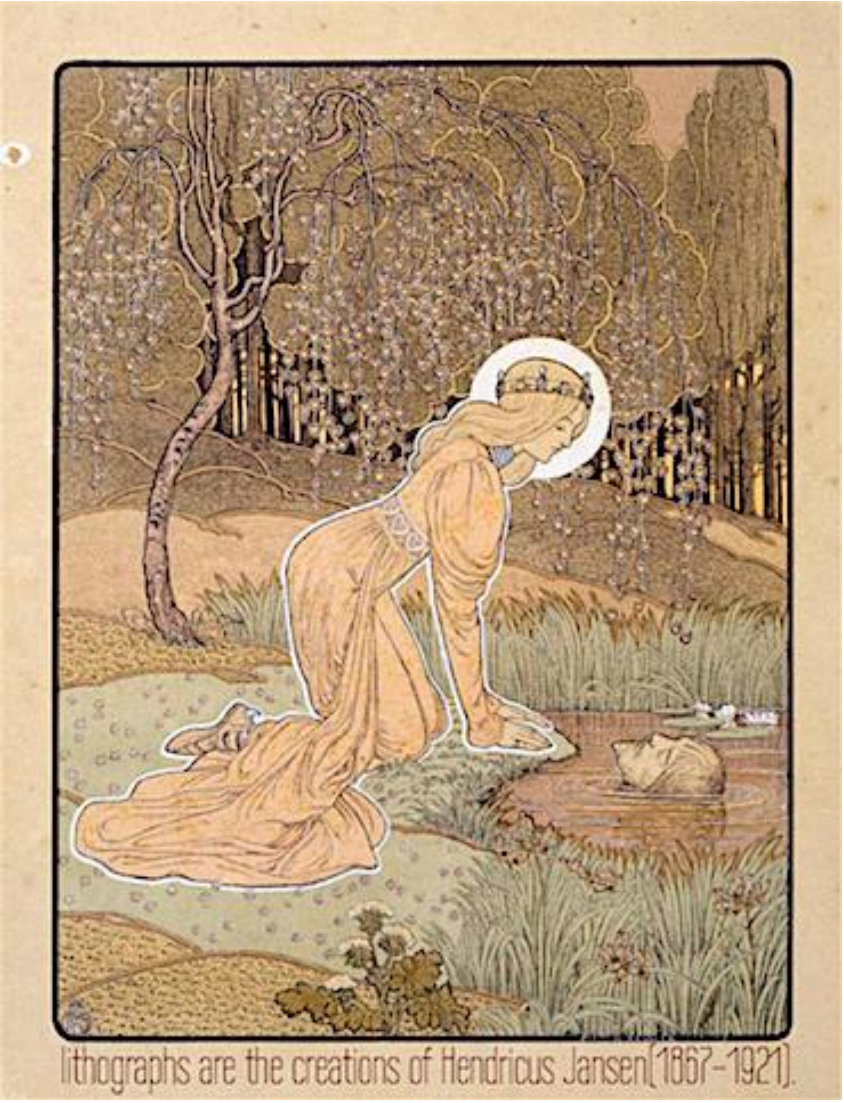
The Song
of
Sir Halewyn



RONALD LANGEREIS ~ AMSTERDAM 2017

Sir Halewyn

There's the legend and there's the ballad of this mysterious knight of the greenwood, who sang an alluring song no one could resist, especially not young maidens. As they flocked to him, like moths to a lamp, he deflowered and then killed them.

"Whoever go thither do never come back."

The theme dates from the Dark Ages, if not earlier, and the several, widely different versions of the story were told all over Europe. In England and Scotland they were known by different names, The Outlandish Knight, May Colvin, False Sir John and Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight. These versions are mostly eighteenth century and peculiar for their way of killing, by drowning the victims, as their counterparts on the continent preferred hanging them or, as in this case, by decapitation.

The ballad seems to have originated in thirteenth or fourteenth century Flanders, but its authenticity is contested. Some scholars maintain the language isn't even Dutch, but Old English, as during the early Middle Ages the tongues spoken on either side the North Sea didn't differ by much.
The ballad was sung at fairs by market singers until the end of the nineteenth century.
The second line of each strophe is repeated, unless it has a third line proper to it.
Printed copies of the text were sold to the public for a few cents each and it was from such 'liedblaadjes' – song leaflets, or broadsides – that Jan Frans Willems (1793–1846) composed his own version of 'Het Lied van Heer Halewijn', which he published in 1838 in a German anthology. A later, posthumous, edition – 1848, Oude Vlaemsche Liederen – is the basis for my translation of the ballad into modern English, presented below.

