

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

Modern English version and notes by Leo CARRUTHERS
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Manuscript and genre

This poem is found in the Auchinleck Manuscript, folios 303rb-303vb, in double columns. It belongs to the genre of philosophical reflections and religious warnings about the dangers of the World, the Devil and the Flesh, to which is added a fourth enemy, Death, here personified in a way recalling the implacable character in *Everyman*.¹ But a fifth may be added, which is Mankind himself, said in the final verse to be his own worst enemy, with an underlying suggestion of the danger he poses to his neighbours.

Structure and metrical system

The poem is divided into seven stanzas of sixteen lines each, making a total of 112 lines. It is written in tail-rhyme, a style popular in 14th-century English romances, e.g. *Sir Launfal*.² In the present case the stanza is divided into four groups of four lines, with a complex rhyming scheme, thus: aaab, cccb, dddb, eeeb. In other words, each rhyming triplet is followed by a fourth line (b), and all four of those fourth lines rhyme with each other. The last word of lines 4-8-12-16 thus contains the ‘tail-rhyme’. For example, the first stanza of *The Four Foes of Mankind* rhymes as follows:

seys, days, ways, wiȝtes	(aaab).
agas, tas, fas, fiȝtes	(cccb).
fende, frende, hende, hiȝtes	(dddb).
pra, fa, swa, diȝtes	(eeeb).

¹ See Leo CARRUTHERS, *Reading Everyman*, Paris: Atlande, 2008. This is an analysis and commentary on the dramatic treatise and morality play, *Everyman*, an English translation c. 1500 of the slightly older Dutch play, *Elkerlijck*.

² *Sir Launfal* is written in rhyming couplets (aab, ccb, ddb, eeb), not triplets, followed by the tail rhyme in the third line, not the fourth as here; but the principle is the same. See Leo CARRUTHERS, *Reading the Middle English Breton Lays and Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale*, Paris: Atlande, 2013. The three Breton lays in the Auchinleck manuscript are *Sir Orfeo*, *Lay le Freine*, and *Sir Degaré*, but they do not make use of tail-rhyme, preferring octosyllabic rhyming couplets. They have been translated into French elsewhere.

Language and dialect

The poem contains a high number of ‘difficult’ or rare words, frequently of Old Norse origin. This is a sure sign of a Northern dialect, testifying to the strong Scandinavian presence in the North-East of England due to the Danish settlements of the 9th-11th centuries. The Northern dialect is also visible in some of the spellings of Old English words, such as *fā* for modern ‘foe’ (see lines 7, 14, 111).

In some respects the Northern dialects were grammatically more ‘advanced’ than those of the South, i.e. exhibiting signs of change moving in the direction of Modern English. An example may be found in the infinitive of the verbs, often given here without the *-n* inflexion, e.g. 67-68 *he will lete to lache when him list*.

The phrasing can be difficult to understand in places, not necessarily because the individual elements are unusual, but because of a certain idiosyncrasy in poetic syntax, often due to ellipsis, as in the first line where a missing verb is understood. An attempt has been made to iron out this problem in the modern English translation, whose essential purpose is to make the meaning clear. This has been done with as much respect as possible for the vocabulary and syntax; but in many places a new word is required (and normally placed in square brackets), either to fill a gap in the original, or to clarify the sense of the preceding word.

Any translation is necessarily an interpretation of the original and the following notes must be taken as being complementary to the translation. Where an unfamiliar word in the poem is not given in the notes, it is hoped that the reader will find the Modern English translation self-explanatory.³

NOTES (by verse number)

Abbreviations: OE (Old English), OF (Old French), OFris (Old Frisian), ON (Old Norse), ME (Middle English), sg (singular), WS (West Saxon).

1 siker soþe. There should normally be no problem with either *siker* (‘sure, secure’) or *soþe* (‘truth’), but the absence of a verb calls for an insertion to make the meaning clear, i.e. ‘The sure/certain truth [belongs to] the one who says...’

2 diol. Noun, from OF *doel*, *duel*, grief, mourning. See also **16 diolely**, grievously.

3 wil. Adjective, short form of OE *wilde*, wild, lost, bewildered (cf. *wilderness* = trackless waste where one is easily lost).

³ There is also a Modern French translation by Leo CARRUTHERS, prepared in conjunction with the English translation for the CEMA website, Paris-Sorbonne.

4 wiȝtes. Noun, plural, OE *wiht*, person, creature, wight. **50 wiȝt** is sg.

