Medieval Nonsense Verse: Contributions to the Literary Genre

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Introduction

Fragments of nonsense verse arise throughout the medieval canon; their steady appearance and consistent formal qualities denote a well-developed literary tradition that has since largely escaped modern critical attention. The popular entertainment nature of nonsense, coupled with its decidedly vocalized tendencies, resulted in limited transcription in the Middle Ages, when printing was costly and literacy relatively elite. The isolated nonsense poems that pepper medieval manuscripts—which I refer to as “standalone” nonsense in this thesis—are thus left out of context in their present-day forms. Fortunately, nonsense verse and references to the tradition also emerge in medieval drama, positioned within narratives and performance situations, revealing some of nonsense’s significations in medieval culture. This study will closely examine these instances of dramatic nonsense in order to characterize the medieval nonsense genre; this informed investigation is an important effort of this study. Using these appearances of nonsense in medieval performance as a contextualizing lens, I will elucidate the relationship of medieval nonsense to the Victorian tradition, particularly through a performance-derived spirit of play and through conserved folkloric motifs extant in the forms.

Current critical involvement with literary nonsense focuses overwhelmingly on the nonsense of the Victorian era, dominated by the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Often treated as an independent literary phenomenon, this children’s literature actually participates in a much broader literary tradition that emerges from folkloric and medieval nonsense. Overlooking the literary traditions embedded in modern nonsense oversimplifies the genre and inappropriately diminishes the continuing literary relevance of medieval nonsense. This thesis will establish a clear literary connection between medieval and Victorian nonsense, grounded in textual analysis. I have chosen to work with the stories and poems of Lewis Carroll as representative of the Victorian era due to his almost unparalleled contribution to the genre and his continued influence on many modern manifestations of nonsense. Though it is clear that Lewis Carroll had an academic interest in Old and Middle English literature (he repeatedly imitated these languages in his writings), I pursue the deeper thematic and literary connections between medieval and Carrollian nonsense in this study; the shared performance contexts and motifs of these traditions reveal a true genre-based connection.

Drawing from ample critical work on the definition of nonsense, Chapter One presents the general meaninglessness of nonsense as its defining feature, while also determining what nonsense is not—these early delineations aid in the identification and discussion of nonsense throughout this thesis. In Chapter Two, I position this study in relation to the major scholars of nonsense regarding the literary-historical origins of the English tradition; I argue medieval, literary origins for Victorian nonsense. Chapter Three investigates the nonsense that appears throughout medieval drama in order to better contextualize the nonsense of the Middle Ages. For this reason, the chapter necessarily takes a survey form to draw general conclusions about the specific significations of medieval nonsense. I then apply these observations to both standalone medieval nonsense and Carrollian nonsense in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four examines the performance aspects of nonsense, focusing on the vocalization of the verse and the dual ethos of the nonsense speaker; Chapter Five discusses the conflation of animals and madness in nonsense, and how the domestic negotiates these destabilizations of human consciousness. Thus, based on features elucidated from the study of medieval drama, I forge a distinctly literary connection between medieval and Victorian nonsense.

It is my foremost hope that this thesis be enjoyable, otherwise it would completely miss the point, if there is to be one at all.
Acknowledgements

It’s difficult to put the deepest gratitude into exact words—

I’ve been lucky enough to have an exceptional advisor during this process, and so my foremost thanks go to Matthew Sergi. His endless enthusiasm for medieval nonsense has been enormously encouraging (a gaude) over the past academic year, and I really could not imagine this thesis without him. So: thank you, Matt, for your frank and thoughtful advice that has been so instrumental to me, as well as for challenging me to be confident in my convictions. You have my utmost gratitude and admiration.

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This research was supported by a Jerome A. Schiff Fellowship, and I can say now in retrospect that this funding was critical to my academic pursuit. By allowing me to redirect my waitressing energies towards medieval nonsense verse, I’ve been allowed to be indulgent in my education, and I couldn’t be more thankful.

Thank you to my family, who are the underlying reasons for everything good that I try to do. Thank you to the wonderful friends that I have at Wellesley, who called me “an exquisite weirdo” and “a twelve-year-old boy” and then proceeded to proofread my nonsensical drafts and humor me on the subject of fantasy world creation. Thank you to so many of my Wellesley professors who have made me feel valued and well-caffeinated—I count you among my closest friends.

I’m impressed by my fortune every day. Once again, thank you.
Chapter One:  
Towards a Definition of Nonsense

A consideration of the nonsense tradition requires a careful understanding of the word “nonsense” itself. As a term, nonsense encompasses catch-all colloquialisms (“You’re talking nonsense!”) and traverses academic fields such as literature, folklore, and philosophy; its ubiquity endows it with a range of subjective meanings, complicating a strict definition. As such, I will not construct an impermeable or independent definition of nonsense. Instead, I will draw on my predecessors to establish parameters around the term as it pertains to my study, particularly where it involves the relatively new discussion of medieval nonsense verse.

At its most basic, nonsense necessarily involves the negation of “sense,” and so a definition of nonsense should begin with the consideration of this opposition. ¹ This places nonsense inherently in tension with the human concepts of common-sense and logic—nonsense always subverts these world-ordering social assumptions. As a human logical construct, language becomes a vehicle of common-sense, and so the ability of literary nonsense to betray language-based logic forms the subversive basis of literary nonsense. Nonsense is a manifestation of the ability of the human mind to circumvent logic, a mechanism that challenges sense itself by drawing the logic of the real world into tension with imagined impossibilities. The existence of the nonsense realm, then, depends entirely on its defiance of reality—the reality of the nonsense observer. Nonsense differs from genres like fantasy and science fiction in this way, where the mechanisms of magic, science/technology, or discrete sub-universes allow nonsensical impossibilities to escape the laws of this world instead of defying them (and this logical defiance is constitutive of nonsense). Nonsense thus powerfully challenges the supremacy of human reason based not on the absence, but the eschewing (which necessitates a relationship), of sense

¹ For a more complex analysis of language-based human sense-making activities and a socio-linguistic definition of nonsense, see: Susan Stewart, Nonsense: aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
and meaningfulness. This chapter will form a definition of nonsense through an exploration of these two nonsense qualities. The first section will discuss the absence of initial sense in the nonsenses of gibberish and absurdity, while the second section of this chapter will explore the theoretical absence of literary-thematic meaning in nonsense. Finally, I will examine language-based literary nonsense techniques (as defined by Wim Tigges) in order to place common medieval nonsense forms within already-established (Victorian-based) critical frameworks.

Gibberish and Absurdity

The first stanza of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” actually appeared sixteen years before Through the Looking Glass in a small, family-printed periodical called Mischmasch. Carroll originally titled the lines, “A Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry,” as the original version of the stanza deliberately mimics the Germanic sounds and medieval spellings of early English verse:

Twas bryllyg, and ye slythy toves
Did gyre and gymble in ye wabe:
All mimsy were ye borogoves;
And ye mome raths outgrabe.

A typical example of linguistic gibberish, the stanza consists almost entirely of syntactically suggestive neologisms, achieving the tension between sense and nonsense which forms the subversive basis of nonsense: the reader, tempted by the familiar syntax, attempts to formulate logical sense from the lines but ultimately must admit its absence. Nonsense may also be found in more comprehensible forms. For example, consider the well-known nursery rhyme “Hey Diddle Diddle:"

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4 Lewis Carroll, The Rectory Umbrellas and Mischmasch (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), originally printed in 1855. It may be of interest that the term ‘mischmasch’ itself appears in association with nonsense verse in the medieval morality play Mankind, in a scene highly representative of the wider medieval nonsense tradition—see page 25; I explore the nonsensical moments of Mankind extensively in Chapter Three.
5 It is remarkable, though, that these ‘gibberish’ lines are entirely translatable into imaginable scene based on glosses provided by Humpty-Dumpy and Carroll himself.
Hey diddle diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed to see such a sport
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

This type of nonsense creates disturbances in sense-making neither through neologism nor gibberish, and yet it intrinsically seems to achieve the same tension between sense and nonsense which constitutes the genre. In the sequence, animals perform human tasks with apparently no logical relation to each other and no overarching purpose to the narrative. Thus, the reader is tempted by the visualization of the scene, but still must ultimately deny its collective meaningfulness. This is a well-established property of nonsense.

In her 1952 book *The Field of Nonsense*, Elizabeth Sewell recognizes these “two forms” of nonsense. She identifies the first form as “a collection of words which in their internal composition of letters and syllables or in their selection and sequence do not conform to the conventional patterns of language to which the particular mind is accustomed;” such is the gibberish-nonsense of “Jabberwocky.” However, nonsense may also be found in the ridiculousness of “Hey Diddle Diddle,” a “collection of events or a verbal description of such a collection, where the order and relationships differ from those held to be normal.” The nonsensicality of gibberish at first seems more innately nonsensical than the ridiculousness of “Hey Diddle Diddle.” Of course cats cannot play fiddles, the moon is too high to jump over, and kitchenware romances are unfeasible; it is the ability to visualize the scene that tempts the human mind towards sense-making much more strongly, and denies it much more subtly, than gibberish. This type of nonsense, which I will henceforth refer to as the nonsense of the absurd, must fulfill another requirement to be truly nonsensical; it becomes true nonsense due to its conclusive meaninglessness. This meaninglessness is the most important element of all nonsense, both

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[Nonsense’s] essence...is that it maintains a perfect tension between meaning and absence of meaning...In suggesting an initial meaning, the most successful nonsense texts set up a playful framework of themes and motifs which appeal to the reader’s imagination, to his sense of language, as well as to his knowledge and appreciation of literary conventions of form and theme, plot and character.7

Such teasing constructions bear out even in the vocabulary of “Jabberwocky,” where one may admit (almost in spite of herself) that she had always known that “slithy” means both “slimy” and “lithe,” or something like it, after all.8 Such is the nonsense-based tension of Jabberwocky’s portmanteau words; meaning is suggested, though technically absent.

The medieval canon offers little in the vein of “Jabberwocky,” sometimes inserting occasional nonsense words into verse to facilitate rhyme or meter, but more often taking up the nonsense of the absurd, the nonsensical perversion of plot or character.9 As such, this study focuses largely on the meaninglessness of verse that nonetheless obeys syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. Such nonsense produces completely perceivable images, but these images inevitably amount to inconsequentiality. Consider this stanza from a medieval nonsense ballad:10

A cowe had stolyn a calfe away
   And put her in a sake;
   Forsoth, I sel no puddynges today;
   ‘Mysters, what doo youe lake?’ (15-18)11

Even in its Middle English, the verse is interpretable enough, and yet certainly occupies the realm of nonsense as much as this stanza from Lewis Carroll’s *The Mad Gardener’s Song*:

He thought he saw an Elephant,

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8 Due to the absence of neutral pronouns in English, I have chosen to use the feminine construction as a default pronoun throughout this study—especially in reference to theoretical medieval nonsense speakers. Sometimes, the first-person nonsense speaker’s gender is explicitly identified in the poem; in these cases, of course, I defer to the text.
9 A notable exception—that-proves-the-rule, macaronic verse, will be discussed shortly.
10 All standalone nonsense poems will be individually cited according to their source, but they are also included in their entirety in the appendix at the end of this thesis. This appendix is organized in order of appearance and is meant for the convenience and curiosity of the reader.
That practiced on a fife:
He looked again, and found it was
A letter from his wife.
“At length I realize,” he said,
“The bitterness of Life!” (1-6)\textsuperscript{12}

Both disobey logic by refusing to consist of collective coherent meaning. Both stanzas present three individual instances of nonsense: the personification of an animal, a directly preceding but logically unrelated statement, and a concluding direct quotation, apparently unprompted. The silly impossibility of the events (a cow stealing; an elephant playing the fife) combined with their lack of connectedness (from calf-stealing to pudding-selling; from the elephant to the letter) create nonsense through resistance to logical reasoning. Sewell describes this flavor of disorder: “It is the sequence of references which is disordered by Nonsense, if the familiar sequence of events in everyday life is to be taken as the standard of order and sense.”\textsuperscript{13} Though these events may be presented matter-of-factly, it is impossible to find any logical relationships within them, according to common sense. Thus, nonsense becomes subject to logical reasoning; it necessarily involves the logical processing (albeit failed) of the nonsense audience. This property, often characterized as playful, involves “the manipulation of the conditions and contexts of messages and not simply a manipulation of the message itself” (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{14} So, discrete, fantastical images become truly nonsensical by their inability to collectively satisfy any broader logical conclusion-making.

