

The Four Foes of Mankind (f. 303rb-303vb)
(The World, the Devil, the Flesh, and Death)

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Preliminary note: an introduction and notes (marked * below) are given in a separate file. A Modern French translation is also provided separately.

Be siker* sope* whoso seys		Sure [is] the truth of whoever says:	
Wiþ diol* dreye we our days		With grief we draw out our days	
& walk mani wil* ways		And walk in many wild ways	
As wandrand wiʒtes.*	4	As wandering [lost] creatures.	4
Al our games ous agas,*		All our games bewilder us,	
So mani tenes* ou[s] tas*		So many vexations tease us	
Þurth fonding* of fele fas*		Through the temptation of many foes	
Þat fast wiþ ous fiʒtes.	8	That fiercely struggle with us.	8
Our flesche is fouled wiþ þe fende		Our flesh is corrupted by the fiend	
Þer we finde a fals frende;		In whom we find a false friend;	
Þei þai heuen* vp her hende		Although they lift up their hands	
Þai no hold nouʒt her hiʒtes.*	12	They cannot hold onto their pleasures .	12
Þis er þre þat er þra,*		These are three that are strong,	
ʒete þe ferþ is our fa:*		Yet the fourth is our foe:	
Deþ þat derieþ* ous swa		Death that hurts us so	
& diolely ous diʒtes.*	16	And treats us so grievously.	16
¶ Þis world wileþ þus, y wat,*		The world wants it thus, I know	
Þurth falsschip of fairhat;*		Through the falseness of [its] beauty ;	
Where we go bi ani gat*		Whichever way we go	
Wiþ bale he ous bites:	20	With calamity it strikes us:	20
Now kirt,* now care,		Now short [of food], now care,	
Now min,* now mare,		Now less, now more,	
Now sounde, now sare,		Now sound [healthy], now sore [sick],	
Now song, now sites,*	24	Now song, now pains,	24
Now nouʒt, now ynouʒ,		Now nothing, now enough,	
Now wele, now wouʒ,		Now joy, now woe,	

Now is in longing þat louʒ*ʒ		Now he that laughed is in want	
Þat o þis liif lites,*	28	That bows [us] down in this life,	28
Now geten, now gan;		Now gotten, now gone;	
Y tel it bot a lent* lan*		I hold it but a [meagre] Lenten reward	
When al þe welþ of our wan*		When all the wealth of our goods	
Þus oway wites.*	32	Thus flies away [so quickly].	32
¶ Now vnder, now ouer,		Now under, now over,	
Now cast, now couer,		Now cast [away], now recovered,	
Now plente, now pouer,		Now [in] plenty, now poor,	
Now pine, now plawe,*	36	Now pain, now play,	36
Now heþen,* now here,		Now here, now there,	
Now feble, now fere,*		Now feeble, now able,	
Now swift, now swere,*		Now swift, now heavy,	
Now snelle,* now slawe,	40	Now quick, now slow,	40
Now nouʒt, now ynouʒ,		Now nothing, now enough,	
Now fals, now frouʒ,*		Now false, now capricious,	
Þe warld tirueþ* ous touʒ*ʒ		The world treats us badly	
Fram wawe to wawe	44	From woe to woe [= blow to blow]	44
Til we be broyden* in a brayd*		Till we are wrapped in a shroud	
Þat our lickham* is layd		And that our corpse is laid	
In a graue þat is grayd*		In a grave that is made	
Vnder lame* lawe.*	48	Under an earthen mound.	48
¶ When derne* deþ ous haþ ydiʒt*		When dark Death has taken aim at us	
Is non so war no so wiʒt*		There is none so wary or so brave	
Þat he no felles him in fiʒt		That he [Death] does not cut down in battle	
As fire dos in tunder;*	52	Just as fire does to tinder;	52
Þer nis no letting at lite*		There is no delay at all [= even a little]	
Þat he no tittes* til him tite*		Before Death binds [us] tightly to himself;	
Þat he haþ sammned* in site*		What he has joined together in sorrow	
Loue wel he sunder.	56	He loves well to separate [body & soul].	56
Noiþer he stintes no stokes		He neither stints nor stokes [= encourages]	
Bot ay prickes & prokes*		But ever pricks and pokes	
Til he vnclustri* al þe lokes		Till he un-cloisters [= opens] all the locks	
Þat liif ligges vnder.	60	That life lies under. [= protect life]	60
When y tent* til him take		When I try to take [respite] from him	
How schuld ich ani mirþe make		How should I make any mirth	

