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

Modern English version and notes* by Leo CARRUTHERS
Professor at Paris-Sorbonne University

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

Sure [is] the truth of whoever says: With grief we draw out our days And walk in many wild ways As wandering [lost] creatures. All our games bewilder us, So many vexations tease us Through the temptation of many foes That fiercely struggle with us.

Our flesh is corrupted by the fiend In whom we find a false friend; Although they lift up their hands They cannot hold onto their pleasures. These are three that are strong, Yet the fourth is our foe:

Death that hurts us so And treats us so grievously.

The world wants it thus, I know Through the falseness of [its] beauty: Whichever way we go With calamity it strikes us:

Now short [of food], now care, Now less, now more, Now sound [healthy], now sore [sick], Now song, now pains, Now nothing, now enough, Now joy, now woe,
Now is in longing þat lou 28
That bows [us] down in this life,
Pat o þis liif lites,* 28
Now gotten, now gone;
Y tel it bot a lent* lan* 28
I hold it but a [meagre] Lenten reward
When al þe welþ of our wan* 32
When all the wealth of our goods
Þus oway wites.* 32
Thus flies away [so quickly].
¶ Now vnder, now ouer, 32
Now under, now over,
Now cast, now couer, 32
Now cast [away], now recovered,
Now plente, now pouer, 32
Now [in] plenty, now poor,
Now pine, now plawe,* 32
Now pain, now play,
Now heþen,* now here, 32
Now here, now there,
Now feble, now fere,* 32
Now feeble, now able,
Now swift, now swere,* 32
Now swift, now heavy,
Now snelle,* now slawe, 32
Now quick, now slow,
Now nou Št, now ynou Š, 32
Now nothing, now enough,
Þe warld tirueþ ous tou 32
The world treats us badly
Fram wawe to wawe 44
From woe to woe [= blow to blow]
Til we be broyden* in a brayd* 44
Till we are wrapped in a shroud
Þat our lickham* is layd 44
And that our corpse is laid
In a graue þat is grayd* 44
In a grave that is made
Vnder lame* lawe.* 48
Under an earthen mound.
¶ When derne* deþ ous haþ ydi3t* 52
When dark Death has taken aim at us
Is non so war no so wi3t* 52
There is none so wary or so brave
Pat he no felles him in fi3t 52
That he [Death] does not cut down in battle
As fire dos in tunder;* 52
Just as fire does to tinder;
Þer nis no letting at lite* 52
There is no delay at all [= even a little]
Þat he no tittes* til him tite* 52
Before Death binds [us] tightly to himself;
Þat he haþ sammned* in site* 52
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 56
He neither stints nor stokes [= encourages]
Bot ay prickes & prokes* 56
But ever pricks and pokes
Til he vnclustri* al þe lokes 56
Till he un-cloisters [= opens] all the locks
Þat liif ligges vnder. 60
That life lies under. [= protect life]
When y tent* til him take 60
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?*
Ywis, it were wonder. 64

¶ Deþ þat deries* ous ȝete
& makes mani wonges* wete,
Þer nis no liif þat he wil letē*
To lache* when him list. 68
When he is lopen* out of les*
No pray noman* after pes;
For non giftes þat ges*
Mai no man til him trist. 72
Our gode frendes has he fot*
& put þe pouer to þe pot
& ouer him yknett his knott,
Vnder his clay kist.* 76
Derne deþ, opon þe ſong
Wiþ þe to striue it is strong;
Y wold be wreken* of mi wrong,
3if y way wist. 80

¶ When þou has gaderd & yglened
Long ly* opon* & lened*
Sparely þi gode spened
& lop for to letē.* 84
Þe war leuer* swelt vtnder sword
Þan parti of þi peni hord;
Þou wringest mani wrang word
Wiþ wanges* ful wete;
& dē dinges o di* dore
Þat nedes schal be þi neiþebore
& fett* þe to ten fore*
Foule vnder fete. 92
For al þe craft þat þou can
& al þe wele þatow wan
Þe mock* & þe mad man
No schul þai neuer mete. 96

Or expect any joy in this world?
Certainly it would be astonishing. 64

Death that troubles us yet [= constantly]
And makes many cheeks wet,
There is no life that he will refrain
From seizing when he wishes. 68
When he has leapt out of the lee [= shelter]
No prey taken [is] left in peace;
For no gifts that jess [= bind, restrict]
May any man trust him. 72
Our good friends has he fought
And put the poor [man] in the pothole
And around him has tied the knot
Under his chest of clay. 76
Dark Death, [who falls] upon the young,
With thee to strive it is hard;
I would be avenged of my wrong,
If I knew how. 80

When thou hast gathered and gleaned,
Long lied about it and lent [the profit],
Spent thy money sparely,
Loath to let go [of it], 84
Thou wouldst rather die by the sword
Than part with a penny of thy hoard;
Thou wringest many a false word
With thy cheeks all wet. 88
But [then] Death knocks on thy door,
He who must needs be thy neighbour,
And summons thee to go before [him]
Like a fowl under [his] feet. 92
For all the skill that thou knowest,
And all the wealth that thou hast won,
Muck [= riches] and the fool
Shall never meet [= stay together]. 96
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.
There is none so strong of these three
That injures me more than myself;
Busier may none be
To bring us into bondage.

Man, complain however thou will,
Truly canst thou believe in this:
That thou never knowest, I guess,
Wherever thou wander in the world,
Nor whatever way thou goest,
These four are watching thy every step.
Now that I have found thy foes,
Find thou friends for thyself!