\textit{Literary Meaninglessness}

Nonsense also involves another sort of meaninglessness that requires further qualification. While the failure of logical reasoning results in narrative meaninglessness, the thematic implications of nonsense must also fulfill literary meaninglessness, an absence of

ultimate purpose. Discussing the meaning of meaninglessness is a challenge found throughout nonsense criticism; assigning any purpose (even purposeful meaninglessness) to nonsense contradicts its very definition. Tigges offers a starting point for this exploration: “It is the prime characteristic of nonsense not to make a ‘point’ or draw a moral, not to satirize, to ridicule or to parody, and not even primarily to entertain.”¹⁵ Nonsense can never moralize or satirize; such purpose negates its nonsensicality. For this same reason, didactic verse, however playful, cannot fall under the classification of nonsense.

This restriction also excludes medieval macaronic verse. Stewart comments on this combining of languages, categorizing it as a true nonsense technique: “The medley of languages and culture seen in the macaronic is an outgrowth of ‘learning,’ of confrontation with the disjunctions and convergences, the limitations, of social reality.”¹⁶ However, in medieval dramatic nonsense, I have found that macaronic verse (mainly Latin and French) consistently acts satirically, criticizing the pompous fashion of the courts or the overeducated bombast of clerics through mis-speech and mockery. This nonsense mocks a failed attempt at sense-making; therefore, in context, it has little to do with true nonsense, which it implicitly denigrates. As such, except in cases where such language bears on surrounding examples of true nonsense, satirical medieval macaronic has been excluded from this study. Despite this constriction, there remain examples of nonsense in medieval drama that undoubtedly use language as what Stewart calls a “confrontation…of social reality.” This type of confrontation creates sense-nonsense tension: the audience’s inability to understand foreign language (causing it to sound like gibberish) is in tension with the acknowledgement of meaning for its speaker, independent of the audience’s comprehension. For example, the earnest attempts of the Chester Shepherds to recall an angel’s “Gloria in excelsis deo” produce macaronics that powerfully but also

convey the “disjunctions and convergences” between realities, the human and the divine; this construction thus places these macaronics within the nonsense tradition.

The parody and entertainment potentialities of nonsense verse present a much more ambiguous picture than Tigges suggests. In his early work *The Poetry of Nonsense*, Emile Cammaerts refers to parody as “in the situation of cousins who can claim to belong at the same time to the family of nonsense and to the family of witticism.”\(^{17}\) He continues to qualify his claim, discussing the parodic ballad refrain by the Victorian poet C.S. Calverly: “Though he laughed at his own production, Calverley was so much infected by the spirit of his original that we are inclined to enjoy his ‘Ballad’ more as an outburst of nonsense than as a criticism.”\(^{18}\) Cammaerts makes the observation that despite intended critique, parody may lean toward nonsense in spite of itself. In context, this becomes apparent through the distancing of parodic reference. Particularly in the nonsense of fiends in morality plays, pointed insults sometimes degenerate into general ribaldry, and eventually into nonsense verse. This perceivable shift in intent creates an isolated moment in the play largely uninvolved with the overall plot, character interactions, or themes—the nonsense stands alone. There is a spectrum of significations from parodic to pure nonsense, and so instances of parodic nonsense should be considered individually to examine the intent of their play.

Thus, I disagree with Tigges’ statement that “it is the prime characteristic of nonsense…not even primarily to entertain.”\(^ {19}\) As I will explore thoroughly in my chapter on medieval dramatic nonsense, medieval nonsense—and nonsense in general—clearly and primarily serves to entertain. Tigges and his colleagues safeguard the meaningfulness of meaninglessness, but it should be emphasized that the element of comedy was absolutely

essential to medieval nonsense verse; in performance, it appears only with comic characters and among jokes, buffoonery, and play.\textsuperscript{20} Contrast this with the opinions of the important nonsense critics: Stewart finishes her book with the strange comment that nonsense “refuses the uplifting note by which the world assumes a happy ending;” Sewell declares that “laughter is incidental to nonsense but not essential to it;” Tigges insists on the tension of nonsense, saying, “nonsense is an intellectual divertissement rather than an easily accessible form of entertainment”—all rather stark estimations for the children’s literature to which they refer.\textsuperscript{21} My observations of medieval nonsense verse in dramatic context rebut these dismissals of the innate humor of nonsense. Of course, entertainment need not necessarily be humorous, but any casual reader of nonsense will recognize its natural lightheartedness. So why, then, do these nonsense critics insist on the sinister capabilities of nonsense? Stewart answers this just before her rejection of nonsense’s “happy ending:”

In nonsense, purpose becomes a continual and pleasurable movement away from itself, a reflexive gesture that spirals away from any point of privileged signification or direction. Both ‘author’ and ‘audience’ are continually fractured and rearranged. While all language assumes a possible society, while all language is utopian, all nonsense divides and rearranges any idea of society as coherent and integral. Nonsense threatens the disintegration of an infinite ‘making conscious,’ an infinite movement of undercutting the world all at once and over and over again.\textsuperscript{22}

If language is the vehicle of logic, the common-sense ordering of society, nonsense, as the perversion of language, destabilizes the very core of society through its purposelessness. Perhaps Stewart, Sewell, Tigges, and so many others recognize, but misinterpret, the subversive implications of nonsense verse. In fact, the lightheartedness of nonsense may be its most important subversive property. It insists on dealing with the serious lightly and the light seriously. Certainly this destabilizes logic, but beyond that, it rejects the importance of logic at

\textsuperscript{20} In fact, nonsense seems to be treated as generally lowbrow humor, possibly related to its folkloric origins.
\textsuperscript{22} Op. cit., Stewart, 209.
all and hence negates its own potential for serious critique. Not sinister, but mischievous, amused at itself, nonsense celebrates through insistent carelessness—a total rejection, albeit temporary, of worldly burdens. Emile Cammaerts comes closest to recognizing this property: “It is the wild, exuberant mood of a Christmas party or of a popular carnival in which every reveler loses his identity under his disguise and indulges in the most impossible pranks.”

Missing the entertainment and humor of nonsense misses the release that nonsense offers.

_Tigges’ Techniques of Literary Nonsense_24

So far I have attempted to explain literary nonsense through its relationships to logic, sense-subversion, and meaninglessness—all of which signal nonsense through its effects—but nonsense may also be identified through its devices. Most of the scholars referenced in this chapter offer their own categories of nonsense, but the categories put forth by Wim Tigges, effectively literary-focused modifications on those of Susan Stewart, are the most clear and useful for the purposes of this study.25 He identifies mirroring, imprecision, infinity, simultaneity, and arbitrariness; I will explain each of these in turn, including examples and indications of those techniques important to the medieval period where necessary. It is my hope that these categories provide a productive reference to the reader desiring further exposition of the mechanisms of language-based nonsense and that they contextualize medieval nonsense verse within previously-established, modern frameworks.

1. _Mirroring_, which encompasses all reversals and inversions, creates the main topsy-turvy sense of nonsense; it is a reversal of expectation. All manner of minor inversions appear in nonsense, from meowing fish to food items cooking themselves. _Animalia_, which anthropomorphizes

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24 Tigges’ own explanations of these categories can be found in _An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense_: op. cit., Tigges, 56-69.
25 Stewart has produced a technical, linguistic series of nonsense devices, particularly relevant to the sociological and philosophical implications of nonsense. Sewell offers a more literarily inclined analysis of nonsense modes, though I find Tigges’ literary techniques more comprehensive for the purposes of this study; I will refer to these techniques independently, where needed, throughout this study.
animals, falls into this category due to the inversion of human and animal behavior. This causes a destabilization of human identity, a blurring between human and animal consciousness; this property will figure heavily into this thesis. Additional motifs such as hunter-prey reversals and fool-kings also fall under this category. More broadly, the paradoxical ability of nonsense to elevate its speaker through absurdity relates to this type of subversion-through-reversal.

2. Imprecision involves play with boundaries. Unlike mirroring, imprecision does not reverse elements but mixes them. This property, at its simplest, involves tricks of signification; its most important nonsense productions are misdirection, riddles, deficiencies in meaning, and any presentation of a puzzle with no answer. Included in this category is the failure of expectation (for example, the impossibility of the question, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”). Misdirection and directional ambiguity are also effective through imprecision—these features are important to the creation of a nonsense realm in medieval nonsense.

3. Seriality is Tigges’ third nonsense device; it interacts with the concept of infinity. This can include counting, listing, nesting, stringing, circularity, or infinite causality. To truly form nonsense, they must implicate infinity to the extent that they become meaningless; their excess reaches a saturation point like the approach of infinity in mathematics. The ubiquitous medieval nonsense list, an important feature of the tradition, is thus a member of this category of nonsense.

4. Simultaneity, is defined as “the quality or fact of being simultaneous; occurrence at the same time,” or “the simultaneous representation of several views of the same object.” The device produces riddles and puns, portmanteau words (such as those that appear in Jabberwocky), neologisms, macaronics, and rhyme and alliteration; essentially, it is a critical nonsense device because it plays on tensions between relationships in nonsense. For example, the stress of meaning that results when rhyme dictates word choice constitutes language-based simultaneity.


because the rhyming word could theoretically be any word; it contains multiple potentialities. Also, and perhaps more obviously important, simultaneity deeply involves absurdity and randomness arising from the result of apparently strange combinations (“I saw a foxe sucke on a kowes ydder” (1812)).

The absence of relationships between nonsense images that ultimately disables any accumulation of meaning (discussed in the comparison of the medieval ballad and The Mad Gardener’s Song) is also an element of simultaneity.

5. Arbitrariness (as defined by Stewart), has a more general application to nonsense literature. It relies on rearrangement within clearly defined boundaries to create nonsense; typically, this applies mainly to the narrative contexts of nonsense verse, or as Tigges describes, definition of the nonsense “playing field.” Most importantly, this device includes the motif of the nonsense voyage or quest, a mechanism which presents many nonsensicalities as true by allowing them spatial distance from the real world of the audience while still remaining technically within it. Furthermore, defined systems such as the alphabet, numbers, space, and time can also effectively frame nonsense due to arbitrariness. Finally, parody can also fall into this category, if it is a nonsensical parody, because it is the manipulation of a predetermined form. In the context of medieval nonsense verse, this becomes significant in the consideration of nonsense’s relationship to the medieval ballad, as well as to the posturing of nonsense performers.

This chapter has tried to construct a useful, if cursory, definition of nonsense. Appearing as either gibberish or absurdities, nonsense arises from intentional meaninglessness and must effectively amount to purposelessness. This purposelessness, however, allows for entertainment in the context of frivolity, an excess that achieves no practical purpose. I will rely on this definition for the remainder of this study, but it is important to note that nonsense is largely intuitive and often subjective—you’ll know it when you see it.

Chapter Two: The Origins of English Nonsense

Nonsense creates a multitude of tensions; it complicates the relationships of syntax and language, meaning and interpretation, and—in the question of its origins—literature and folklore. In spite of a significant body of medieval nonsense in both drama and poetry, most criticism erroneously treats “literary nonsense” as a discrete phenomenon, developing independently of these medieval and folkloric origins. Nonsense is often considered “a product of the Victorian era,” driven by rigid Victorian sensibilities seeking respite in fantasy and nursery rhyme. Other critical theories emphasize nonsense’s universality—though deeply intertwined with human psychology (like most good literature), such suppositions sever nonsense from its clear literary tradition. Overlooking the distinctly literary historical traditions embedded in modern nonsense oversimplifies the genre and inappropriately diminishes the continual literary relevance of medieval nonsense. In fact, the medieval and folkloric nonsense tradition relates to the Victorian in a much more concrete way. As of yet, this connection has not been grounded in literary, academic analysis; this is the connection I will forge in this thesis.

The assignment of Victorian origins is a common trend in nonsense criticism, necessitating a strict definition of literature that neglects the self-conscious medieval literary tradition. Similarly, nursery rhymes are often cited as a natural source of inspiration for Victorian nonsense—while this is true in the case of Lear and Carroll, it does not accurately represent the influence of medieval nonsense on the Victorian tradition. Some scholars alternately present nonsense as universal, emerging ubiquitously and independently from human sense-making activities through confrontations with dreams and madness. Though nonsense does grapple with such universal concepts, literary nonsense is far from universal itself. At the end of this chapter, I also explore the critical positions regarding medieval and folkloric origins to adequately

contextualize the literary analytical approach I will take in this thesis.

