

Here begins Herod the Great

MESSANGER: Most mighty Mahound make you merry with mirth!
All from borough and town, by fell and by firth,
Both king with crown, and barons of birth,
If you make here no sound, that now shall be worth
Your safe-keeping. 5
Your attention give me
To the words I bring ye,
Else harm shall ye see
Round ye creeping!

Herod, the high king -- by grace of Mahound -- 10
Of Jewry, now ruling resplendent in crown
All alive, each one living in tower and town,
Sends you gracious greeting; commands you bow down
At his bidding.
Love him with loyalty; 15
Dread him, the most haughty;
He charges you, ready be
Humbly at his liking.

That man upon mould who shall of him complain
Shall quickly be told -- knight, or squire, or swain -- 20
Be he never so bold, he shall buy that bargain
Twelve thousandfold more than I could proclaim,
Have no doubt!
He is wondrously worthy,
Yet he has a strange worry 25
Of a newly-born boy he
Has heard much about.

A king they him call -- and that we deny!
How this may befall, that, sirs, know not I.
Therefore to you all shall I make a cry 30
That ye bring here no brawl, nor tell here no lie
At this tide!

Talk of no king
But Herod, that lording,
Or home now start running, 35
Your heads for to hide!

He is king of all kings, this truly I know;
Chief lord of lordings, leader of the law -- lo,
There wait 'neath his wings those who will strike a blow
To dash down great kings who no reverence show! 40
They revere him

In Tuscany, Turkey,
India and Italy,
Syria and Sicily --
All of them fear him! 45

From Paradise to Padua, to Mount Flascon;
From Egypt to Mantua, even here to Hogtown;
From Sarceny to Susa to Greece they bow down;
Both Normandy and Norway reverence his crown.
His renown 50

Can no tongue tell
From heaven unto hell.
None resembles him well
But his cousin Mahound!

He is the worthiest of all boys that are born. 55
Noble men to him fall, most grievously torn.
Begins he to brawl, he smites all men with scorn.
Obey must we all, or be quickly forlorn.

At once
Fall down on your kneee 60
All you that hi see,
Or displeased he will be,
And break many bones!

Here he comes now, I cry, that magnificent one!
Fast before will I fly, quickly, at a run, 65

And welcome him worshipfully, laughing for fun,
As he is most worthy; and kneeling low down --
Most low! --
Down quickly to fall
As a knight loyal
Hail, the worthiest of all!
To thee must I bow!

70

Hail, loved lord! Lo, proclamation I've made,
Have done all I could do, and their silence have prayed;
Much more I've done, too, as your will I displayed,
But rumour runs so that much talk here is made
Amongst them.

75

They talk of a king;
They cease not such chattering.

HEROD:

But I shall tame their talking,
And themselves they may hang then!

80

Cease, wretches, your din -- yea, every one!
I command that ye hearken until I am gone.
For, if I begin, I shall break every bone
And tear off the skin from your bodies, each one --
Yea, pardee!

85

Cease all this wonder,
And make here no blunder,
Or I'll rip you asunder,
I tell you truly!

90

Peace, both young and old, at my word I command!
All this world I enfold: life and death in me stand!
Who shall be too bold, I'll brain him -- he'll be banned!
Speak not till I have told of my will in this land!

Ye know not

95

All I will tell you.
Stir not, for if ye do
I'll cut you up for stew,
And throw you in the pot!

My mirth is gone awry, my meekness turned to ire! 100
 On account of that small boy, within I burn like fire!
 If I may him espy, I'll pay him for his hire!
 Unless I do, say I, I were a stupid sire.

At once,
 Had I that boy in hand, 105
 As king of all this land
 I should with this steel brand
 Break all his bones!

My name rings far and near: "the doughtiest" men me call,
 "That ever ran with spear!" -- a lord and king royal. 110
 What joy now, when I hear a boy shall seize my hall?
 By this crown that I wear, that boy shall pay for all!
 I roar!

I know not what devil me ails;
 They madden me so with tales 115
 That, by God's dear nails,
 I will keep peace no more!

