

Henry Kirke White (1785-1806)

2 *Gondoline: a Ballad*

- 1 The night it was still, and the moon it shone
Serenely on the sea,
And the waves at the foot of the rifted rock
They murmur'd pleasantly,
- 2 When Gondoline roam'd along the shore, 5
A maiden full fair to the sight;
Though love had made bleak the rose on her cheek,
And turn'd it to deadly white.
- 3 Her thoughts they were drear, and the silent tear 10
It fill'd her faint blue eye,
As oft she heard, in fancy's ear,
Her Bertrand's dying sigh.
- 4 Her Bertrand was the bravest youth
Of all our good king's men,
And he was gone to the Holy Land 15
To fight the Saracen.
- 5 And many a month had pass'd away,
And many a rolling year,
But nothing the maid from Palestine
Could of her lover hear. 20
- 6 Full oft she vainly tried to pierce
The ocean's misty face;
Full oft she thought her lover's bark
She on the wave could trace.
- 7 And every night she placed a light 25
In the high rock's lonely tower,
To guide her lover to the land,
Should the murky tempest lower.
- 8 But now despair had seized her breast,

- And sunken in her eye; 30
'Oh tell me but if Bertrand live,
And I in peace will die.'
- 9 She wander'd o'er the lonely shore,
The curlew scream'd above,
She heard the scream with a sickening heart, 35
Much boding of her love.
- 10 Yet still she kept her lonely way,
And this was all her cry,
'Oh! tell me but if Bertrand live,
And I in peace shall die.' 40
- 11 And now she came to a horrible rift
All in the rock's hard side,
A bleak and blasted oak o'erspread
The cavern yawning wide.
- 12 And pendant from its dismal top 45
The deadly nightshade hung;
The hemlock and the aconite
Across the mouth were flung.
- 13 And all within was dark and drear,
And all without was calm; 50
Yet Gondoline enter'd, her soul upheld
By some deep-working charm.
- 14 And as she enter'd the cavern wide,
The moonbeam gleamed pale,
And she saw a snake on the craggy rock, 55
It clung by its slimy tail.
- 15 Her foot it slipp'd, and she stood aghast,
She trod on a bloated toad;
Yet, still upheld by the secret charm,
She kept upon her road. 60
- 16 And now upon her frozen ear
Mysterious sounds arose;
So on the mountain's piny top

The blustering north-wind blows.

- 17 Then furious peals of laughter loud 65
Were heard with thundering sound,
Till they died away in soft decay,
Low whispering o'er the ground.
- 18 Yet still the maiden onward went, 70
The charm yet onward led,
Though each big glaring ball of sight
Seem'd bursting from her head.
- 19 But now a pale blue light she saw,
It from a distance came;
She follow'd, till upon her sight 75
Burst full a flood of flame.
- 20 She stood appall'd; yet still the charm
Upheld her sinking soul;
Yet each bent knee the other smote,
And each wild eye did roll. 80
- 21 And such a sight as she saw there
No mortal saw before,
And such a sight as she saw there
No mortal shall see more.
- 22 A burning caldron stood in the midst, 85
The flame was fierce and high,
And all the cave so wide and long
Was plainly seen thereby.
- 23 And round about the caldron stout 90
Twelve wither'd witches stood;
Their waists were bound with living snakes,
And their hair was stiff with blood.
- 24 Their hands were gory too; and red
And fiercely flamed their eyes:
And they were muttering indistinct 95
Their hellish mysteries.

- 25 And suddenly they join'd their hands,
And utter'd a joyous cry,
And round about the caldron stout
They danced right merrily. 100
- 26 And now they stopp'd; and each prepared
To tell what she had done,
Since last the lady of the night
Her waning course had run.
- 27 Behind a rock stood Gondoline, 105
Thick weeds her face did veil,
And she lean'd fearful forwarder,
To hear the dreadful tale.
- 28 The first arose: She said she'd seen 110
Rare sport since the blind cat mew'd,
She'd been to sea in a leaky sieve,
And a jovial storm had brew'd.
- 29 She call'd around the winged winds,
And raised a devilish rout;
And she laugh'd so loud, the peals were heard 115
Full fifteen leagues about.
- 30 She said there was a little bark
Upon the roaring wave,
And there was a woman there who'd been
To see her husband's grave. 120
- 31 And she had got a child in her arms,
It was her only child,
And oft its little infant pranks
Her heavy heart beguiled.
- 32 And there was, too, in that same bark 125
A father and his son:
The lad was sickly, and the sire
Was old and woe-begone.
- 33 And when the tempest waxed strong,
And the bark could no more it 'bide, 130

She said it was jovial fun to hear
How the poor devils cried.

34 The mother clasp'd her orphan child
Unto her breast and wept;
And, sweetly folded in her arms, 135
The careless baby slept.

35 And she told how, in the shape o' the wind,
As manfully it roar'd,
She twisted her hand in the infant's hair,
And threw it overboard. 140

36 And to have seen the mother's pangs,
'Twas a glorious sight to see;
The crew could scarcely hold her down
From jumping in the sea.