*The Victorian Theory*

The Victorian children’s authors Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear defined modern nonsense literature. The influence and popularity of their works has extended well beyond children’s literature, informing the use of nonsense in adult fiction, poetry, and performance. Though often credited with inventing nonsense literature, they actually popularized a nonsense tradition already embedded in English literature. Unfortunately, this literary-historical tradition of nonsense is often overlooked. Critics, while acknowledging the existence of pre-Victorian nonsense, equate it with nursery rhyme and insubstantial folkloric remnants, instead refocusing on the English Victorian era as the birth of literary nonsense. Though the nineteenth century certainly marked a sharp rise in nonsense’s popularity, establishing Victorian nonsense as the apex of the English nonsense tradition ignores a substantial body of medieval nonsense, devaluing the historical richness of the genre. Conceiving Victorian nonsense as a “new” literature also generates inappropriate critical theories regarding its origins. Wim Tigges proposes that “the increasing leisure time of the growing bourgeoisie,” “social legislation and a reduction of the working day of the laboring class,” “concurrency of political stability and an inflexible social system,” “the rise and development of an industrial, capitalist economy with the concomitant consumer and welfare society,” and that “Victorian households, in particular those of the middle class, were inundated with ‘things,’” all contributed to the creation of literary nonsense.\(^{31}\) Similarly, Jean-Jacques Lercecle suggests that the rise of natural history (propelled by the discoveries of Charles Darwin) and the institutionalization of schooling contributed to an environment prone to list-making and word games that were conducive to nonsense forms.\(^{32}\) In his book *The Philosophy of Nonsense*, Lercecle insists that nonsense is pedagogic: “Nonsense is


a metalinguistic genre because it has the same goals (but not the same methods) as school education: to teach children the rules of language…and more generally the rules of conduct.”

Nonsense as pedagogy violates the definition of nonsense outlined in the previous chapter; teaching language, conduct, or any subject endows the verse with practical purpose, opposing the innate meaninglessness of nonsense. In fact, nonsense ignores education; its reader (or listener) requires very little knowledge to enjoy its frivolous entertainment. This theory exemplifies another problematic characterization of nonsense: its classification as children’s literature. Lear and Carroll intended their Victorian writings for children, but it is evident that Learic and Carrollian nonsense have the capacity to access readers of all ages. The nonsense of the Middle Ages reached gathered communities, evident in its sometime-association with sexual jokes and the varied audiences of dramas containing nonsense. Restricting the nonsense genre solely to a juvenile audience neglects the significance of its wider appeal; the obvious attraction of adults to nonsense (evident even in the droves of critical work on Victorian nonsense) reveals the universal nature of its questioning of human logic.

Such tenuous assumptions about nonsense’s audience arise from the perspective that nineteenth-century nonsense represents the first literary manifestation of the tradition; elucidating the contributions of medieval nonsense verse to the popular Victorian genre will create a much more accurate understanding of the literary tradition as a whole.

Neglecting the medieval literary tradition of nonsense also muddles critical assessments of the early existence of nonsense literature. Tigges attempts to ameliorate this tension by distinguishing between nonsense as a literary device and a literary tradition:

Considered as a literary genre, however, according to the views set out in the previous chapters, we cannot indeed trace the origins of nonsense beyond the nineteenth century…I hope I have made it sufficiently clear already that the early

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33 Ibid., 216.
34 And perhaps this belonging is due to the child’s underdeveloped orientation into the common-sense ordering of the world, industriousness, responsibility etc., and their impending social induction.
samples of nonsense quoted in anthologies or mentioned by critics…are at most nonsensical as device or mode, subservient to other aims such as satire, parody and burlesque.\textsuperscript{35}

This delineation between form and genre appears frequently in Victorian-centric estimations of nonsense literature.\textsuperscript{36} The Oxford English Dictionary defines genre as “a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose;” if critics admit the presence of nonsense in form and style before the Victorian period, then they must either challenge the literary quality or the purpose of the nonsense (often, they challenge both).\textsuperscript{37} I will address the “literariness” of medieval nonsense later on in this chapter. As for its purpose, the analyses of this thesis will show that medieval nonsense, whether in performance or standalone verse, satisfies the requirement of an autonomous nonsensicality. In fact, episodes of nonsense in medieval drama often thematically diverge from the dominant narrative, moments of entertainment valued primarily for their purposeless absurdities. This textual independence demonstrates their clear popular entertainment value and recognizes a certain thematic autonomy that denotes genre status.

\textit{Nursery rhymes}

Nursery rhymes significantly influenced the Victorian generation of nonsense. Nursery rhyme nonsense appears variously in the works of both Lear and Carroll, and its influence on both writers is of little dispute. In 1925, Emile Cammaerts remarked that the “connection between modern and old nonsense poetry is thus significantly established. It is to nursery rhyme that we owe the nonsense songs.”\textsuperscript{38} The sometime-involvement of nursery rhyme with nonsense

\textsuperscript{35} Op. cit., Tigges, 138-139.
\textsuperscript{36} “It is true in a certain sense that some of the greatest writers the world has ever seen—Aristophanes, Rabelais and Sterne—have written nonsense; but unless we are mistaken, it is in a widely different sense. The nonsense of these men was satiric—that is to say, symbolic; it was a kind of exuberant capering round a discovered truth.” G.K. Chesterton, “A defence of nonsense” in \textit{The Defendant} (Echo Library, 2006), 43-53. First published in 1902. Also see: op. cit., Lercecle, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{The Oxford English Dictionary}, s.v. “genre.”
literature, though, overemphasizes the connections between nursery rhyme, folklore, and children. Often, nursery rhymes are considered remnants of ancient English folklore, a concept which Lercecle describes as arising in Victorian England.\textsuperscript{39} However, nursery rhymes often have much more recent origins, and their connections with folklore are much-eroded. Noel Malcolm addresses this in his book \textit{The Origins of English Nonsense}, the only work to seriously consider the highly literary past of English nonsense:

The idea that nursery rhymes represent some sort of age-old sub-culture of poetical folk-nonsense is, in any case, of doubtful validity. What we now call nursery rhymes consists of a very disparate assortment of materials, having little in common beyond the fact that they are all recited by or to children. Many of them have ordinary literary origins, as songs, ballads, riddles, political squibs, etc., written by adults for adults and only subsequently bowdlerized for nursery use.\textsuperscript{40}

So, although modern nursery rhymes strongly influenced both Lear and Carroll’s nonsense writings, they do not carry the far-reaching historical implications which many ascribe to them. Additionally, even those that appear to be nonsensical likely had more logical-sounding predecessors, and thus provide no actual connection to medieval or folkloric nonsense traditions. Nursery rhymes also do much to maintain the juvenile associations of nonsense. As I have previously mentioned, medieval nonsense appealed widely to its audiences of mixed age and socioeconomic status. The eventual association of nonsense with children has more modern social origins. Stewart approaches an explanation of this development:

\begin{quote}
Nonsense becomes that which is irrelevant to context, that to which context is irrelevant. Nonsense becomes appropriate only to the everyday discourse of the socially purposeless, to those on the peripheries of everyday life: the infant, the child, the mad and the senile, the chronically foolish and playful. Nonsense becomes a negative language, the language of an experience that does not count in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{39} “The historical moment of this subversion occurs in nineteenth-century Britain, through the rediscovery of the national past. In the wake of the Romantic revaluation of popular culture and language it was realised that such childish trivia as nursery rhymes and nonsense tales were monuments of the English national past.” Op. cit., Lercecle, 181.

the eyes of common-sense discourse.\textsuperscript{41}

Because nonsense deliberately defies social, intellectual, and emotional context, it becomes associated with those also excluded from these contexts—the severely mentally ill, the foolish, and children—those marginalized groups often considered apart from productive society. As I will demonstrate in my upcoming chapter, nonsense consistently subverts the values of common-sense societal productivity and therefore aligns with these voices. This is evident when considering the speakers of nonsense in medieval literature, always members of the comic “low” and the socially marginalized. In these cases, nonsense empowers through its meaninglessness, a rejection of the stricture of socially-defined common-sense. With the development of the concept of “high” literature, nonsense itself would be pushed to the margins due to these associations; hence its shift to children’s literature. However, it is critical to realize that the connection between nonsense and children does not rise from antiquity and surface in the nursery. Instead, children become modern nonsense speakers, possessing wisdom in their innocent, rather than mad, foolishness.

\textit{Universality}

Another dominant critical perspective on nonsense, the assignment of universal origins, complicates the history of the tradition. Nonsense certainly carries universal implications; it playfully questions the autonomy of human logic and the society that operates within it—a challenge with extremely broad implications. However, framing nonsense as a type of unknowable, folkloric inheritance discredits its clear literary history that emerges in the English canon. Cammaerts expresses this sentiment immediately in his early work, describing nonsense as “as old and widespread, among European nations, as the oldest ballads and popular stories, and has been brought to a standard of high perfection, in modern times, in England, through the

writings of Edward Lear and of Lewis Carroll, whose influence is still strongly felt to-day.\textsuperscript{42} Far from the arguments insisting on the Victorian origins of true nonsense, Cammaerts and others view Lear and Carroll as the modern prophets (or manifestations) of a timeless truth. G.K. Chesterton initiates this trend in his 1901 essay, citing the spirituality of nonsense:

This simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense. Nonsense and faith (strange as the conjunction may seem) are the two supreme symbolic assertions of the truth that to draw out the soul of things with a syllogism is as impossible as to draw out Leviathan with a hook.\textsuperscript{43}

Recognizing the logical autonomy which nonsense attempts, Chesterton links nonsense to faith in that both assert the existence of a truth beyond human comprehension. Lending nonsense this mythical omnipresence has helped to characterize the early genre as somewhat a-literary by marking it as beyond human logic, which it certainly is not (as discussed, nonsense inevitably relies on sense). Even the socio-philosophical evaluations of Stewart contribute to this erroneous idea of universal origins. Opposite Chesterton’s broad view, Stewart focuses on the linguistic mechanisms of nonsense’s defiance of common-sense. Still, even her detailed work implies that nonsense is a-literary. Her book, entitled \textit{Nonsense: aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature}, does not remark on specific folkloric origins of nonsense and instead considers human social behavior as innately folkloric. Much like nonsense literature, folklores have unique and specific origins which differ individually; they are far from universal. Her assumption thus forces the folkloric (and, implicitly, nonsense) into the universal. Her heavy emphasis on the dependent relationship between sense and nonsense also fosters this concept. Stewart relates a 1977 study by Richard Hilbert, which concluded that “nonsense rescues common sense by providing a

\textsuperscript{42} Op. cit., Cammaerts, 2.
\textsuperscript{43} Op. cit., Chesterton, 11.
residual category for storing disorder." This presents nonsense as a scapegoat for ideas incompatible with societally-constructed common-sense. The requirement of nonsense for the function of human logic and society reduces the literary appearances of nonsense to inevitable universalisms. Such analyses detract from the literary history of nonsense. This thesis, while acknowledging these important philosophical aspects of nonsense, will clearly locate medieval and even folkloric nonsense as part of a literary tradition, not a universal human need.

Dreams, madness, fools

A few common nonsense motifs in particular are misunderstood to contribute to the concept of the universality of nonsense, when in actuality they demonstrate a clear underlying nonsense tradition in English literature. Dreams, madness, and foolery all appear frequently in conjunction with nonsense and nonsense speakers. Because they derive from natural human experiences with the illogical, it is often speculated that experiences with dreams and madness initially inspired nonsense creation; such claims are impossible to verify or deny. Noel Malcolm observes that “the truth is that dreams and madness, far from automatically generating literary forms, require the existence of suitable literary conventions in order to gain any significant purchase on literature in the first place.” Truly, literary nonsense bears little resemblance to dreams or to madness; if related, the interpretive distance between these experiences and their nonsense forms constitutes literature. Dreams, madness, and foolery do not cause literary nonsense, but they do act secondarily within it. These motifs’ main import is their consistent use in literary nonsense, from medieval to renaissance to Victorian literature. I will demonstrate that madness and foolery, embodied in the nonsense fool, are conserved throughout English nonsense, and comprise an important connection between the medieval and Victorian

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45 For one example, see the previous Susan Stewart quote.
eras. Malcolm, who attempts to prove that medieval nonsense was “extinguished,” minimizes this connection, but concedes an association between medieval nonsense, madness, and the English fool.\textsuperscript{47}

Only in two minor ways did the presentation of madness in literature show any connection with nonsense writing. The first was through the genre of the “Bedlamite” or “Poor Tom” poem…The second was through the institution of the Fool—a dual-category concept which spanned lunatics and mental defectives on one hand (“natural fools”) and witty entertainers (“artificial fools”) on the other.\textsuperscript{48}

Medieval characters, as I will explore throughout this study, show this same conflation of madness and foolery in nonsense speech, and these themes also appear throughout medieval nonsense verse. Thus, madness and foolery (dreams probably align more closely with the nonsense journey motif) expose an important variety of literary nonsense which obviously extends beyond the medieval period and into the “high” literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Such positioning surely establishes the survival of medieval nonsense beyond the Middle Ages, a perpetuity too often ignored or rejected.