N.B.
The name Halewijn has three syllables: Ha-le-wyn, and derives from (h)Adelwyn, or Æthelwyn, meaning 'noble friend', which is kind of surprising for a character one would rather call an ignoble fiend. It reminds of the use of 'Eumenides', the Gracious Ones, for the terrifying Erinyes or Furies.
On the French-Belgian border there's a former village of this name, Halluin in French, Halewijn in Flemish, now part of the Lille (Rijsel) – Courtrai (Kortrijk) agglomeration.
It is situated on the river Lys (Leie).
Charles de Coster – see Sources – supposed a castle near this village must have been Lord Halewyn's residence.

Sources
– dbnl – Halewijn – Oude Vlaemsche Liederen, J.F. Willems (Ghent, 1848)
– Wikipedia – Lord Halewyn – historic references and exegesis
– YouTube – Heer Halewijn – the ballad sung in Dutch with instrumental accompaniment
– Poetry Nook – Sir Halewyn – a translation of the ballad into Scots by Sir Alexander Gray
– Charles de Coster (1827–1879), also the author of 'Owlglass', Uylenspiegel (1867)
  – Heer Halewijn – Dutch translation by Nico Rost (1923) – facsimile edition in pdf, from Sire Halewyn (1858), written by De Coster in Rabelaisian old-French
– Project Gütenberg – Sir Halewyn – by Harold Taylor (1920), idem in English, illustrated.

The song of Sir Halewyn

Sir Halewyn sang his chant so well
Whoever heard it came under a spell

And so befell the child of a king
Loved by her parents beyond anything

To her father she went and took him aside
To Halewyn, father, please, let me ride

Oh no, daughter, no, stay aloof from his track
Whoever go thither do never come back

To her mother she went and took her aside
To Halewyn, mother, please, let me ride

Oh no, daughter, no, stay aloof from his track
Whoever go thither do never come back

To her sister she went and took her aside
To Halewyn, sister, please, let me ride

Oh no, sister, no, stay aloof from his track
Whoever go thither do never come back

To her brother she went and took him aside (illustration below)
To Halewyn, brother, please, let me ride