5 agas. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, from ME *a-gāsen*, to terrify, bewilder; origin uncertain, perhaps from ON (unrecorded), perhaps related to OE *a-gāst*, breathless, aghast, from OE *gāst*, breath, soul, spirit, life.

6 tenes. Noun plural, from OE *teona*, vexation, injury.

6 tas. Verb, ME *tase(n)*, *tæse(n)*, from OE *tasān*, *tæsan*, to tease, annoy.

7 fonding, 99 fondinges. Noun, ‘temptation’, from ME verb *fāndien*, OE *fāndian*, to tempt.

7, 111 fas, plural (see **14 fa**, ‘foe’).

11 heuen. Verb, infinitive (in this case preserving the inflexional *-n* which is often lost in Northern infinitives), cf. Modern English to heave, lift, raise.

12 hiȝtes. Noun, plural, from OE *hyht*, joy (also found as *huht* in South-Western ME, from the WS dialect of OE).

13, 101 þra. Adjective, from ON *þrūr*, bold, strong. One of many Northern words in the poem, showing a marked Danish influence.

14 fā. Noun, from OE *fah/fag*, foe. The spelling *fā*, preserving that of the OE vowel, is Northern (Southern had moved to *fō* by the 14th century).

15 derieþ, 65 deries. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, ME *derie(n)*, OE *derian*, to hurt, injure.

16 diȝtes. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, ME *diȝte(n)*, OE *dihtan*, to treat, set in order, put in place.

17 y wat. Pronoun + verb, 1 sg present indicative, ‘I wot/know’, from OE preterite-present verb *witan*, to know. See also 107.

18 fairhat. Abstract noun, literally ‘fairhood’, hence beauty, from OE *fæger* (adjective, ‘fair’) + OE suffix *-hād*, later *-hood*, denoting state or condition. The spelling of the suffix, *-hat*, is Northern.

19 gat. Noun, from ON *gat*, way, road, street, related to OE verb *gān*, to go. The modern standard word ‘gate’ comes from the ON, but meaning ‘barrier’, not ‘way’; the ON meaning, way or street, is preserved in Yorkshire dialect. See also 107.

21 kirt. Adjective, from OE verb *cyrtan*, to shorten; a Northern word, as the *k* indicates, perhaps from ON (unrecorded). Cf. modern ‘curt’ (terse, short in temper or speech), but this is from Latin *curtus* and not recorded before the 18th century.

22 min. Noun, Northern, from ON *minnr* (cognate with OFris *min*), ‘less’ as opposed to ‘more’.

23 sites. Noun, plural, from ON *sýti*, sorrow, pain.

27 louȝ. Verb, strong, 3 sg preterite, Northern spelling of ME *lāh*, laughed, from OE strong verb *hlæhhan*, to laugh, OE preterite *hlōh*.

28 lites. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, ME *lute(n)*, from OE *lūtan*, to stoop, bow down.

30 lent lan. ‘A Lenten (meagre) reward’. Lenten is of the season of Lent, associated with penance and fasting, which precedes Easter. *Lan*, from OE *lēan*, reward.

31 wan. ME from OE *wan*, store, quantity, worldly goods.

32 wites. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, ME *wīte(n)*, from OE *wītan*, to fly away, depart (not to be confused with OE *witan*, to know, as at 17).

36 plawe. Noun, variant of ‘play’, ME *pleȝe*, *pleye*, from OE *plegan*, *plegian*, to play, exercise, amuse oneself.

37 heþen. Adverb, Northern ME, from ON *heðan*, ‘hence, away’.

38 fere. Adjective, ME *fere*, able, healthy, from OE *ge-fere*, able, in health.

39 swere. Adjective, ME ‘heavy, sore’, from OE *swār, swære*, sore.

40 snelle. Adjective, ME ‘quick, active’, from OE *snell*, keen, fresh, brisk etc.

42 frouȝ. Adjective, ME *froh*, from OE *frōh*, false, capricious.

43 tirueþ. Verb 3 sg present indicative. ME *tirȝe(n), terȝe(n)*, from OE *terġan, tyġan*, to provoke.

43 touȝ. Adjective, from OE *tōh*, tough, tenacious, sticky; here used as adverb, ‘hard, badly’.

45 broyden in a brayd. Verb, past participle + noun of same root, ‘braided, twisted in a knot’. OE noun *braid, bræġd*, twist, hence the verbal form.