\textit{The Medieval}

Often, critical work regarding modern nonsense literature focuses primarily on Victorian nonsense and very little on its literary-historical origins at all, instead dedicating a few pages to vague speculations. Many critics, enthralled by the personae of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, too readily dismiss medieval specimens of nonsense as “ancient types of inconsequentiality” irrelevant to the Victorian period.\textsuperscript{49} Such misconceptions arise from an erroneous concept of “literariness” that seems to exclude medieval literature. Noel Malcolm’s 1997 \textit{The Origins of English Nonsense} is the only modern work to classify pre-Victorian nonsense verse as a literary genre, yet it does not recognize the contribution of medieval nonsense verse: “After a brief flowering in the Middle Ages…literary nonsense poetry in England was re-invented in the early

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 19.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 113-114.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Op. cit, Tigges, 85.
\end{itemize}
seventeenth century.”50 Malcolm frequently conflates medieval nonsense with folklore or dismisses it as a transient phase in the Middle Ages, too fleeting or too anonymous to achieve “literary” status. Malcolm maintains that “no one who places the elaborate and very self-consciously literary nonsense poetry of Hoskyns, Taylor and Corbet alongside the small quantity of fortuitously created folk-nonsense can plausibly argue that the former owes its origin—or any essential aspect of its nature—to the latter.”51 Though he chooses not to construct an explicit definition of nonsense, Malcolm frequently describes his “high” nonsense literature as “something invented, learned and transmitted; something which existed only in a literary culture” and “a literary genre with a particular history or histories, developed by individual poets and possessing a peculiarly close relationship—largely a parodic one—to the ‘high’ literary conventions of its day.”52 As this thesis will demonstrate, medieval nonsense certainly fulfills these requirements, though its authorship may be more obscure than many critics desire.53 Nonetheless, authorship does not constitute literature. The medieval performance-based and standalone nonsense works that I will evaluate in this study already participate in a self-conscious literary genre, replete with common significations and motifs that characterize the tradition, some of which are preserved in Victorian verse.54 This is contrary to Malcolm: “…it is doubtful whether any of the small number of medieval English nonsense poems which have come down to us were known to writers of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. The torch of nonsense poetry seems to have been more or less extinguished in England after its brief flaming in the fifteenth century.”55 In this statement, Malcolm makes several mistaken assumptions. First, manuscripts of medieval nonsense unavailable to writers in Early Modern England were not

51 Ibid., 117.
52 Ibid., 53, 4.
53 It seems that many critics, by searching for “touchstone” authors such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, disregard many anonymous but no less literary works.
54 Malcolm does not manage to convincingly connect his seventeenth-century nonsense to the Victorian period.
55 Ibid., 62.
necessarily unavailable to Victorian nonsense writers; in fact, Lercecle points out that the resurrection of the English past was actually in vogue with the Victorians.\textsuperscript{56} Furthermore, and significantly, Malcolm assumes that the influence of the medieval period on later literature necessitated extant manuscripts. Characters such as Skelton’s fools and Shakespeare’s Poor Tom demonstrate the establishment of a tradition that had fully permeated literary society in a clear progression; whether or not there remains a record of this progression is after the fact.

\textit{The Folkloric}

Malcolm constructs a strict dichotomy between folkloric and literary nonsense, stating that “literary nonsense is, by its very nature, a product of literary culture, not of folk culture.”\textsuperscript{57} However, literary and folk culture need not be disconnected categories, particularly in the case of medieval literature, which borders the transition from aural to written forms.\textsuperscript{58} This movement becomes important to nonsense literature due to its distinctly auditory tendencies. Nonsense verse, even that of the Victorian era, almost demands to be spoken aloud. This bears out in dominant medieval nonsense forms; it appears in performance, ballad, and verse, all vocalized forms in the medieval period. Nonsense’s association with such verbal performance hints at the connection to oral literature, which inevitably remains in the purview of folklore. Such a property probably also contributed to the slow transition of nonsense into written forms.

Another essential folkloric element of medieval nonsense is its carnivalesque implications. Several critics recognize this Bakhtinian nature.\textsuperscript{59} Lercecle explains: “Carnival is the embodiment of the negative prefix in ‘nonsense’—it says no, locally and temporarily, to

\textsuperscript{57} Op. cit, Malcolm, 124.
\textsuperscript{59} The work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of “carnival” is relevant to this analysis, however, it carries overt social tones of subversive aggression which I believe are largely absent from medieval nonsense verse (as mentioned in Chapter One). I occasionally mention Bakhtinian carnivalesque inversions, but only in areas where particularly relevant and explicitly hierarchical. See: Mikhail Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World}, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009). First published in 1940.
order and hierarchy, not least the hierarchy of the comic and the serious." In fact, I will demonstrate that the rejection of the serious is the foremost rejection of nonsense, rather than the overt defiance of more formal hierarchies. Though they may be implicated, such specific resistance would push nonsense too far into the satirical, compromising its very nature. Nevertheless, this carnivalesque topsy-turvydom closely associates nonsense with those subject to pressure from social hierarchies: namely, the common folk. The connection is manifest in the folksiness of nonsense characters; they are consistently comically low: voices of the poor, uneducated, and unproductive. Far from parody, though, the lowness of these characters becomes valued, creating an inversion of social capital that infuses nonsense with its festive subversion—this quality shows the bottom-to-top movement present in the written record of medieval nonsense. Even so, the embedded hierarchical destabilization in nonsense arises through a lighthearted rejection of logical cares, less aggressively populist than Bakhtinian proponents claim. Malcolm, a stark opponent of folkloric origins, offers two counter-arguments to the folk-spirit of nonsense. First, he contends that topsy-turvy events (fool-kings, wise-fools, etc.) which fostered the same subversion of hierarchy as nonsense, act as “safety-valves” ultimately bolstering the power of the elite. Such an argument falls into the aforementioned mistake often made by Bakhtinian estimators of nonsense—nonsense’s inherent subversion acts through whimsical indulgence, not pointed aggression at explicit social hierarchies. Its criticism thus goes beyond the maintenance of social power structures, directed more toward the seriousness of life’s cares. Malcolm’s second point is as follows:

It is that Bakhtin’s account of comic-parodic literary forms having arisen from the ‘folk spirit’ (or, as one more recent Bakhtinian study puts it, of ‘the language of festivity’ having ‘welled up from the depths of popular culture’) tends to confuse two different things: the social nature of a cultural event, and the origins of the literary, aesthetic or ritual forms which that cultural event makes use of.

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62 Ibid., 119.
So, while acknowledging the subversiveness of carnival celebrations and their association with nonsense verse, Malcolm argues that these folk-associated events make use of a form produced from a different, more “literary, aesthetic, or ritual” source. The assumption arises from the bias of modern sources of medieval material. Extant nonsense required production by a literate elite, evident especially in the dramatic texts that I will analyze; however, the speakers of nonsense verse in drama and its often domestically-infused content indicate an ultimately folkloric heritage. The deep textual involvement with these characters, motifs, and themes, even if recorded by the elite, speak to a recognition of the folkloric basis of nonsense, produced to appeal to common people, that eventually arose to literary status in the medieval period.
Chapter Three:  
Nonsense in Medieval Drama

The fifteenth-century morality play *Mankind* opens with a forty-four line sermon by the virtue Mercy, quickly undercut by mockery of the fiend Mischief by asking Mercy “this question to claryfy” (48):

Mysse-masche, dryff-draff.  
Sume was corn and sume was chaffe,  
My dame seyde my name was Raffe;  
Onschett yowr lokke and taken an halpenye. (49-52)\(^63\)

His question, of course, is nonsense—remarkably similar to that which appears in medieval poetry and ballads. The fifteenth-century “Song on Woman” uses similar repetition: “Some be lewd, and some be schreuied” (5); “some be nyse, and some be fonde” (7); “some be browne, and some be whit” (17).\(^64\) Nonsense poems also commonly feature the character of the dame: “Our dame milked the mares talle,” “My dame began to spin a thread,” “Our dame began to brew.”\(^65\) Even the storage of pennies appears repeatedly in nonsense, as seen in the sixteenth-century “My Lady went to Canterbury:” “I prey you, kepe true hart in store, / A peny for a ladell,” and in the fifteenth century “Herkyn to my tale:” “I toke a peyny of my purse, and offerd to hom all”.\(^66\) The final line of this *aaab* set, rhythmically distinct from the previous three, calls attention to this lack of actual meaning somewhat obscured by the previous agreement. The rhyme, repetition, and internal mirroring of the lines unifies them despite their disconnected contents; they defy

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\(^63\) *Mankind* in *Medieval Drama: an anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2000), 259-279. All quotations and stage directions are taken from this anthology unless otherwise indicated. I indicate line number in-text and include page number ranges in the footnotes for the plays; specific page numbers will be included for standalone verse.

\(^64\) “Song on Woman” in *Reliquiae antiquae: scraps from ancient manuscripts, illustrating chiefly early English literature* vol. 1, eds. Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell (London: John Russell Smith, 1845), 248.


\(^66\) “Herkyn to my tale” in *Reliquiae antiquae: scraps from ancient manuscripts, illustrating chiefly early English literature* vol. 1, eds. Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell (London: John Russell Smith, 1845), 81-82/85-86.
logical speech in favor of audibly pleasing features, just like their contemporary nonsense poems. This evident cross-form literary presence of nonsense, though critically neglected, has potential to elucidate the signification of the wider medieval nonsense tradition.

Medieval standalone nonsense verse indicates a rich tradition of comic nonsense in the Middle Ages; however, the fragmented and somewhat sparse appearances of these manuscripts prevent a thorough literary characterization of this tradition. Fortunately, another body of medieval nonsense verse exists within the medieval dramatic tradition. Nonsense verse and scenes referencing nonsense appear intermittently but consistently throughout medieval plays—moralities, mysteries, miracle plays, and court dramas. By investigating the placement and operation of nonsense verse within clear narratives, medieval nonsense in general may be more extensively contextualized. In order to define the essential features of the larger medieval nonsense tradition, this chapter necessarily surveys a heterogeneous body of medieval dramatic nonsense. In forthcoming chapters, I will apply the attributes defined here to both standalone medieval nonsense and Victorian nonsense, eventually establishing a literary connection between medieval nonsense verse and the Victorian children’s genre.67

Across a broad sampling of medieval dramatic nonsense, nonsense consistently uses language to comically subvert the established order through a spirit of carefree festivity. It destabilizes morality, power, and propriety depending upon the narrative in which it exists. The nonsense that appears consistently in medieval drama falls into three forms: song and game, excessive lists, and the verse belonging to the “nonsense fool.” Song- and game-based nonsense initiate a celebratory, rambunctious atmosphere that inverts perceived human hierarchies. Listing, an extremely common form of nonsense in the Middle Ages, critiques the reliance on worldly wealth through the ridiculousness of excess, which carries revelrous associations.

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67 Though the trajectory of this thesis necessitates a focus on the relationships between medieval and Victorian nonsense, the relationship between medieval dramatic and standalone forms in and of itself is a naturally embedded and significant focus of this study.
Finally, nonsense is often spoken by character versions of the “nonsense fool.” These comically low characters use nonsense as a vehicle of topsy-turvy empowerment, derived from a defiant rejection of logical reason or practicality and embodied in festivity.  

Song and Game

The appearance of nonsense in song and game levels hierarchy through an atmosphere of irreverent joy; the construction of this spirit borrows from the festive and holiday associations of song and game. The struggle of the shepherds to interpret the angel’s “Gloria in excelsis” song which announces the birth of Jesus makes manifest the dichotomy between human and divine through language. The Nativity shepherds, the foils of the learned magi, represent the universality of Christ’s message through their lowliness. The clumsy attempts of the shepherds to interpret the holy music further illustrate their flawed humanity, which makes them unable to access the divine song. However, their eventual miraculous translation and subsequent moral transformation confirm the moral equality of the common man, the uneducated layperson, in God’s kingdom. The well-known Christmas song which the angel delivers initially confounds the shepherds; it signals to them as nonsense and borrows an atmosphere of holiday celebration. Thus, a nonsense carol levels social, educational, and religious hierarchy in the Chester and Towneley shepherds’ plays.