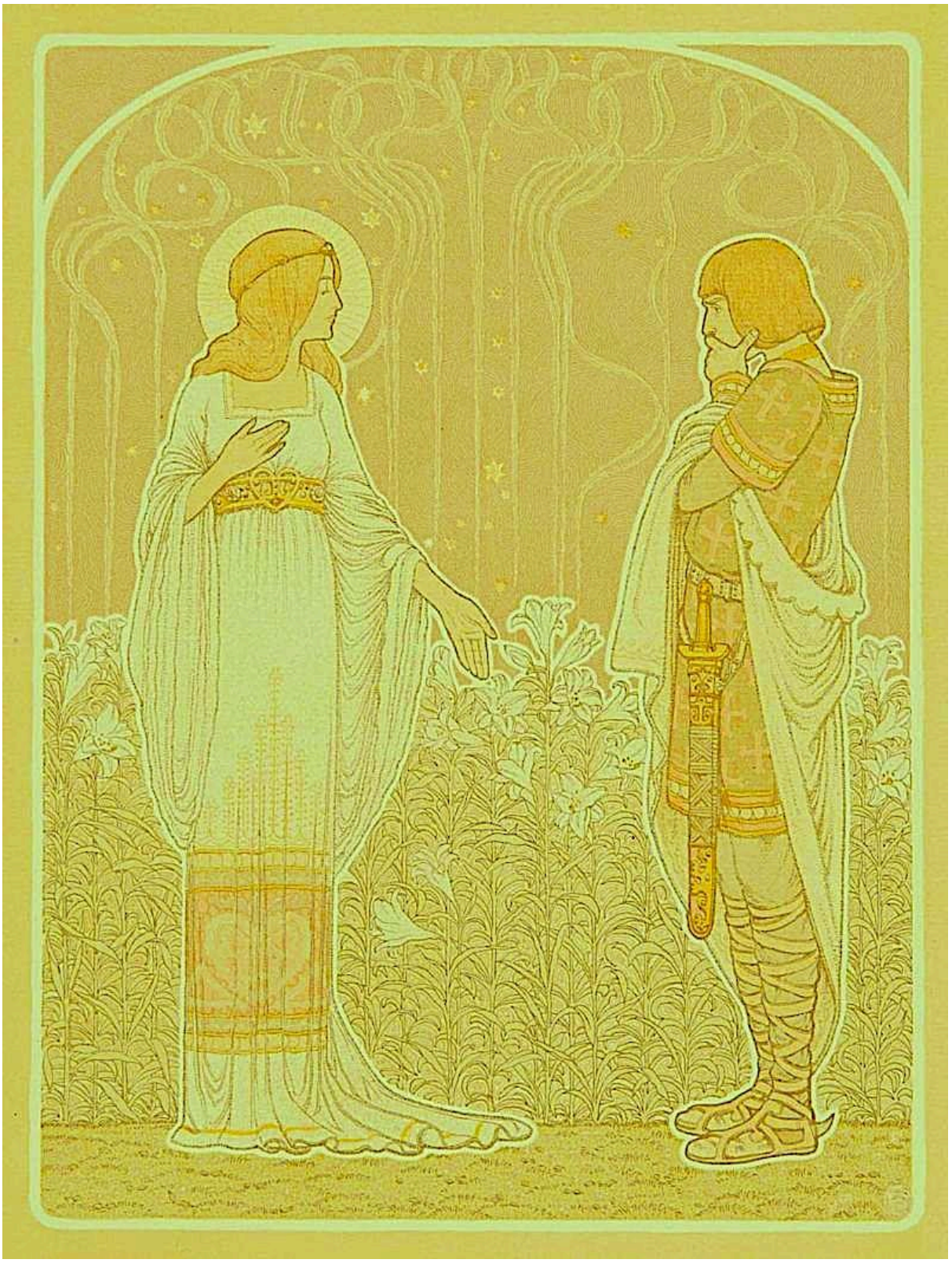
Whither you ride is equal to me
If your honour is kept as it ought to be
And you'll be wearing your crown with dignity

Up to her room she repaired herself
In her finest wear she decked herself

What did she put on her naked skin?
A silken shirt and that was thin

What did she put on her bodice bright?
Of bands of gold it seemed alight

What did she put on her red skirt bold?
From stitch to stitch a knob of gold



To her brother she went and took him aside,
To Halewyn, brother, please, let me ride . . .

What did she put on her carlet rich? *
A pearl there was from stitch to stitch

What did she put on her fine blonde hair?
A crown of gold and heavy to wear

To her father's stables she went after all
And there chose the best steed of them all

She mounted on horseback sitting astride
And singing and jingling she went on her ride
•

Through the wood rode she and halfway in
There she encountered Sir Halewyn

He tied his horse unto a tree º
The maiden watched in agony

Greeting, he said approaching her near
Greeting fair maiden of brown eyes clear
Come, sit you down, unbind your hair

