

The Fairy Girl and the Shepherd: A Turkish Ballad

Translated by A. L. and F. MACFIE

As A. L. Lloyd remarks in his *Folk Song in England* (1967), "metamorphosis" ballads, deriving perhaps from mythical sources such as the cosmogonic transformation of Yajnavalkya, the Hindu Adam, and his wife, and the story of Peleus's rape of Thetis—in her efforts to escape her pursuer Thetis changes herself into fire, water, a lion, a serpent, and a cuttlefish—have for centuries appeared as a staple ingredient in the folk traditions of Europe and the Near and Middle East. In the example given below, which is set in the Turkish world—the original, *Peri Kızı ile Çoban Hikayesi* by Orhan Seyfi Orhon, was first published in Istanbul in 1919¹—the heroine, a fairy girl, endeavors to escape the embraces not just of one but of a series of lovers; and in so doing like Thetis changes her shape a number of times, first into a bird, pearls and a flower, before succumbing to the embraces of her first love, a simple shepherd lad.

Once long ago, in old Turan,
When Oghuz Han was king,
There lived, they say, a fairy girl,
Who loved to dance and sing,

To wander on the mountain top
And roam the desert plain,
And pierce the hearts of shepherd lads
With cruel darts of pain.

For where she passed the roses bloomed
And every bird would sing,

And where she chose to rest her head
Would silver fountains spring.

She walked, a star in heaven's night,
In beauty's radiance clad;
Had she met Love upon the way
She would have made him mad.

Now, the great sultan Oghuz Han,
On hearing of this sprite,
Ordered that she be brought to him,
At once, that very night,

That he might see this pearl of joy,
And question her for why,
She lived upon the mountain top,
Alone beneath the sky.

"Why do you live alone?" quoth he.
"God, who created life,
Made nothing that can live alone:
You must be someone's wife!"

"No more!" she cried. "I too have loved:
A shepherd was my wight.
I was the subject of his love,
He was my sovereign light.

Until one day, I know not how,
Some careless deed or word
Caused my true love to fly from me,
Like a tormented bird.

And never since on hill or dale
Has my fair one been seen,
Nor has his silver voice been heard
In wood or pasture green;

And I have lived, in widow's weeds,
All to myself alone,
Weeping away the live-long day,
My heart a heavy stone."

The Sultan paused and thought awhile:
"Nevertheless," said he,

“ It can't be right you live alone:
Come, now! You must marry! ”

“ I shall not wed,” the maiden cried,
“ Nor shall I give my heart,
Except to one that can excel
In this, my magic art.

For love alone can cast a spell
As potent as love's fire,
And love alone can hold the wine
Distilled from its desire.”

“ So let it be,” the Sultan cried,
“ Go, publish this afar,
That none shall hold this crescent moon
Or capture this bright star,

Except he cast a secret spell
As potent as love's fire,
And can devise a jar to hold
The wine of love's desire.”

Now soon the fame of this sweet sprite
Spread far through all the land,
And suitors came from every part
To seek and win her hand.

And long they sought to match her skill,
With potions and with charms,
To capture her delight with spells,
And hold her in their arms.

But though they conjured hard, yet she
Escaped the snares they set,
And, changing shape a thousand times,
Slipped through their every net.

At first a bird she flew away,
Then like the wind she sped,
And then, a snow-white pearl, she hid
Deep in an oyster bed.

Next as a toad in the hedgerow,
An owl in the wood,

And then, a speckled fish, she swam
Beneath the river's flood.

Her suitors, stunned by this display,
Abandoned their pursuit,
And all confessed their impotence;
When sudden came a shout,

And into the King's palace ran,
As lithe as any hart,
A shepherd lad, who claimed he knew
The secrets of love's art.

"Let me but try my wit," he cried,
"I'll show the myriad ways
That Love can capture his delight,
However far she strays."

"Not so!" the Sultan rose and cried.
"How dare you so presume?
This princess is not for your bed.
Stand back, young man, make room!"

But then the fairy girl stepped forth,
Taking the shepherd's part.
"Love knows not wealth nor rank," she said,
"The lad too has a heart.

Let's see if he can follow me,
And catch me in his arms;
Three times I'll test his secret arts
And try his magic charms."

Then she became a little bird
And perched up in a tree;
And he as quick became a cage
Of silver filigree.

As quick as light she changed her shape
To pearls upon the ground;
And he as quick became the shells
That nurture them around.

Next every pearl became a flower,
Trembling in its bed;

And every shell a butterfly
Fluttering at its head.

The fairy girl then reappeared:
“ I know this youth,” she cried.
“ He was my lover once and I
Was once before his bride.

I cannot wed him now, for love
Cannot abide ill faith;
Although he holds my heart in fee,
I cannot be his wife.”

“ I beg you,” cried the shepherd lad,
“ Hear out my tale of woe,
And learn that Love’s secret dart
Shot from a sacred bow.

For far I fled from Love’s embrace,
Fearful of his design,
Seeking release, yet finding none,
In pleasure and in wine.

Now to my fair one I return,
If she will take me back,
And never more shall I depart,
Though earth itself should crack.”

“ Enough! ” the Sultan intervened,
“ This sorry tale of love
Would make a wooden statue weep.
Come, now, my pretty dove,

Take back your lover, he alone
Can hold you in his heart,
And he alone can understand
The secrets of your art.

For forty days and forty nights
Your wedding feast shall last,
And lovers all, from near and far
Partake of the repast,

And holy men ,who seek the Truth,
And travel on the way,

Give thanks that Truth and Beauty here
Are joined in Love this day.”

NOTE

1. The exact English translation of the Turkish title is “The Story of the Fairy Girl and the Sheperd.” It is not known who published the poem in Istanbul in 1919. It is, however, believed that it was published independently by the poet himself under the title of the poem. For this translation I have used the text as it is published in the anthology edited by Kenan Akyüz, *Batı Tesirinde Türk Şüri Antolojisi*. Ankara: Doğus Matbaacılık, 1958.