What the devil! I think I burst for anger and fury!
 I think these kings have passed, that had been here with me.
 They promised at the last by now I should them see -- 120
 Or else I would have cast another trick, trust me!
 I tell you,

A boy they said they sought
 With offering that they brought.
 I'd give it not a thought 125
 To break his neck in two!

If they have passed me by, by Mahound in heaven,
 I shall, I swear on high, set all at six and seven!
 Think ye a king like I will let my place be given
 To any but myself? Fie! Not for this have I striven! 130
 Nay, nay!

The devil lay me low
 If I that rascal know

And strike him not a blow
That shall him surely slay! 135

For perils they foretold, I must know if they are gone.
If any, young or old, hear of it, tell me soon.
For, if they've been so bold, by God that sits on throne,
The pains cannot be told that they shall have, each one,
For ire! 140
Of such pains man never heard tell,
So ugly and cruel
That Lucifer in hell
Their bones shall set on fire!

SOLDIER 1: Lord, think not ill of me if I tell you how they have passed. 145
I'll not hide it, truly: since they came by you last,
Another way, you see, they sought, and travelled fast.

HEROD: Why, have they passed by me? Fie, fie! for rage I burst!
Whee! fie!
Fie on thee, devil! I cannot hide 150
My rage, but furiously must chide!
Thieves! I say ye should have spied
And told when they went by.

Ye are fine knights to trust! -- nay, rascals ye are, each one!
I could give up the ghost, my heart is so undone! 155

SOLDIER 2: Why should ye be aghast? No grief so great's been done
To grind your teeth to dust!

soldier 3: And why do you lay this on
Us, with no cause?
You should not thus threaten
That we will be beaten -- 160
Your tongue you should sweeten,
Or give us recourse!

HEROD: Fie, you liars! I curse you, louts everyone!
Ye are traitors and worse, knaves, for knights you are none!
Had ye been worth your spurs, these kings had not gone. 165

If I may catch those curs, I shall break every bone.
 First, vengeance
 Shall I wreak on their bones,
 Then, if ye stay here, with stones
 I shall beat you at once -- 170
 Yea, difizance doutance!

I know not where I may sit for anger now, say I.
 We have not done all yet, as I think. Now fie! fie!
 Fie, devil! Now how is it? I swear I shall not fly,
 But as long as I see fit shall reign as king on high 175
 Forever!
 If I stay in good part --
 I speak from the heart! --
 I shall make them to smart,
 Or else trust me never! 180

SOLDIER 1: Sir, they went suddenly, ere any man knew,
 Or we'd have met them, pardee -- I tell you true!

SOLDIER 2: So bold nor so hardy were none of that crew
 To fight with we three with fists, i tell you,
 For fear! 185

SOLDIER 3: They dared not abide,
 But all ran to hide.
 Might I have them spied,
 I'd have tricked them all here!

What more could we do to save your honour? 190

SOLDIER 1: We were all ready, too, and shall be each hour.

HEROD: Now since it is so, ye shall have favour:
 Go where ye will go, by town and by tower --
 Go ye hence!
 I have matters to tell 195
 To my privy counsel.
 Clerks, ye bear the bell:
 Now, of these things make sense!

One spoke in my ear a very strange thing,
 And said a virgin should bear another to be king. 200
 Sirs, I pray you, enquire in every writing
 In Virgil, in Homer, and each other thing
 But scripture.
 Search poetic epistle,
 But leave prayer book and missal. 205
 Mass and lauds can go whistle --
 These I cannot endure!