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68 Comically “low” characters, such as the shepherds and doctor investigated in this chapter, seem to have the strongest associations with folk-knowledge, superstition, lore, etc.


understanding; the shepherds’ inability to recollect the holy song is also the inability to access a higher realm of comprehension. The attempt produces nonsense. Tudd, the third shepherd, further exemplifies the confusion of their amusing interpretive efforts:

What songe was this, saye yee,
That he sang to us all three?
Expounded shall yt bee
Erre wee hethen passe;
For I am eldest of degree
And alsoe best, as seemes me,
Hit was ‘grorus glorus’ with a ‘glee’
Hit was neyther more nor lesse. (377-384)

As Tudd declares his intent to interpret this Latin church song, he makes several statements that reveal the involvement of language with hierarchical structures. First of all, he states that the angel sang to “us all three”, indicating the three shepherds and clearly excluding Trowle, the comically-low shepherds’ apprentice. This demonstrates a prideful naïveté on the part of Tudd. Later in the play, Trowle contributes meaningfully to the song’s interpretation and is touched with holiness through its understanding; his comic character becomes equally as relevant as the magi-mirroring three shepherds. This leveling, transcendent effect of the song implies initial hierarchy, which nonsense ultimately subverts. Tudd also makes a personal claim of superiority by saying “For I am eldest of degree / And alsoe best, as seems me”. He declares precedence among his fellow men in both age and general performance, which he claims should somehow endow him with the ability to interpret the angel’s confusing Latin song. While he rightly recognizes that accessing the holy song requires some higher capabilities, his reliance on status is misguided. He goes on to utter the silly, “Hit was ‘grorus glorus’ with a ‘glee’ / Hit was neyther more nor lesse”. His ridiculous misinterpretation proves nonsense equally incomprehensible to all the shepherds regardless of social positioning. In much the same way, nonsense verse in general levels its audience due to general incomprehensibility, traversing social and educational disparities.
The shepherd’s struggle with the angel’s “Gloria in excelsis” in the *Chester Shepherds’ Play* further reveals some of these festive significations of medieval nonsense, proving that their strange utterances and misunderstanding of the angel’s song were indeed thematically connected to contemporary medieval nonsense. Trying to interpret the song, Tudd seems to draw parallels between the angel’s song and characters from popular ballads:

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Wyll [ye] here howe he sang ‘celsis’?
For on that sadly hee sett him;
Nayther singes ‘sar’ nor soe well ‘cis,`
Ney ‘pax merye Mawd’ when shee had met him. (409-412)
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Tudd draws on his knowledge of popular ballads to attempt to better understand the angel’s song, which the shepherds have been interpreting nonsensically. He separates the nonsense “celsis” into “sar” and “cis,” or ‘Sarah’ and ‘Cissy,’ and relates “pax” to ‘Peace Merry Maud,’ all female characters in the medieval nonsense ballads.\(^{71}\)

Tudd thus equates the perceived nonsense of the angelic hymn with common ballads; the resonances reveal the playfulness of the scene and demonstrate the popular entertainment aspect of nonsense ballads in the medieval period.

The *Towneley Second Shepherds’ Play* similarly uses the shepherds’ misunderstanding of the angel’s “Gloria in excelsis” to demonstrate a spiritual disparity between the human and the divine. Unlike the Chester shepherds, the Towneley men never explicitly produce nonsense verse; however, their dialogue acknowledges the previously established correlation between spiritual hierarchy and linguistic comprehension that the song eventually traverses. Exploring the attitudes of the shepherds towards this temporarily incomprehensible Latin, the shadow of nonsense, still provides crucial context for understanding the associations and attitudes embedded in the nonsense tradition.

After a series of events involving a sheep disguised as a newborn infant, the buffoonish

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shepherds of the *Towneley Second Shepherds’ Play* encounter the divine. Right after the shepherds toss their sheep-stealer in a blanket as punishment (a sequence with strong folkloric origins), an angel appears and announces the birth of Jesus by singing “Gloria in excelsis” (sd 637.2). Though this common biblical passage would be easily recognizable to all persons in the audience, the shepherds respond with complete confusion and fear: “This was a qwant stevyn that ever yit I hard! / It is a mervell to nevyn, thus to be skard” (647-648). Simultaneously, the shepherds recognize this heavenly speech as both frightening and marvelous. In religious expression, these contradictory emotions are often inspired by contact with the divine; however, the word ‘marvel’ also appears frequently in reference to medieval nonsense tales, and could reflect the shepherd’s classification of the Latin song (and the angel’s appearance) as a nonsense event. In the case of these shepherds, their confusion manifests in a struggle with the verbal, the message of the angel, embedded in the song: “Say, what was his song? Hard ye not how he crakyd it?” (656). The shepherds cannot yet access the meaning of the words of the Latin song, locating them in a pre-Christian world, but also aligning them with the less-educated lay people of the medieval period. Thus, there exists a disjunction between the angelic song and the comprehensive abilities of the shepherds, representatives of the divine and the human, respectively. Nonsense inhabits this disjunction. When another shepherd insists that he is able to repeat the angel’s song, he is immediately ridiculed: “Let se how ye crone. / Can ye bark at the mone?” (661-662). These mocking words further demonstrate the incompatibility of the shepherds’ lowness and the high Latin song. They imply that to attempt to repeat the words would be madness. By equating the attempt to barking, an animal expression, they bring another level of consciousness into comparison. In folklore, dogs often symbolize a frenzied madness,

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purportedly related to canine behavioral changes resulting from heat stroke or rabies. As animals, their importance also lies in their relationship to the human world: like humans, dogs are living (domesticated) beings, but they nonetheless have a “lower” animal consciousness. The shepherd’s proposed interpretations, as perceived by his fellows, would imitate the human-animal relationship in its attempt to reconcile the human and the divine. That this would result in nonsense shows the ability of nonsense to represent disjunctions of consciousness through language. The word “mone,” in this statement also evokes another form of consciousness, human madness. Classically associated with the phases of the moon, lunatics also frequent nonsense verse. Like animals and the divine, lunatics operate in different spheres of understanding than the common man. These low characters, dogs and lunatics, invoked in the shepherd’s reaction to supposed nonsense, are thus implicated in the nonsense tradition by this comment. Both signify insurmountable differences in understanding, just as nonsense verse cannot be reconciled using logical reasoning. Nonsense, a failure of comprehension, expresses the inability to traverse such distinct realms of consciousness without transcendence. Thus, when the shepherd does, in fact, successfully repeat the angel’s song (sd 664.1), the entire character of the shepherds change; they enter an entirely different sphere of existence. After beginning to successfully sing the Latin, the shepherds shed their low roles and become the holy, biblical shepherds of the Nativity. This process denies the religious superiority of educated Latin speakers through the transcendence of the common man; translation ultimately levels all the hierarchies presented in the play. Significantly, this leveling only occurs through song; the shepherds’ participation in holiday festivity is the mechanism.

The treatment of another mock-Christmas song in *Mankind* elucidates the atmosphere surrounding holiday festivity and the perversion of language. Though it does not specifically

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74 Chapter Five of this thesis examines the connections between dogs, animals, and madness in nonsense verse.
contain nonsense, it is a contextually informative parody. After Mankynd’s entrance into the play, he commits himself to God and to Mercy, and diligently begins to dig with his spade and tend to his crops. As he works, the enemies of Mankynd, Nowadays, New Guise, and Nought, rambunctiously reenter the scene with a song: “Make rom, sers, for we have be longe! / We wyll cum gyf yow a Crystemes songe” (332-333). This song undoubtedly engaged the audience, as Nought proclaims, “Now I prey all the yemandry that us here / To synge wyth ws wyth a mery chere” (334-335), inviting everyone to join in on their ballad. Each verse of the song first is sung by Nought, followed by the repetition of New Gyse and Nowadays. This form would allow the audience to also participate. The song goes thus:

Yt ys wretyn wyth a coll, yt ys wretyn wyth a cole…
He that schtyth wyth hys hoyll, be that schytyth wyth hys hoyll…
But he wyppe hys arse clen, but he wyppe hys arse clen…
On hys breche yt xall be sen, on hys breche yt xall be sen…
Hoylyke, hoylyke, hoylyke! Hoylyke, hoylyke, hoylyke! (332-344)

The song borrows the festivity of Christmas (a parody of the common “Holy, holy, holy”) and the audience’s energy to deliver a quite vulgar image; uncontrolled, irreverent hilarity dominates the scene. The medium of song not only lends a familiar melody, but the aids of rhyme and repetition to entertain, much like more secular nonsense ballads. Primarily, the song undercuts the divine joy of the holiday with gleeful scatological humor, reveling in the unapologetic transgression of replacing religion with such a coarse image. The power of such comedy lay in the denigration of the spiritual through its forced association with the grossly corporeal; this forcing together of extremes is one mechanism of hierarchical leveling. The atmosphere created by their song also starkly contrasts the dull labor that Mankind performs in their midst, rejecting the austere practicality of industriousness. Its carefree, witty, celebratory, and irreverent nature propels its transgression. In fact, its celebratory nature subverts traditional values of diligence, pushes the borders of honesty, and demonstrates the attractiveness of frivolity—nonsense can
also generate this atmosphere.

John Skelton’s 1519 Magnyfycence encompasses many different dramatic genres. While it follows the basic fall and redemption structure of classic medieval morality plays such as Mankind and The Castle of Perseverance, it also satirizes the Early Modern court of Henry VIII; the play thus embodies the transition from medieval to Early Modern drama. An authored text performed in court, this play belongs to the educationally and socially elite, unlike the medieval morality and mystery plays. Thus, the nonsense employed in the play represents a certain sophistication of the tradition—a literary recognition of an entertainment tradition. The nonsense that appears in Magnyfycence is associated with overlapping styles such as doggerel rhyme and skeltonics, all properties of the Vices and representing the degeneration of Magnyfycence’s court as the degradation of the Virtues’ rhyme royal.\(^75\) The use and context of nonsense in Magnyfycence, then, is essential to understanding its undeniably burgeoning literary significations. The speakers of nonsense in Magnyfycence, the frivolous fiends Fansy and Foly, interestingly present their nonsense speech as a form of game or trickery, presented as an eventually damning distraction. This reflects nonsense’s association with overindulgence and festivity, ultimately defying responsibility and socially-established morality structures through celebratory game.

The entanglement of nonsense and games demonstrates its pleasurable, playful associations; however, as a game, nonsense appears to be considered a frivolous indulgence and a subversive temptation. Foly, one of the two nonsense fools of the play, tells a tall tale, giving (“gyve”) it to Magnyfycence, whom he attempts to corrupt:

```
Mary, I pray God your mastership to save.
I shall gyve you a gaude of a goslynge that I gave,
The gander and the gose bothe grasynge on one grave.
Than Rowlande the reve ran, and I began to rave,
```

Foly creates an absurd nonsense scene framed as a “gaude,” or a joke. However, the humor delivered contains no punch line—it follows, then, that the nonsense itself is the joke, a comic entertainment tradition. These lines also demonstrate an alliterative trend sometimes seen in nonsense verse. Each line practices alliteration of a different letter, repeating a variety of sounds unconnected to any particular theme. This technique demonstrates the strong primary emphasis on aural device; in this sequence, end-rhyme and alliteration dictate characters, actions, and objects of the story instead of the reverse. The ability to execute this control is derived from the lack of meaning in the lines as well as a lack of allegiance to logic. Foly’s last stanza of the play (representing the apex of language and court corruption) continues in this vein, but centers around species of birds:

Sym Sadyglose was my syer, and Dawcocke my dame.
I coude, and I lyst, garre you laughe at a game:
Howe a wodcocke wrastled
With a larke that was lame;
The bytter sayd boldly that they were to blame;
The fieldfare wolde have fydled and it wolde not frame;
The crane and the curlew therat gan to grame;
The snyte sniveled in the snowte and smyled at the game. (1832-1838)

Foly begins by introducing his sire and dame, characters that often frequent nonsense poems. In this case, they are a simpleton and an idiot, respectively (saddlegoose: simpleton, dawcock: idiot).

