speaking!"

108. O eyes of mine, your light is lost,  
So look no more on slender maidens!  
What consolation could avail  
To bring relief to my great anguish?

109. All friends, all family I'll abjure;  
I won't seek death, but go on living  
To suffer yearnings, pain and woe,  
With daily swoons and fevered torment.

110. I'll live on just to mourn her loss,  
And feel each hour a thousand death-pangs.  
The peaks and crags will swallow me;  
Deep forest will become my dwelling.

111. By night and day I'll weep and mourn,  
Telling my sorrow to the mountains;  
I'll make the wild beasts follow me  
To weep in sympathetic pity.

112. Panpipe and flute I'll play no more,  
Nor stroll in meadows and fruit-orchards.  
My sheep I'll leave to milk themselves,  
And pass my days in wintry hardship.

113. My white pet lamb with pretty spots,  
The present my sweet lady gave me,  
Will be my only company;  
The pair of us will roam together.

114. I'll weep for her, the lamb for me,  
Wandering over hills and mountains;  
I'll lull it in my arms to sleep,  
And rail against my adverse fortune.

115. In lightning-storms, in hail and snow,  
When shepherds keep away from hilltops,  
Then shall I stand on mountain-peaks  
To wail and mourn my lovely damsel.

116. When the hot Sun burns sticks and stones,  
And all draw near to leafy plane-trees,  
And even shepherds seek for shade,  
I'll stay out, that the Sun may scorch me.

117. Let shepherds keep within their caves;  
Let veiling cloud-banks dim the sunlight;  
Let meadow-grass go brown with frost;  
Let sheep refuse to leave their shelter!

118. Let no bird flit about the wood;  
Let no cocks crow to greet the sunrise;  
Let nightingales trill no more songs;  
Let hawks go blind and hunt no longer!

119. Let moonlight grace the night no more;  
Let Ocean be devoid of fishes;  
Let streams and fountains cease to flow,  
And tender rush-beds parch and wither!

NOTE: Stanza 81A and part of the following line, set in square brackets, are the translator's attempt to cover an obvious gap in the narration.