37 The hag held a lock of the hair in her hand, 145
And it was soft and fair:
It must have been a lovely child
To have had such lovely hair.

38 And she said, the father in his arms
He held his sickly son, 150
And his dying throes they fast arose,
His pains were nearly done.

39 And she throttled the youth with her sinewy hands,
And his face grew deadly blue;
And the father he tore his thin gray hair, 155
And kiss'd the livid hue.

40 And then she told how she bored a hole
In the bark, and it fill'd away;
And 'twas rare to hear how some did swear,
And some did vow and pray. 160

41 The man and woman they soon were dead,
The sailors their strength did urge;
But the billows that beat were their winding-sheet,
And the winds sung their funeral dirge.

- 42 She threw the infant's hair in the fire, 165
The red flame flamed high,
And round about the caldron stout
They danced right merrily.
- 43 The second begun: She said she had done 170
The task that Queen Hecate had set her,
And that the devil, the father of evil,
Had never accomplish'd a better.
- 44 She said, there was an aged woman, 175
And she had a daughter fair,
Whose evil habits fill'd her heart
With misery and care.
- 45 The daughter had a paramour, 180
A wicked man was he,
And oft the woman him against
Did murmur grievously.
- 46 And the hag had work'd the daughter up
To murder her old mother,
That then she might seize on all her goods,
And wanton with her lover.
- 47 And one night as the old woman 185
Was sick and ill in bed,
And pondering solely on the life
Her wicked daughter led,
- 48 She heard her footstep on the floor, 190
And she raised her pallid head,
And she saw her daughter with a knife
Approaching to her bed.
- 49 And said, 'My child, I'm very ill,
I have not long to live,
Now kiss my cheek, that ere I die 195
Thy sins I may forgive.'
- 50 And the murderess bent to kiss her cheek,

And she lifted the sharp bright knife,
And the mother saw her fell intent,
And hard she begg'd for life. 200

51 But prayers would nothing her avail,
And she scream'd aloud with fear,
But the house was lone, and the piercing screams
Could reach no human ear.

52 And though that she was sick, and old, 205
She struggled hard, and fought;
The murderess cut three fingers through
Ere she could reach her throat.

53 And the hag she held the fingers up,
The skin was mangled sore; 210
And they all agreed a nobler deed
Was never done before.

54 And she threw the fingers in the fire,
The red flame flamed high,
And round about the caldron stout 215
They danced right merrily.

55 The third arose: She said she'd been
To holy Palestine;
And seen more blood in one short day
Than they had all seen in nine. 220

56 Now Gondoline, with fearful steps,
Drew nearer to the flame,
For much she dreaded now to hear
Her hapless lover's name.

57 The hag related then the sports 225
Of that eventful day,
When on the well-contested field
Full fifteen thousand lay.

58 She said that she in human gore
Above the knees did wade, 230
And that no tongue could truly tell

- The tricks she there had play'd.
- 59 There was a gallant-featured youth,
Who like a hero fought;
He kiss'd a bracelet on his wrist, 235
And every danger sought.
- 60 And in a vassal's garb disguised,
Unto the knight she sues,
And tells him she from Britain comes,
And brings unwelcome news. 240
- 61 That three days ere she had embark'd,
His love had given her hand
Unto a wealthy Thane — and thought
Him dead in Holy Land.
- 62 And to have seen how he did writhe 245
When this her tale she told,
It would have made a wizard's blood
Within his heart run cold.
- 63 Then fierce he spurr'd his warrior steed,
And sought the battle's bed; 250
And soon, all mangled o'er with wounds,
He on the cold turf bled.
- 64 And from his smoking corse she tore
His head, half clove in two.
She ceased, and from beneath her garb 255
The bloody trophy drew.
- 65 The eyes were starting from their sockets,
The mouth it ghastly grinn'd,
And there was a gash across the brow,
The scalp was nearly skinn'd. 260
- 66 'Twas Bertrand's head! With a terrible scream
The maiden gave a spring,
And from her fearful hiding-place
She fell into the ring.

- 67 The lights they fled — the caldron sunk, 265
Deep thunders shook the dome,
And hollow peals of laughter came
Resounding through the gloom.
- 68 Insensible the maiden lay 270
Upon the hellish ground,
And still mysterious sounds were heard
At intervals around.
- 69 She woke — she half arose — and wild
She cast a horrid glare;
The sounds had ceased, the lights had fled, 275
And all was stillness there.
- 70 And through an awning in the rock
The moon it sweetly shone,
And show'd a river in the cave
Which dismally did moan. 280
- 71 The stream was black, it sounded deep
As it rush'd the rocks between;
It offer'd well, for madness fired
The breast of Gondoline.
- 72 She plunged in, the torrent moan'd 285
With its accustom'd sound,
And hollow peals of laughter loud
Again rebellow'd round.
- 73 The maid was seen no more, — but oft
Her ghost is known to glide, 290
At midnight's silent, solemn hour,
Along the ocean's side.

(From *The Poetical Works of Henry Kirke White and James Grahame*. With Memoirs, Critical Dissertations, and Explanatory Notes, by the Rev George Gilfillan. Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1856)