 I pray you, tell quickly -- what there do ye find?
 COUNSELLOR 1: Truly, sir, prophecy is never blind!
 In Isaiah thus we see: in a virgin so kind 210
 Conceived he shall be -- one who never sinned
 Shall him bear.
 Virgo concipiet,
 Natumque pariet.
 "Emmanuel" -- this is it -- 215
 His name, sir, I swear:

 "God is with us," that is for to say.
 COUNSELLOR 2: And others say thus -- trust me ye may:
 "In Bethlem a gracious lord," they say,
 "Shall spring, that of Jews a great king shall be, aye 220
 Lord most high!
 To him shall honour bring
 Both emperor and king."
 HEROD: Why should I cower to him?
 Nay, there ye tell a lie! 225

 Fie! the devil the speed -- and me, if I drink not!
 This have ye done, indeed, to enrage me a lot!
 And thou, knave, take heed: thy reward hast thou bought!
 Ye know not half your creed. Out, thieves, from this spot!
 Fie, knaves! 230
 Fie, dunderheads with your books! --
 Go throw them in the brooks!.

Through such tricks, and such crooks,
My mind now here raves!

I heard never such a thing -- that a knave so base might 235
Like a saint here come in, and deprive me my right.
I shall him down bring; I shall kill him outright!
Give me room for breathing! Now I think to fight
For anger.
My guts here will burst 240
If this lad hang not first!
For vengeance I thirst,
Or I may live no longer.

Should a churl in a cave, of but one year of age,
Thus cause me to rave? 235

COUNSELLOR 1: Sir, cease all your rage! 245
Away you should wave all such language.
AS Mahound, sir, you save, is he only a page
Of a year?
We two shall him slay
With our wits here today. 250
Now, if ye do as I say
He shall die on a spear!

COUNSELLOR 2: For fear he might reign, do as we suggest:
Throughout Bethlehem and each place -- this is best --
Send knights of great fame to put to their deaths 255
All the boy-children, then, of two years and less
If ye can.
This child ye may kill
Thus, at your own will.

HEROD: Now you speak with great skill: 260
This is a good plan!

If long I may live a good life -- as I hope --
This promise I give: I will make thee a Pope
Now no longer I grieve; no longer I mope!

For these words I receive, I grant thee great scope 265
 To have my grace:
 Marks, rentals, and pounds;
 Great castles and grounds;
 Through all seas and sounds
 For thee I make space! 270

Now will I proceed to take vengeance!
 Call all knights of good deed to allegiance.
 Bewsher, I bid, take heed! It may thee advance.
 MESSENGER: Lord, I shall now speed, and bring them perchance
 To thy sight. 275
 Hark, knights! I you bring
 Here a new tidings:
 Unto Herod the king
 Haste, with all your might,

In all the haste that ye may, in your armour bright -- 280
 In your best array, so ye be a fine sight.

SOLDIER 1: Why should we make affray?
 SOLDIER 2: This is not quite right!
 SOLDIER 3: Sirs, without delay I'm afraid we must fight.

MESSENGER: I pray you,
 As fast as ye may, 285
 Come to him this day.

SOLDIER 1: What? in our best array?
 MESSENGER: Yea, sirs, thus I say you.

SOLDIER 2: Something is in hand, whatever it be.
 SOLDIER 3: Let us not here stand, but there now go we. 290
 MESSENGER: King Herod the grand: greetings to thee!
 The knights you command, in armour you see
 At your will.

SOLDIER 1: Hail, doughtiest of all!
 We have come at thy call 295
 To do what may befall
 Your desire to fulfil.

HEROD: Welcome, lords, in bliss, both great and small!
 The reason now is this, that I sent for you all:
 A lad, a knave, born is that shall be king royal. 300
 Unless him and all his I kill, I'll burst my gall!
 Therefore, sirs,
 If vengeance ye shall take
 For that same lad's sake,
 Great men I shall you make 305
 In each place that ye come, sirs!

To Bethlem make your way, and all the lands about,
 All boy children to slay -- and let your hearts be stout! --
 If two years old be they, or less, without a doubt,
 Leave none living, I say, in swaddling clothes. Go out, 310
 I charge thee!
 Spare ye no blood.
 Let it run like a flood!
 If women run mad,
 I warn you, sirs, move quickly! 315

Hence! Go now your way, and teach them this lore!

SOLDIER 2: We'll make such a fray! Let me go before!
 SOLDIER 3: Think of this, sirs, I say: I shall charge like a boar!
 SOLDIER 1: Set me in front! Hey -- I'm good for a score!
 Lord most kind, 320
 We shall at your call
 Make a game most cruel.