46 lickham. Noun, ‘body’, from OE *lichama*, body, corpse.

47 grayd. Verb, past participle, ME *graid, graiden*, earlier *greiþ, greiþen*, from ON *greiðr*, to prepare.

48 lame lawe. Two nouns in apposition, ‘earthen mound’. ME *lame* = modern loam, clay, earth, from OE *lām*. ME *lawe* = mound, tomb, barrow, from OE *hlāw, hlæw*.

49 derne. Adjective, ‘dark, obscure’, from OE *derne, dierne*, hidden, secret, obscure, evil.

49 ydiȝt. Verbal adjective, past participle, ‘prepared, set in order’, from ME *dihte(n)*, OE *dihtan*, with *y-* prefix in past participle from OE *ġe-* (perfective prefix).

50 wiȝt. See 4 above.

52 tunder. ME *tunder* from ON *tundr*, cognate with OE *tynder*, tinder. While the OE and ON words are similar, the modern English word ‘tinder’ plainly comes from the OE *tynder*, so the retention of the ON form is typical of this poem’s Northern dialect.

53 at lite. ‘At little, even a little, the slightest’. From OE *lyte*, little.

54 tittes. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, from ME *titte(n)*, to pull.

54 tite. Adverb, from ME *tid, tit*, from ON *tiðr*, tight.

55 sammned in site. ‘Joined together in sorrow’. Verb, past participle, ME *sammne(n)*, OE *sammian*, to join together; Northern ME *site* from ON *sýti*, sorrow, pain.

58 prokes. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, from ME *proke(n)*, *prokie(n)*, to poke, stimulate; origin uncertain, perhaps from ON (unrecorded), cf. Low German *proken*, to stimulate.

59 vnclustri. Verb, subjunctive, from ME *vnclustre(n)* (rare), to uncloister, unlock, based on OF noun *clostre, cloistre*, from Latin noun *claustrum, clostrum*, a lock, bar on door.

61 tent. Verb, 1 sg present indicative, ME *tente(n)*, to try, attempt, from OF *tenter*.

63 wake. Verb, infinitive, ME *wake(n)*, from OE *wacian*, to watch, expect, wake.

65 deries, 15 deriep. See 15 above.

66 wonges, 88 wanges. Noun, plural, from OE *wange, wonge*, cheek.

68 lache. Verbe, infinitive, ME *lacche(n)*, OE *ġe-læccan*, to catch, seize.

69 lopen. Verb (strong), past participle, ME *leape(n)*, from OE *hlēapan*, to leap, run.

69 les. Noun, plural, from OE *hlēo, hlēow*, protection, shelter, lee.

70 noman. Verb, past participle, ME *nimen*, OE *niman*, to take, seize, surviving today only in the adjective *numb*. *Numen* is the OE past participle; it is typical of ME to substitute *o* for *u* in proximity to *n/m* in order to avoid the danger of confusion resulting from too many minims, which can make *u* and *n* hard to distinguish (see 104 *ou[t]* for a misreading of *ou-* for *on*).

71 ges. Noun, from OF *ges*, jess, strap for a hawk’s legs, used in falconry. The noun seems to be used here as a verb, which the context requires, with the sense of ‘to bind, restrict’. This is an unusual transfer of noun to verb in ME; jess is normally a noun, and usually plural (a falcon’s jesses), so this is an early example of a phenomenon typical of later English, that of

making a noun into a verb. The phrasing of lines 69-72 is complex, the meaning somewhat obscure, but the metaphor is that of Death as a bird of prey, a falcon in the field waiting to pounce, which cannot be jessed (bound) or trusted and which remains impervious to titbits (71 gifts) offered by the huntsman as a distraction.

73 fot. Verb (strong), past participle, from ME *fehhte(n)*, *fihte(n)*, OE *fēohtan*, to fight. Various other ME spellings of the past participle include *fauht*, *fauzt*, *faut*, *faht*, all precursors of the modern preterite ‘fought’.

76 kist. Noun, sg, from ON *kist*, cognate with OE *ċest*, *ċeast*, chest; the velar *k* is typically Scandinavian, and Northern ME, in comparison with the West Saxon palatal *ch-* of modern ‘chest’.

79 wreken. Verb, past participle, from ME *wreke(n)*, OE *wrecan*, to avenge.