Or wele in þis warld wake?*		Or expect any joy in this world?	
Ywis, it were wonder.	64	Certainly it would be astonishing.	64
¶ Deþ þat deries* ous ʒete		Death that troubles us yet [= constantly]	
& makes mani wonges* wete,		And makes many cheeks wet,	
þer nis no liif þat he wil lete*		There is no life that he will refrain	
To lache* when him list.	68	From seizing when he wishes.	68
When he is lopen* out of les*		When he has leapt out of the lee [= shelter]	
No pray noman* after pes;		No prey taken [is] left in peace;	
For non giftes þat ges*		For no gifts that jess [= bind, restrict]	
Mai no man til him trist.	72	May any man trust him.	72
Our gode frendes has he fot*		Our good friends has he fought	
& put þe pouer to þe pot		And put the poor [man] in the pothole	
& ouer him yknett his knott,		And around him has tied the knot	
Vnder his clay kist.*	76	Under his chest of clay.	76
Derne deþ, opon þe ʒong		Dark Death, [who falls] upon the young,	
Wiþ þe to striue it is strong;		With thee to strive it is hard;	
Y wold be wreken* of mi wrong,		I would be avenged of my wrong,	
ʒif y way wist.	80	If I knew how.	80
¶ When þou has gaderd & yglened		When thou hast gathered and gleaned,	
Long ly* opon* & lened*		Long lied about it and lent [the profit],	
Sparely þi gode spened		Spent thy money sparely,	
& loþ for to lete.*	84	Loath to let go [of it],	84
þe war leuer* swelt* vnder sword		Thou wouldst rather die by the sword	
þan parti of þi peni hord;		Than part with a penny of thy hoard;	
þou wringest mani wrang word		Thou wringest many a false word	
Wiþ wanges* ful wete;	88	With thy cheeks all wet.	88
& deþ dinges o di* dore		But [then] Death knocks on thy door,	
þat nedes schal be þi neiʒebore		He who must needs be thy neighbour,	
& fett* þe to ten fore*		And summons thee to go before [him]	
Foule vnder fete.	92	Like a fowl under [his] feet.	92
For al þe craft þat þou can		For all the skill that thou knowest,	
& al þe wele þatow wan		And all the wealth that thou hast won,	
þe mock* & þe mad man		Muck [= riches] and the fool	
No schul þai neuer mete.	96	Shall never meet [= stay together].	96

¶ Seppen font ous fra filp wesche
 Our fa haue founde we our flesche
 Wiþ mani fondinges* & fresche
 & four-sum of fendes. 100
 Is nan so þra* of hem þre
 Þat ma merres* þan me;
 Bisier mai nan be
 To bring ous out* bendes.* 104
 Man, mene* þou þi mis,*
 Trowe trustly on þis:
 Þou no wat neuer, ywis,
 In world whare þou wendes, 108
 No wat* gat* þatow* gas,*
 Þis four er redi on þi pas.*
 Now haue y founden þi fas,*
 Finde tow* þi frendes. 112

Since font [= baptism] cleansed us from filth
 Our flesh we have found our foe
 With [its] many and fresh temptations
 And a foursome of fiends. 100
 There is none so strong of these three
 That injures me more than myself;
 Busier may none be
 To bring us into bondage. 104
 Man, complain however thou will,
 Truly canst thou believe in this:
 That thou never knowest, I guess,
 Wherever thou wander in the world, 108
 Nor whatever way thou goest,
 These four are watching thy every step.
 Now that I have found thy foes,
 Find thou friends for thyself! 112