Foly delivers his parentage unapologetically, claiming himself the product of stupidity itself. Both of these terms also play on types of birds, a goose and a jackdaw, a trend which continues in the rest of the stanza. Viewing the verse as a word game, focused on alliteration and end-rhyme coupled with the added challenge of remaining within bird imagery. The feat itself is the challenge of the game, and apparently the inevitable nonsensicality of the result elicits laughter

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and amusement. Again, meaning bears no importance to the rhyme; in fact, the inevitable
deviance from meaning produces the entertaining force of the lines. These lines aid in the
contextualization of the game-like associations of nonsense in the Middle Ages. As mentioned,
Foly first describes this sequence as a “gaude” meant to entertain Magnyfycence—but it is
actually a frivolous and hedonistic distraction meant to encourage Magnyfycence to forget his
moral duties. Thus, this feature of the game of nonsense becomes subversive, representative of
the sinful extreme of playfulness. Foly intends to cause Magnyfycence to “laughe at a game” at
the beginning of the stanza. At the stanza’s close, it is the “snyte” that “smyled at the game.”
This parallel demonstrates the corruption of Magnyfycence which Foly achieves at this
distraction. The unrestrained indulgence by enjoying the purposelessness of Foly’s exercises
mimics animalistic hedonism, uncontrolled by human logical reasoning.

As I mentioned, Magnyfycence is particularly important to the location of nonsense
within an elite literary tradition, which so many modern nonsense critics ignore. Immediately
preceding Magnyfycence’s total disgrace, the unapologetically foolish Foly enters
Magnyfycence’s court. Foly begins by answering Magnyfycence’s inquiry after his “tydynges”
(1803) with a silly tale about his fake hawk, but his story quickly degenerates into even greater
absurdities. At the apex of the play’s trickery, he speaks to the prince only in nonsense:

And, syr, as I was comynge to you hyder,
I saw a fox sucke on a kowes ydder,
And with a lyme rode I toke them bothe togyder.
I trowe it be a frost, for the way is slydder.
Se, for God avowe, for colde as I chydder…
A, syr, tolde I not you howe I dyd fynde
A knave and a carle, and all of one kynde?
I sawe a wethercocke wagge with the wynde.
Grete mervayle I had, and mused in my mynde,
The houndes ranne before, and the hare behynde.
I sawe a losell lede a lurden, and they were bothe blynde.
I sawe a sowter go to supper, or ever he had dynde. (1811-1815, 1817-1823)

This nonsense bears striking resemblance to many standalone medieval nonsense poems
presented as travelers’ tales, definitively demonstrating Skelton’s recognition of a particular style of nonsense. Importantly, this nonsense style (which I explore in some depth in the following chapter) frames nonsense speech as a verbal lying game, a game already based on questionable morality. Like doggerel and skeltonics, it has long episodes of a single end-rhyme; however, the content distinguishes these lines from other types of light verse. This type of nonsense derives its humor from impossible absurdity and no requirement for meaningfulness. Thus, after briefly dwelling on the ridiculous images like a “fox sucke on a kowes ydder” and his alleged capture of both with a bird-net, Foly discusses the weather. In his nonsense world that straddles reality and absurdity, the blind do lead the blind, hares chase hunting dogs, and weathervanes do not provide directionality. Foly presents an ever-growing collection of absurdities as objective truth.

Nonsense is an indulgence not associated with serious scholarship or the social elite, but its universal appeal and temptation to indulgent absurdities corrodes societal principles of morality. Lying tales like this one play on the tension of truth and lie between the nonsense speaker and her audience. Though both perhaps recognize the impossibility of the tale, the speaker must still attempt to convince the audience of absurdity and the audience enjoys the fun even in falsity; both are implicitly guilty, morally lowered by the game.

Lists

The sheer material excess of nonsense lists destabilizes the valuing of worldly wealth and power in dramatic nonsense; the language of excess participates in celebration which can both empower the poor and criticize the haughty rich. When spoken by tyrants, nonsense becomes a language of excess—the perversions of pompous language mark characters as prideful and foolish. In *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, the villain Jonathas the Jew subverts his monetary power through his own nonsense. The character of the Jew, like Herod, Pilate, and Satan in the York and Chester plays, is a comic braggart. The play offers multiple examples of
alliterative lists, a form of seriality. The nonsense list has a saturation point for the conveyance of additional meaning; once reached, additions become comically ridiculous, again accessing absurdity through excess. The play opens with a long boast by Jonathas. His fifty-five-line monologue enumerates his substantial wealth, including, “amastystys” (81), “barylls that be bright of ble” (82), “saphyre seemly” (83), “crystalys clere” (84), “dyamantys derewourthy to dresse” (85), “emerawdys” (86), “onyx and achatys” (87), “topazyouns, smaragdys” (88), “perlys precious grete plente” (89), “rubes ryche” (90), “crepawdys and calcedonyes” (91), “curious carbunclys” (92), “gyngere, lycorsse, and cannyngalle” (95), “fygys fatte” (96), “peper and saffyron and spycys smale” (97), “datys wole dulcet for to dresse” (98), “almundys and rys” (99), “reysones both more or less” (100), “clovys, greynis, amd ginger grene” (101), “mace, mastyck that might” (102), “synymone, suger” (103), “long peper and Indas lycorys” (104), “orengys and apples of grete apryce” (105), and “pungarnetys” (106). In addition to substantial length and repetition, Jonathas also repeatedly makes claims of an “abunddaunce of spycys” (79), “many other spycys” (105), and “moche other merchandise” (107), extending his boast even beyond the content in his expansive list.77 Jonathas’s bragging becomes nonsensical through its sheer excess. The extensive alliteration of the list works similarly. The passage exhibits extremely varied alliteration in service of aural aesthetics rather than additional conveyance of meaning through sound repetition. The aesthetics of language take precedence in the nonsense list, adding to a sense of extravagance in the lines. Spoken by tyrants and villains such as Jonathas, this excess becomes subversive. By forcing his boasts into comedy by fashioning them into these nonsense-driven alliterative lists, the character becomes absurd, and his bragging comic greed. The nonsense of Jonathas, then, reflexively identifies him as foolish.

77 The Croxton Play of the Sacrament in Medieval Drama: an anthology, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2000), 212-233. This list also appears to participate in the alliterative nonsense game alluded to by Foly: each phrase uses a different alliterative sound.
and morally corrupt, debasing any power in the worldly wealth described in his list. Because this character relies on materiality, his list becomes unconsciously self-critical; the impoverished lists of the Chester shepherds also subvert worldly wealth, but in a different manner.

_The Chester Shepherds’ Play_ contains several nonsense lists. However, these lists convey different meaning than those emitted by comic tyrants, actually empowering their speakers through their material celebration due to a satisfaction in modesty. This play begins with a soliloquy by Hankin, the first shepherd. The first stanza of his speech serves mainly to orient the viewers to the play’s setting; he recounts his herding and his high value for his sheep. This introduction also immediately introduces a verbal levity to the play: “On wouldes I have walked wylde / Under buskes me bowre to bylde, / From styffe stormes my shepe to shilde…” (1-3). Each line repeats a different alliterative sound, /w/, /b/, /st/, and /sh/. The variety of the sounds eliminates any one particular tone that could be created by alliteration; instead, through the clever extravagance of the repetitive sounds, the alliteration creates a more general sense of play (this type of alliterative play also occurs in the nonsense game of Foly in _Magnyfycence_ and in Jonathas’s list). The second stanza continues in this vein, with a different sound repeated in almost every line: “walkynge werye” (9), “suche my shepe I sought” (10), “taytfull tuppes” (11), “shrewde scabbe yt sought” (13), “rotte…were wrought” (14), and “cough…caught” (15). The variety and frequency of this repetition emphasizes the manipulable sounds of language, rather than their contribution to its meaning through auditory associations. Hankin goes on to recount his extensive herb garden:

```
Of henbane and horehounde,
Tybbe, radishe, and egermonde
Which be my herbes save and sounde,
Medled on a rowe.
Here be more herbes, I tell yt you;
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78 Another example is the greedy Christian merchant of the Croxton play, who sells the wealthy Jews the Eucharist and enumerates his wealth by describing his power in other countries, alphabetically and alliteratively, over the span of twenty-one lines.
I shall reckon them on a rowe:
Fynter, fanter, and fetterfowe,
And alsoe penye-wrytte. (21-28)

These herbal lists are central to Hankin’s soliloquy. Hankin repeatedly refers demonstratively to
the herbs: “Loe, here be my herbs” (17), “Which bee my herbes” (23), and “Here bee more
herbes” (25). Physical gestures and props would likely accompany this demonstration in
performance; the on-stage physicality of the herbs parallels the effect of lists in nonsense verse.
This particular section of the speech gains a particular resonance from its repeated grounding in
exhibition. Repeated addition of the herbs, in both verse and in Hankin’s hands, eventually
becomes unwieldy, and eventually absurdly so. Such is the playful effect of alliterative nonsense
lists: their excess of substance and increasing lack of substantial meaning creates their absurdity.
Though this clever list is completely logical, it nonetheless bears many similarities to the popular
nonsense themes. The final stanza of the soliloquy itself hints at an internally independent
moment of comic performance. Hankin’s speech concludes with:

But noe fellowshippe here have I
Save myself alone, in good faye;
Therefore after one faste wyll I crye.
But first will I drinke, if I maye. (41-44)

This stanza acknowledges the independent performance tradition embedded in the previous
speech. After his lengthy talk, Hankin remarks on his solitude. Despite having an actual audience
in Chester, he also requires one in the world of the play to validate his speech, marking it as a
dramatic moment with resonance independent of the plot. Like Hankin’s speech, performed
nonsense verse does not thematically relate to surrounding events; its internal consistency must
be independent of external influence. Hankin’s closing lines further locate him within this
tradition: “But first will I drinke, if I may” (44). Though it has been established that no one is
present, Hankin still uses the formal convention “if I may.” Asking for permission requires a
permitting presence to reward Hankin for his performance with alcohol, a construct common in
nonsense verse, where its recitation often concludes with this reward. This microcosmic reference to nonsense appears repeatedly in this play. The episode reveals the performance element embedded in medieval nonsense verse. Drinking, like nonsense, is spirited and indulgent, a celebratory reflection of excess through its meaningless verbosity. As a reward, drinking initiates this celebration. Nonsense becomes an invitation to this festivity, a completely indulgent intemperance in the world too fraught with practical troubles; linguistic and festive surplus unite in the performance of nonsense verse. The empowerment of listing found in this section arises from the shepherd’s lowness; his list, a celebration of a sparse repertoire of herbs defies his relative poverty. This mechanism becomes even more evident in the following scene, the shepherds’ feast.

The shepherd’s feast of The Chester Shepherds’ Play also operates around richly-worded lists, this time involving various foods. Immediately after the three shepherds, Hankin, Harvey, and Tudd come together, they combine their leftover food to make the shepherds’ feast. Much critical attention has been paid to the performance of this scene; for my part, it matters only that the food is treated as physical. Like Hankin’s demonstrative treatment of his herbs, this combines the verbally dense lists with physically present objects, lending the dramatic effect of physical absurdity to the verbal absurdity created by the nonsense list. In fact, like the previous scene, the demonstrative “here” is oft-repeated. Of the five food-centric stanzas, four of them have “here” in the first line, opening each stanza with a repeated gesture, further emphasizing the additive excess. One-by-one, the shepherds enumerate their contributions to the meal, together creating a tremendous variety of food: “meate” (112), “bredd” (113), “onyons, garlycke, and leekes” (114), “butter” (114), “greene cheese” (116), “a pudding” (119), “a jannock” (120), “a sheepes head” (121), “a grayne” (122), “sowre milke” (123), “a pigges foote from puddings

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79 See appendix for full text. I also discuss this motif in depth in Chapter Four.
purye” (128), “hott meate” (130), “gambonns and other good meate” (131), “a pudding with a pricke in the end” (132), and a “tonge” (134). Like all nonsense lists, the sheer excess perpetuates the absurdity. Primarily entertaining, this comic feast appeals to a humor already well known to its audience. Despite the poverty of the low characters, they choose to construct an extravagant feast, an action which emphasizes the agency of their rejection of austerity. The atmosphere is celebratory; this is borne out in the quick closing of this scene—the feasting effectively ends with a drink. Declaring it time to drink, Harvey, the second shepherd, says, “Now to weete our mouthes tyme were” (143). Of course, drinking naturally follows eating, but Hankin’s response invites further interpretation: “Such lickour makes men to live; / This game may noe where be lest” (145-148). The acknowledgement of the scene as a “game” places it beyond the straightforward context of a meal; like a game, this feast encourages playful festivity. Moreover, the somewhat metatheatrical reference brings performance to the forefront, placing drink as the formal conclusion to a highly theatrical moment, much like the performance of nonsense verse in Hankin’s soliloquy. As before, drink concludes and aptly rewards a successful performance. Inebriation has the potential to bring its beneficiary closer to the nonsense realm, less reliant on logic and often more creatively nonsensical, a continuance of the performance. Drunkenness, like other excesses, defies temperance and prudence much like nonsense defies logic, all virtues of human practicality. The relative financial and spiritual poverty of the low shepherds emphasizes the purposelessness of their nonsense and the bold choice of festivity in spite of real-world common sense. In the case of these shepherds, the subversion that inherently exists in all nonsense serves to endow the low characters with the agency, subverting the very expectation of their lowness.

Another part of *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament* strongly evokes this tradition of list-based nonsensical folk performance. As Walker explains,
The comic double act between the physician Master Brandyche (‘Brown-ditch’) and his unruly servant Colle, which forms an interlude in the miracle narrative, seems to reflect the folk traditions of the Mummer’s Plays (although a partial debt to the comic servants and pompous master of classical drama should not be entirely discounted either). A quack doctor frequently appeared in these locally produced fertility dramas to resurrect the hero or his adversary after he had been slain in combat. And a similar delight in comic lists of unlikely-sounding cures and medicines seems to have been central to their performances too…The inclusion of this scene in the play may well reflect a further attempt to tailor it for a specifically English rural audience. (213-214)

Walker describes these characters as folk-derived. As the central element of their performance, then, this theory supports the derivation of nonsense lists from folklore. When Colle enters the play, his speech immediately exhibits two features of nonsense defined in my previous analyses. First, he states his disdain for his master: “I haue a master: I wolld he had the pyppe” (447). Such comic insult from a servant to master evokes the topsy-turvy subversion of master and servant found in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque tradition. Continuing, he characterizes his master as a drunkard, saying, “He syttyth wyth sum tapestere in the spence; / Hys hoode there wyll he sell” (451-452). Again, drink and drunkenness accompanies comically low nonsense characters and evokes a spirit of indulgent celebration, as Colle and Master Brundyche confirm in this sequence. Their subsequent conversation is full of wit, wordplay and dirty jokes, displaying a low but playful humor that also frequently co-occurs in nonsense speakers. Colle then pronounces an advertisement of their services (sd 527.1) in the form of a nonsense list, filled with diseases purportedly curable by the physician:

```
All manar off men that have syknes,
To Master Brentberecly loke that yow redresse!
What disease or syknesser that ever ye have,
He wyll never leve yow tyll ye be in yowr grave.
Who hat the canker, the collyke, or the laxe,
The tercyan, the quartan, or be brynnyng axs;
For wormys, for gnawing, gryndyng in the wombe or in the boldyro;
All maner red eyn, bleryd eyn, and be myegrym also;
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81 Walker uses the term “Mummer’s Play,” to mean a partially narrated folk play.
For hedache, bonache, and therto the tothache;
The colt-evyll, and the brostyn men he wyll undertak,
All tho that have the poose, the snake, or the tyseke.
Thowh a man were right heyle, he cowd soon make hym sek!
Imquyre to the colkote, for ther ys hys loggyng.
A lytyll beside Babwell Myll, yf yhe wyll have understondyng. (528-541)

This list takes the form of seven rhymed couplets, a very simple form that characteristically evokes playful levity, welcome in a speech describing amusingly gruesome afflictions. This list runs the gamut of human disease, even including the human contraction of a disease afflicting the horse penis. The extensive repertoire of this drunken doctor does little to build his credibility; in fact, the excess of this list only enhances awareness of the inept doctor’s false advertising. Master Brundyche, as Colle describes him, is a doctor who specializes in causing illnesses instead of healing them (“He wyll never leve yow tyll ye be in yowr grave;” “Thowh a man were right heyle, he cowd soon make hym sek!”). The character of the quack-doctor subverts the claims of medicinal knowledge and healing power that doctors typically possess. Thus, each addition to the list adds a lie, and the doctor’s ambitious claims are made ridiculous through their excess. Paradoxically, though, this character often succeeds in the revival of a perished hero, achieving the ultimate act of healing towards which all medicine implicitly strives. Despite (in fact, because of) his inadequacy, the quack-doctor surpasses the limitations of human power. This subversive achievement elucidates a powerful undercurrent in the comic existence of nonsense verse. Absurdities, by circumventing logic, may approach an understanding beyond normal modes of cognition potentially beyond human ability. Of course, this transcendence comes second to hilarity, as Colle and Master Brundyche demonstrate. The scene occurs randomly in the Croxton play, entirely unrelated to the larger narrative—even the characters have no wider role in the drama. Instead, this moment seems almost an intermission

83 Ibid., 337 n.56.
84 Ibid., 214.
from the religious and xenophobic drama of the play; it is a relief from seriousness and the bounds of social doctrine in the play. As a comic, carefree moment amid more paradigmatic constructions, this scene also signifies a type of festivity characteristic of nonsense.

Comically low fools

Comically low characters typically exhibit distasteful or indecent behavior: gross poverty, drunkenness, sexual and scatological humor, and lying are several of their key qualities. Colle and Master Brundyche are two such characters who signal play by their very presence in scenes of medieval drama. Despite their abject lowness, however, such characters derive power from their performance; their nonsense invites communal celebration. In comically low characters, nonsense creates agency through the initiation of festivity.

Trowle, the shepherd’s boy and self-described “Devyll of the sope” (193) in the *Chester Shepherds’ Play* is deeply entrenched in the nonsense tradition through a subversive topsy-turvydom, openly defying the orders of his masters. Eventually, Trowle even physically rebels against his masters by wrestling them each in turn. Lawrence Clopper in *Drama, Play, and Game* describes Trowle’s behavior as related to the popular topsy-turvydom of the Bakhtinian carnival banquet. As an apprentice shepherd, Trowle is socially below the shepherds in both age and occupation. However, the Bakhtinian spirit that he embodies paradoxically makes him their superior by means of his inferiority; his very lowness becomes a vehicle of defiant celebration. Trowle’s introductory soliloquy defines his position within nonsense tradition. He comes on the scene in relative isolation, alone with his sheep:

Good Lord, looke on mee
And my flocke here as the fed have.
On this wold walke we;
Are no men here, that noe waye.
All is playne, perdee;

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Therefore, sheepe, we mon goe.
Noe better may bee
Of beast that blood and bonne have. (165-172)

Trowle’s verse displays a much more irregular rhyme than those of the other shepherds. Throughout his speech, the end-rhyme and alliteration appear sporadically, not conforming to a particular form. For the most part, the rhyme relies on alternating \( ab \) repetition, punctuated intermittently with unrhymed lines. This distinguishes his soliloquy, emphasizing the innate subversion of the character. Trowle’s initial isolation also highlights this unique position in relation to the other shepherds. Unlike his masters, Trowle speaks to somewhat unreceptive subjects, making his aloneness more palpable. He speaks to a disembodied “Good Lord” casually in prayer, and directly to his sheep, not in command but in a rather conversational tone:

“Therfore, sheepe, we mon goe.” These necessarily one-sided interactions depict Trowle’s cognitive separation, which he himself confirms: “Are no men here, that noe waye. / All is playne, perdee …” These interactions associate Trowle with these different cognitive realms, particularly with the sheep, for unlike the divine, they are both mortal creatures, “beasts that blood and bonne have.” Trowle clearly identifies with his sheep, repeatedly grouping himself with the animals: “mee / and my flocke,” “walke we,” “sheepe, we mon goe.” This communion with the beasts firmly locates Trowle in a lower sphere of consciousness with the animals. Nonsense verse often explores the union of human and animal through animal personification, but Trowle challenges human consciousness through his mental degradation (similar to human madness in nonsense).\(^86\) Trowle’s performance of this relationship can further elucidate this aspect of nonsense. Trowle goes on:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wotte I not, day or night,} \\
\text{Necessaryes that to mee beelongen.} \\
\text{Tarboyste and tarboll}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^86\) Chapter Five discusses the intricacies of this sometimes animal-based nonsense commentary on human consciousness.
Yee shall here;
Nettle, hemlock, and butter abydinge,
And my good dog Dottynolle
That is nothinge cheeffe of his chydinge. (173-179)

Trowle makes a short list of mostly useless belongings. “Tarboyste and tarboll,” “nettle,” “hemlock,” and “butter abydinge” all have somewhat medicinal implications, but make a sparse repertoire, unlike Hankin’s herbal wares. This short list of tar and herbs also contrasts the relative extravagance of the other shepherds’ recent feast. His relative poverty further qualifies him to eventually assume the role of fool-king (of the shepherds). Finally, the list concludes with his “good dogge Dottynolle” as his final possession. Again, a dog appears within silly verse, bringing with it folkloric associations of madness.87 Though dogs often accompany shepherds, the explicit mention of this dog implies a connection with the nonsense animal. The dog’s name, “Dottynolle,” means “silly-head,” a humorous name that definitely locates the animal within a comic, nonsensical realm.88 The animal “is nothinge cheeffe of his chydinge” of Trowle. This statement, in reference to the dog’s constant barking, again comically places Trowle in conversation with animals. In fact, the dog is chiding him, shifting the expected dominance of man and animal. As a nonsense character, Trowle is doubly low, first through his close identification with animals, and second through his poverty and isolation from the other shepherds. This lowness becomes the vehicle by which Trowle triumphs over his masters, much as how nonsense triumphs over logic by completely rejecting its premises.

Trowle’s next stanza begins with a joke wound up with defiance of authority and an ambiguous sense of location:

Yf any man come mee bye
And would wytt which waye best were,
My legge I lifte up whereas I lye
And wishe him the waye easte and weste where.

And I rose where I laye,  
Me would thinke that travell loste.  
For king ne duke, by this daye,  
Ryse I will not but take my reste here. (180-187)

Wandering with his sheep on the moor, Trowle proves ambivalent towards both geographical location and human interaction through his ridiculous response to other imagined travelers. He explains that he would reply to anyone who asks for direction: “My legge I lifte up whereas I lye / And wishe him the waye easte and weste where.” Trowle’s gesture imitates that of a dog urinating, again lowering himself to animalistic behavior. This response defies not only human interaction but also conventional directionality, conflating “easte and weste where” and therefore eliminating their indicative significances. In many nonsense poems, strange journeys produce personified animals (in Trowle’s case, animalized people). The connection of indefinite space with absurd spectacle helps to define a separate nonsense “realm”, allowing the transgressions of nonsense to escape certain logical confines of reality; this slight creation of a different space appears in this description of Trowle’s surroundings. Trowle has no intention of leaving this indeterminate (but paradoxically bolstering) position “for king ne duke.” He denounces political positions of authority, directly associating the subversion of nonsense with the topsy-turvydom of carnival.

Finally, at the end of his next stanza, Trowle declares that “Noe man drinke here shall / Save my selfe, the Devyll of the sope” (192-193). By proclaiming himself “Devyl of the sope,” Trowle asserts a certain authority that bases its claims in drunkenness, typically indicative of inferiority. Thus, his claim is itself a subversion of logic that nonetheless endows him with a certain power, evident in his pronouncement, “Noe man drinke here shall / save my selfe,” indicating a certain privilege and ability to enforce his declaration. He proves capable of exercising this power later in the play in his scuffle with his masters. Further, this moment

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89 See appendix for full text.
mimics the same drink-as-reward motif present in all of the shepherds’ comic speeches. This motif again relates to a nonsense verse structure, where a successful nonsense performance ends with reference to this reward. By calling himself “Devyll of the sope,” Trowle declares his performance the most successful, identifying himself as most closely aligned to the nonsense tradition, appropriately in accordance with his Bakhtinian positioning.