HEROD: If you avenge me well
 Ye shall find me your friend.

SOLDIER 2: To our work go ye now -- and handle them well! 325
 SOLDIER 3: I shall pay them, that I vow, the truth for to tell!
 SOLDIER 1: You fools! See that cow? I'll put her through hell!
 I'll wager -- and how! -- she'll not like me well
 When we part!
 Dame, take it not ill, 330
 Thy boy if I kill!

WOMAN 1: What, thief? Against my will?
 Lord, keep him whole in heart!

SOLDIER 1: Abide, now, abide! No further go ye.

WOMAN 1: Peace, thief! Shall I chide and scream lustily? 335

SOLDIER 1: I shall take this, your pride: these boys now kill we!

WOMAN 1: Whatever betide, thy nose I'll bloody,
 False thief!
 Take this blow on thy head!

SOLDIER 1: What, whore? Art thou mad? 340

WOMAN 1: Out, alas! my child's blood!
 Fie, fie for this grief!

 Alas, for shame and sin! Alas, that I was born!
 My bitter tears begin, to see my child forlorn --
 My comfort and my kin, my son thus cruelly torn! 345
 Vengeance here for this sin I cry, evening and morn!

SOLDIER 2: Well done!
 Come hither, hag, say !!
 That lad of thine shall die!

WOMAN 2: Mercy, lord, I cry! 350
 It is my own dear son!

SOLDIER 2: No mercy from me! It shall not help thee, Maud!

WOMAN 2: I'll split thy head in three! -- you want to be clawed?
 Leave off, speedily!

SOLDIER 2: Peace, I bid, bawd!

WOMAN 2: Fie, fie! -- shame on thee! -- fie, full of fraud, 355
 And worse!
 Have at thy tabard,
 Thou cursèd coward.
 Ye shall be marred!
 I cry and I curse! 360

 Out! Murder, man, I say -- strong traitor and thief!
 Out, alas, and welaway! -- my child, of all joys chief!

My love! My blood! My play! -- that never caused man grief!
 Alas! Alas, this day! My heart may break for grief,
 Asunder! 365
 Vengeance I cry and call
 On Herod and his false knights all!
 Vengeance, Lord, upon them fall,
 And plagues down on them thunder!

SOLDIER 3: This work goes well here -- just as it should be. 370
 Come hither, my dear! Ye need not to flee.

WOMAN 3: Will you harm him? I fear for my child and me.

SOLDIER 3: He shall die, that I swear. His heart's blood shall thou see.

WOMAN 3: God forbid!
 Thief, ye shed here my child's blood! 375
 Out, I cry! I go stark mad!
 Alas, my heart, for this young lad!
 To see my child thus bleed!

By God, sore shall ye buy this deed that ye have done.

SOLDIER 3: Hag! Now just you try, by the moon and by the sun! 380

WOMAN 3: Have at thee, say I! Take that! -- and another one!
 Out on thee, I cry! Have one at thy groin!
 Another!
 This kept I in store.

SOLDIER 3: Peace now -- no more! 385

WOMAN 3: I cry and I roar --
 Out on thee, for this murder!

Alas, my babe, mine innocent: for sorrow, mine own offspring.
 That God so dearly sent, who now relief may bring?
 That body in pieces rent! I cry, morn and evening, 390
 Vengeance for blood thus spent. "Out!" I cry, grieving!

SOLDIER 1: Go quickly!
 Get out of here -- go!
 Ye hags, now do so,
 Or by God's sacred toe, 395
 I'll make you move slickly!

Now they're beaten, I vow; they will not abide.
SOLDIER 2: Let us run hot-foot now, and on our way stride,
To tell of just how we have done -- how they cried!
SOLDIER 3: You work well, I'll allow, for that I espied. 400
Go forth now:
Tell to Herod our tale --
It will us avail;
I tell you, sans fail,
He will praise us -- and how! 405

SOLDIER 1: I am best of you all, and ever have been.
The devil take my soul if I'm not the first seen!
I should rightly call my lord here, I mean.
SOLDIER 2: Now why should ye brawl? Be not so keen
To be stronger. 410
I shall say thou did best --
Save myself -- as I guessed.