82 ly opon. The manuscript reading is *lyopen*, a word unknown elsewhere, not making any sense and probably based on a faulty transcription. A number of different interpretations have been suggested. The grammatical context calls for a fourth past participle after *has*, to match *gaderd*, *yglened* and *lened*. If the *p* of *lyopen* were to be taken as a mistake for *w*, then *lyowen* might, at a stretch, be taken as the past participle of OE *léon*, ‘to lend, give, grant’, thus making doublets of *lyowen* and *lened* (‘given and lent’). Smithers (1992), supported by McIntosh (1993), emends to *ly opon* in two words, taking *ly* as a short form of *lyen* (OE *licgan*), ‘to lie, lay, lain’, though there is also perhaps a deliberate pun on *léoʒen* (OE *léogan*), ‘to tell lies’; *open/opon* would then be the preposition *upon*, meaning ‘about’. Either way, the grammatical structure remains unsatisfactory, since *ly* is unconvincing as a past participle, even an abbreviated one. As to the meaning of the verse, the implication seems to be that the miser (a) lies down (rests) upon the goods he has gathered and gleaned, perhaps through usury, and (b) he lies about what he owns and lends it at interest. The sense of ‘telling lies’ may well be confirmed by 87-88, where the miser or usurer is a false hypocrite who cuts a sorry figure, weeping insincerely while explaining that he cannot part with a penny.

84 lete. Verb, infinitive, from OE *lettan*, to let, let go, relinquish.

85 leuer. Adverb, from OE *lief*, *liefer*, preferable, more pleasing. Note the impersonal construction of *Be war leuer*, literally ‘It would be preferable to thee’.

85 swelt. Verb, infinitive, from ME *swelte(n)*, OE *sweltan*, to die, perish.

88 wanges (see **66 wonges**).

89 di = thy, reflecting local pronunciation, and perhaps the influence of heavy alliteration on *d* in this line. But OE *th-* is notoriously unstable in ME: compare **107 þatow = that thou**, **112 tow = thou**.

91 fett. Verb, infinitive, from ME *fete(n)*, *fette(n)*, OE *fettan*, to fetch, summon.

91 to ten. Verb, infinitive, from OE *téon*, to go, mount.

91 fore. Adverb, from OE *fōr*, fore, before, forth, forwards. The meaning is that Death knocks on the door and calls the miser to leave the hoard that he has been watching so carefully, to go before him, like a fowl (game bird) under foot, startled from its cover in the long grass; the image of Death as a hunter prolongs the metaphor established in the previous stanza, 69-72, where Death is a bird of prey. Since the sense is clear enough, there can be no reason to emend *fore* to *flore*, despite Sisam's suggestion which Smithers retains (Smithers 1952, revision of Carleton Brown).

95 mock = muck. Muck is filth, here taken as a synonym for wealth, in the sense of filthy lucre. Lines 95-96 sound proverbial, rather like the modern saying 'a fool and his money are easily parted'; there may also be an echo of Proverbs 21:20, 'There is a treasure ... in the dwelling of the just: and the foolish man shall spend it' (Rheims-Douay).

99 fondinges (see **7 fending**).

101 þra (see 13).

102 merres. Verb, 3 sg present indicative, ME *merre(n)* from OE *merran*, *myrran*, to injure.

104 out bendes = on, into bonds, bondage. The sense clearly requires 'into' rather than 'out of'. Smithers explains (1952, revision of Carleton Brown) that the suprascript *t* is squeezed in between the *u* and the *b* of the following word, i.e. the original word was *on*, but the scribe misread it as *ou*, presumed it to be a mistake for *out*, and added the *t* above. But 'out' makes

no sense in the context. Removal of the intrusive *t* restores the reading *on*, and thus the meaning ‘in, into’.

105 mene. Verb, imperative sg, ME *mene(n)* from OE *mænan*, to complain, moan.

105 mis. Adverb, from ON *mis*, badly, wrongly, amiss; in the context, ‘complain as much or as badly as you want’.

107 No wat gat þatow gas. For *wat*, see 17. For *gat*, see 19. For *þatow*, see 89, 112. For *gas*, see also 19. Here, *gas* is a verb, 2 sg present indicative, but note loss of inflectional *-st* in expected Northern ME *gast*, *gaist*, Southern ME *goest*.

109 pas. Noun, sg, from OF *pas*, pace, footstep.

111 fas. Noun, plural (see 14 **fa**).

112 tow = thou (see 107 **þatow = that thou**).

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