So many hairs as she unbound
So many tears fell to the ground

Together they rode in an easy walk
And under way they had much to talk

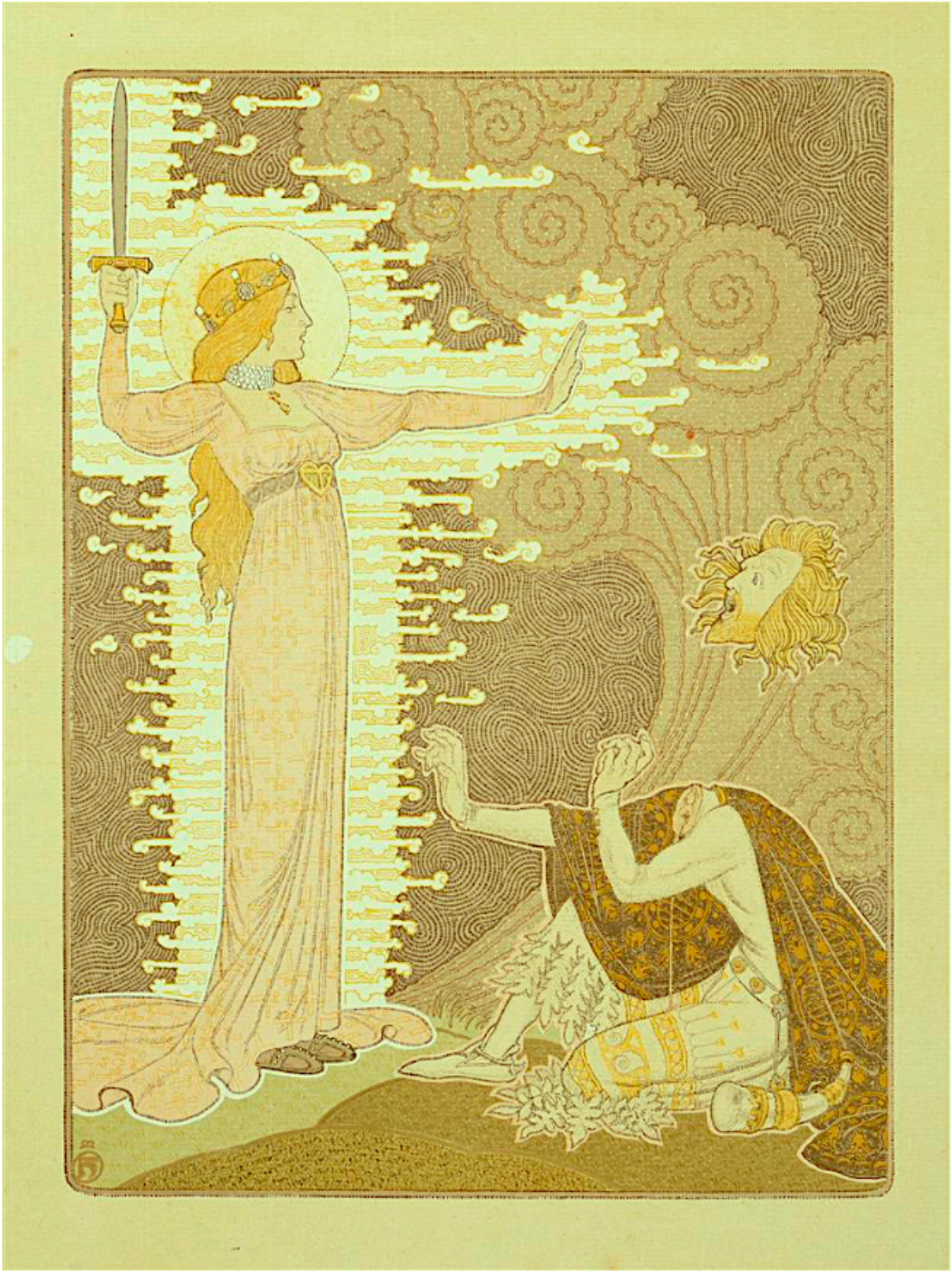
To a gallows they came by a fountain clear †
Many a woman's figure hung here

Sir Halewyn then spoke up to her
As you are the maiden of all most fair
So choose your death, the time is there

Given the choice, well, ruthless lord,
Above all else I choose the sword

But first put off your surcoat bright
For maiden's blood spurts broad and wide
Should it stain you, it would grieve me, quite

And ere he'd pulled his garment, trying
At his feet his head was lying
Still, these words his mouth was crying (illustration below)



And ere he'd pulled his garment, trying
At his feet his head was lying
Still, these words his mouth was crying

Go yonder into the corn
And there blow my horn
That may hear it all my friends

Into the corn I will not go
And your horn I will not blow
A murderer's word I do not heed

Then under yonder gallows go
Bring the ointment there below
And smear with it my scarlet throat

Under the gallows I will not dare
Your scarlet throat I will not smear
A murderer's word I do not heed

She picked up the head by its ginger hair
And washed it in the fountain clear

She mounted on horseback sitting astride
And singing and jingling she went on her ride

•

Through the wood rode she and halfway back
She met Halewyn's mother on the track
My son, fair maiden, have you seen him of late?

Your son, Sir Halewyn, has met his fate
You'll never see him back your living days

Your son, Sir Halewyn, is dead
I carry in my lap his head
Mine apron by his blood is red

Back to the gate she made her ride
And there blew the horn like a knight

And as it reached her father's ears
Her call allayed his darkest fears

There was held a banquet gay ‡
The head on the table on a tray.

There was held a banquet gay
The head on the table on a tray.

Notes

* carlet
Middle Dutch ‘keirle’ – Old Dutch Dictionary: ‘carlé and carlet’
An upper garment made of a woolen fabric of a double-twined warp and a plain weft.