SOLDIER 1: Well, that is most honest.
SOLDIER 2: Go -- tarry no longer!

SOLDIER 1: Hail, Herod our king! Now glad may ye be! 415
Good tidings we bring! Hearken now to me:
We have made a riding throughout all Jewry.
Be sure of one thing: that murdered have we
Thousands of young ones.

SOLDIER 2: A hot time I gave them -- 420
Beat them brutally then!
Those wives never again
Shall softly swaddle their sons!

SOLDIER 3: Oh, if you'd seen how I fared when I came among them!
There was none that I spared: I racked them and wring them! 425
I am worth a reward. I'd no pity among them;
How fiercely I stared -- I would have hung them,
I swear.

HEROD: Now, by Mighty Mahound,
That great god of renown, 430
Ye shall have, by my crown,
A lady most fair!

Each one a fair maid, to wed at his will.

SOLDIER 1: Many times, I'm afraid, you've said this -- now fulfill!

SOLDIER 2: I was never dismayed, for good nor for ill. 435

SOLDIER 3: You'll find you're well repaid, if our lusts you will fill,
I tell thee,
With treasures untold --
If I may be so bold! --
Both silver and gold 440
Give us plentifully!

HEROD: As I am king crowned, I think it quite right.
There is none here around has servants so bright!
A hundred thousand pound's a good wage for a knight:
Of pennies good and round ye may take away quite 445
A large store.
And ye knights here of ours
Shall have castles and towers,
Both for you and for yours,
For now and evermore! 450

SOLDIER 1: There was never one born anywhere in this land,
Before this fair morn had gifts half so grand!

SOLDIER 2: We have castles and corn; much gold in our hand!

SOLDIER 3: It will never be worn, I swear as I stand.
Hail, great lord! 455
Hail, lord! Hail, king!
We are forth hastening.

HEROD: Now may grat Mahound bring
You where he is adored!

Now in peace may I stand -- I thank thee Mahound! --
 And give of the lands that belong to my crown.
 Draw now near at hand, you of borough and town:
 When I'm ready, a thousand marks shall everyone
 Have, I say.
 I shall be most happy 465
 To give this freely.
 When I come back to ye,
 Then ask me ye may.

I think it quite good, now my heart is at ease,
 That I shed so much blood: all my lands are at peace! 470
 To see this great flood, from the neck to the knees,
 Cannot mar my fair mood -- I laugh till I wheeze!
 Ah, Mahound!
 So light is my soul,
 It has sweetened my gall. 475
 I may do what I shall,
 And maintain my crown!

I was cast down with care -- so fiercely afraid! --
 But I need not despair, for low is he laid
 That I dreaded most there: his life I betrayed. 480
 For most wondrous it were, since so many lie dead
 In the street,
 That one child so helpless
 Should escape scatheless,
 When such children numberless 485
 Their deaths did meet.

A hundred thousand I know, and forty are slain,
 And four thousand or so -- this should ease my brain!
 Such a murder here below shall never be again.
 Had I struck but one blow at that saucy swain 490
 So young,
 It should have been said

How I was avengèd,
Were I many years dead,
By many a tongue. 495

Thus I'll teach every knave example to take:
Each one who will rave, and tries mastery to make.
All who insolence crave should their boasting forsake,
For no sovereign will save you -- your necks I shall shake
Asunder! 500
On no king now call
But Herod, the royal,
Or else many a one shall
On your dead bodies wonder!

For, if I hear it spoken when I come again, 505
Your brains shall be broken -- I need no more explain! --
Obedience is the token, this shall be quite plain.
Once my anger is woken, I shall not it restrain
Nor quench.

Sirs, this is my counsel: 510
Be not too cruel.
Now adieu! -- to the devil!
I know no more French!

Here ends Herod the Great