• The enjambment (apokoinou) is an allusion to the Middle Dutch ‘Ballad of Fergus’

‘Ferguut heft sinen wech genomen
In een foreest es hi comen.’

º Indented lines
These are insertions from a different source, which Mr Willems mentions in the margin of his own chaste version. These lines are telling so far that they imply the princess didn’t escape with her maidenhood intact. To unbind her hair she must have taken off her crown and, as Mr Willems’s marginal notes make clear, the crown was a symbol of a maiden’s honour, i.e. of her maidenhood. She didn’t shed those tears for nothing.
Throughout the text, there are several allusions to the sexual act:
– the explicit mention, twice, of her riding astride.
Normally, a woman rode side-saddle or pillion. Having an animal between her legs was an expression tantamount to having sex.
– her answer to Halewyn’s mother: *‘Mine apron by his blood is red.’*
As she had washed his head in the well, there can’t have been that much blood left to stain her apron. Instead, it was her own, the virginal blood that flowed when Halewyn forced himself on her. She must have been quite ashamed of it and was quick to lie about its provenance to his prying mother.
As several versions of the ballad lack this whole passage, the sole function of its presence must have been to provide her with a viable pretext for the blood stain on her garment. She invented it on the spot but, after her return, this explanation forestalled awkward questions by her brother who, by Carolingian custom, was the guardian of her honour.
She was a smart lass and able to take anybody for a ride, Halewyn and his mother and her own kin as well.
As is mentioned in the Wikipedia article: *“One version however adds a footnote saying that the princess remained unmarried all her life because no suitor could ever match the passion she felt for Lord Halewijn.”* It is hard to imagine such a strong passion to arise from a conversation on horseback alone, while the intensity of a first sexual experience can easily account for it.

On the other hand, her way of riding a horse and blowing the horn like a knight picture her as being of bold character and physically powerful. It takes quite some strength to chop off someone’s head in a single stroke, especially, when the victim is engaged in pulling his surcoat over it. In this respect, her meek behaviour in front of Halewyn in the wood, as suggested by the inserted lines, seems out of character, unless she was gifted with thespian talents as well. All these qualities combined made her a greater charmer than Halewyn himself. Once she rode against him, the feared greenwood foe never stood a chance.

† fountain
Sir Halewyn and his counterparts in different versions of the legend are often associated with water in the form of springs, streams and the sea. As stated above, after raping and robbing their victims they took pleasure in drowning them. Halewyn, too, has a fount at his disposal. He must have been in the business of hanging and drowning. Only a maiden of extreme beauty and purity, and a king's daughter to that, is granted the choice of the royal way.
The motive behind their barbaric behaviour, originally, may have been a completely different one than lust and greed. In ancient cultures, water was used to test for purity, i.e. the virginity of maidens. It was believed that springs, or the spirits living in them, possessed magical powers, which could indicate the difference between good and evil, pure and impure. If a true virgin entered the water of a clear spring or stream, it stayed clear, where it became muddy or ran as red as blood, if she wasn't a virgin. Girls who failed the test were killed. Halewyn and his ilk may have started their careers as water sprites, who lured their victims with their chant – the sound of running water – and drowned them. Some sixteenth century German versions of the ballad support this assumption.

In our present case, however, the tables are turned. The princess rinses Halewyn's head in his own well. The water must have run as red as blood indeed and I wonder, if by doing so, apart from the practical reasons, she's absolving him – literally – from his sins, or breaking the spell forever by washing away his enchanting powers.

I found a striking resemblance between depictions of the floating head of two magical singers, the one Halewyn, the other Orpheus.
After his failed attempt to bring back his beloved Eurydice from Hades, Orpheus was inconsolable and retired into the woods. There he was found mourning by a raving band of Maenads who urged him to sing for them and when he refused tore his body apart and threw his head into a well.
– Hendricus Jansen, The princess and the head, litho, ca 1902 – see title page and illustrations.
– Sir John William Waterhouse, Nymphs finding the head of Orpheus, 1909 – see below.

‡ banquet
Commentators agree these two final, most memorable lines must have been added around 1600, as the use of the word 'banket' – pronounced: bankét, not: bánquit – with this connotation came into vogue about that time.

Ronald Langereis
Amsterdam ~ 10 June 2017

Further reading

– Short History of Broadside Ballads – contemplator.com

Did you enjoy this poem?
A reaction will be greatly appreciated.