In many morality plays, nonsense becomes the fare of minor fiends, as Elizabetta Tarantino describes in her work on William Wager’s morality plays. *Mankind* uniquely contextualizes this demonic nonsense through the character of Titivillus, a demon popular in the medieval imagination and a central spectacle of the play. Titivillus was a well-known devil that collected idle words (the chitchat of unengaged parishioners) and misspoken sermons during the Mass and damningly stored them in a sack to present to God. This demon could also induce mistakes in speech and writing—effectively, he creates linguistic nonsense. In the fifteenth-century treatise *Myroure of Oure Ladye*, Titivillus introduces himself thus: “I am a poure dyuel, and my name ys Tytyvyllus…I muste eche day…brynge m y master a thousande pokes full of faylynges, and of neglygences in syllables and wordes” (I.xx.54). Fiends, like nonsense verse, are inherently subversive. Especially in the moralities, they deliberately corrupt the God-ordained path of mankind. They commonly participate in the same sexual, scatological, and nonsensical humor as the comically low, establishing fiendish demons as another facet of the comically low nonsense fool in the medieval tradition. Titivillus’ character connects moral subversion with the language-based subversion of nonsense in the medieval dramas in which he appears. Mischief, Nowadays, New Guise, and Nought, the fiends of *Mankind*, frequently use language manipulation to subvert moral authority (symbolized by the character of Mercy in the

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play). Importantly, the fiends that speak nonsense are never characterized as the most innately evil; rather, they act more as comic buffoons and seem to be valued by medieval audiences.

After the introduction of New Gyse, Nowadays and Nought into *Mankind*, the fiends quickly start to ridicule Mercy’s “Englysch Laten” (124). Though the following lines do not contain nonsense, they are significantly related to the stanza of nonsense that immediately follows them. Their treatment of language thus informs the related nonsense tradition. Following Mercy’s self-introduction, Nowadays, like Mischief, demands that Mercy translate absurdities:92

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I prey yow hertyly, worschyppull clerke,  
To have this Englysch mad in Laten:  
‘I have etun a dyschfull of curdys,  
And I have schetun yowr mouth full of turdys,’  
Now open yowr satchel with Laten wordys  
And sey me this in clerlycall manere! (131-136)
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Nowadays calls Mercy a “worschyppull clerke,” explicitly ridiculing Mercy’s linguistic “clerycall manere,” similar to that of a church scholar. He then asks him to translate scatology: “I have etun a dyschfull of curdys, / And I have schetun yowr mouth full of turdys.” The vulgar nonsense lines are very corporeal; they center on bodily consumption and defecation. This surprising crudeness of the image contrasts with refined church Latin; the juxtaposition of high language with low humor denigrates Mercy’s language. By asking Mercy, who speaks with a sophisticated command of Church Latin, to clarify this nonsense, Nowadays equates Mercy’s class- and morally-signifying language with nonsense, comically degrading its power. This satire of Church hierarchy criticizes the pompous language of over-educated clerics, as excessive and meaningless as nonsense to lay people. In the context of *Mankind*, it is important that nonsense will eventually become intertwined with this thematic commentary on language and hierarchy. These lines make this insult explicit. Because Mercy’s high language comes from his mouth, Nowadays equates the church Latin with his feces, directly assaulting Mercy’s speech. This

92 See page 25 of this chapter.
phrase also shares its end-rhyme with the following line: “Now open yowr satchel with Laten wordys”, uniting the three middle lines of the stanza. Nowadays references this “satchel with Laten wordys” in association with his nonsense. Titivillus is often described as collecting idle words into a satchel.\textsuperscript{93} So, Mercy stores Latin words as Titivillus stores frivolous chatter—nonsense. The analogy presents the virtue as demonic, critiquing the assumption of moral superiority signified by Latin. Nonsense speech immediately follows this scene, connecting it to this commentary. Nonsense language also violates some ideal of expression; its meaninglessness is thus transgressive. Nowadays’s speech continues with nonsense verse:

Also I have a wyf, her name ys Rachell;
Betwyx her and me was a gret batell;
And fayn of yow I wolde here tell
Who was the most master. (137-140)

The scene considers the amusement of a wife overpowering her husband in a battle, and comically inverts traditional concepts of gender roles to imply a certain feminine weakness in Nowadays. These four lines stand on their own in a separate, more harmless comic moment than earlier, seemingly uninvolved with the dramatic relationships of the play. Still, it is at least performatively associated with the scatological insult in the previous lines, proving that these two examples are both conceptually related to the nonsense tradition. Though lines 137-140 are less obviously subversive than lines 131-136, they are connected to the tradition by their idleness, their lack of purpose or relevant meaning. These seemingly innocuous lines closely resemble much standalone nonsense verse, demonstrating the subtle but inherent subversion present in the entire nonsense tradition. Additionally, the use of nonsense language to subvert well-educated language demonstrates a certain power in nonsense to disregard manifestations of hierarchy, thus elevating the nonsense speaker through their humor. Mercy chastises the minor

\textsuperscript{93} Op. cit., Jennings.
Vices with, “Thys ydyll language ye xall repent” (147).\textsuperscript{94} Mercy characterizes the previous language as indeed sinful “idyll language.” This strongly associates nonsense with Titivillus’ collection of sinful language, confirming the perception of the meaninglessness of nonsense as transgressive. Because it distinguishes between Virtue and Vice in Mankind, nonsense certainly signifies a subversion of moral order, both through overt aggression and idle, indulgent behavior. Beyond this, though, nonsense is used as a vehicle to criticize the elite, diminishing the authority signified by the over-use of educated language. Interestingly, the nonsense fiends become the anti-clerical voice of the lay people in the performance, most aligned with their audience. This duality of the fiends as agents of corruption and voice of the populus is enabled by the paradoxically-empowering low voice of nonsense speakers.

The nonsense speakers in Magnyfycence are especially relevant to the construction of nonsense characters in medieval and Early Modern literature. As with earlier nonsense, only the lowest of the comic character utter true nonsense in Magnyfycence. While other Vices exhibit the short lines and dense rhymes of doggerel and skeltonics, Fansy and Foly, the comic fools of the play, are the sole speakers of nonsense; this marks it as the basest possible degradation of language and representative of the lowest possible moral and socio-political state of existence in the play. This concept of lowness is borne out in the sources of the characters’ knowledge: while the Virtues oft-quote scripture to support their arguments, the Vices rely on proverbial folk-knowledge, marking a clear association of nonsense and similar language with folk culture.\textsuperscript{95} In Magnyfycence, Fansy and Foly’s nonsense deviates from the main narrative of the play in isolated entertainments moment. As explored, these independent moments are characterized by deception; their nonsense forms tall tales that manage to dupe Magnyfycence into sin. Both

\textsuperscript{94} Immediately before this, the fiends’ buffoonery continues with more vulgar jokes between Nowadays and Nought, telling each other to “Osculare fundamentum!” (142) or to “putt yowr nose in [Pope Pokett’s] wyffys sokett” (145); such scatological and sexual humor often appear with nonsense.

agents of corruption and the main comic characters of the play, Fansy and Foly harness the same duality as *Mankind*’s fiends and Trowle the shepherds’ boy, demonstrating a continuity of nonsense character that assumes qualities from both versions of the comically low nonsense fool.

In the middle of Foly’s nonsensical sermon, Magnyfycence says to Foly, “By Cockes harte, thou arte a fine mery knave!” (1824). “Mery” is a term oft-applied to Fansy and Foly in *Magnyfycence*, a word which both means happy and mad. The duality of this term elucidates the attitude towards the Vice-derived fool in the late medieval period. The fool appears as a joyful hedonist, not privy to the laws of the real world and human consciousness. Magnyfycence applies this adjective to Foly in the middle of his nonsense speech, establishing the social context of nonsense as the property of these merry fools. Throughout morality plays, fiends and fools such as Foly are highly entertaining, well-loved characters, and yet they remain villains and their nonsense a form of villainy—such is the duality of the nonsense speaker. Its main danger is idleness; even as it entertains Magnyfycence, it distracts him from his dilapidating court and from his princely duties. The whims of nonsense threaten self-discipline and industriousness, and they must be conquered by Measure in *Magnyfycence*.

As the language of Magnyfycence decays with the corruption of the prince, so does the content of the language. The fiends of the play increasingly speak “in bastarde ryme, after the dogrell gyse” (408) and in skeltonics, short-lined verses with long rhyme leashes that appear throughout Skelton’s work. In *Magnyfycence*, both are comedic and informal, thick with rhyme in couplets or greater prolongations of end-rhyme, sometimes consistent throughout entire stanzas. While doggerel and skeltonics are the property of all of the fiends, however, true nonsensical content appears only with Fansy and Foly, the fools of *Magnyfycence*. Immediately before Foly’s introduction to Fansy, Courtly Abusyon exits the scene, leaving Fansy alone on the stage. Fansy begin his monologue in clear skeltonics, describing his buffoonish hunting hawk
(likely a stuffed owl). The light verse paired with his bragging description of the glorified owl invites a comedy of contrasts similar to the subversive spirit of nonsense; fittingly, the skeltonics morph into the ridiculousness of nonsense verse immediately prior to Foly’s entrance: “And howe styll she dothe sytt / Te[w]yt te[w]yt! / Where is my wyt? / The devyll spede whyt!” (1002-1005). According to Walker, Fansy mistakenly utters an owl call (tuwhit) to the bird, revealing the animal’s true identity and revealing his artifice. To recover his error, he makes a pun on the rhyme “wyt”, a shift that prompts his proceeding nonsense speech. The association of wit with nonsense appears in other places in the medieval dramatic canon; the word “wyt” initiating nonsense verse strengthens this association. Furthermore, Fansy’s nonsense is presented as a recovery; it is an intentionally distracting and digressive moment in the play, which also signals its ridiculousness and pure entertainment value to the audience. The stylistic shift is clear: the two- or three-footed skeltonics grows to four- to six-footed verse and four-lined rhymed stanzas transition into a thirty-five-lined series of couplets, now focused on Fansy himself:

    That was before I set behynde:
    Now to curteys, forwith unkynde;
    Somtyme to sober, somtyme to sadde,
    Somtyme to mery, somtyme to madde,
    Somtyme I syt as I were a solempe prowde,
    Somtyme I laughe over lowed… (1006-1011)

Fansy is nothing more than disguised foolery, and so the monologue too is erratic and contradictory, full of contrasts and inversions. Fansy sets what was first, “behynde,” a reversal of value common in nonsense poems; it is a mirroring technique. Such subversion extends beyond physical principles, and applies also to manners, emotions, and behaviors, as Fansy explains. Punctuated by the repetition of “somtyme,” Fansy may at any time be “sober,” “sadde,” “mery,” “madde,” or “solempe prowde;” he may “laughe” or “wepe” with little provocation. This large

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96 Op cit., Walker, 372 n.90.
97 Ibid., 374 n.98.
emotional variation comes to emphasize the meaninglessness of his emotions, the lack of motivating substance behind them. This devaluing of powerful emotional expression continues: “Somtyme I wepe for a gew-gaw, / Somtyme I laughe at waggynge of a straw; / With a pere my love you may wynne, / And ye may lese it for a pynne” (1012-1015). Fansy cries over a “gew-gaw,” and laughs at something as inconsequential as the “waggynge of a straw.” Even love, an abstraction containing a multitude of inflated emotions, is worth only a “pere” or “pynne” to Fansy. Not only are grand emotions dismissed by their association with small, worthless objects, but their abstraction is also made concrete. So, the nonsense subverts large abstractions by connecting them with small concrete items in the speech of the fool. This quick reduction of typically highly valued sentiments initially demonstrates foolishness, but the role of the fool to challenge such values thus extends beyond simple comedy to a challenge of entire human value systems. The nonsense fool thus embodies nonsensical motifs and themes even in self-description; the fool becomes an extension of nonsense itself.

Fansy explains his characteristically flippant nature even further in his speech:

Now I wyll this, and nowe I wyll that,
Make a wyndmyll of a mat.
Now I wolde…and I wyst what…
Where is my cappe? I have lost my hat!
And within an houre after,
Plucke downe an house and set up a rafter. (1026-1031)

Fansy embodies carelessness and self-indulgence, completely entertaining of his whims. The repetition of “Now” and “wolde” forms creates a sense of immediate satisfaction of wants. His desires, however, are ambiguous, either “this,” “that,” or only ellipses—terms that, in performance and probably call for accompanying movements. Deliberate pauses open up the meter for movement, bringing the potential for action into the substance of the verse, bringing physicality to the definite pronouns and verbal pauses. The fool is unapologetically hedonistic, an ally of the physical realm, which his verse reflects. However, the verse is decidedly not a
subject of physical laws involving space, work, or time. He may “make a wyndmyll of a mat” and “…within an houre after, / Plucke downe an house and set up a rafter” according to the most fleeting of his inclinations. Walker glosses such action only as “a foolish idea” (1027), but such impossibility goes beyond the realm of simple foolery; it is a manifestation of the nonsense mechanism of simultaneity. By stating definitively that he may perform impossible actions, Fansy possesses a certain power in his own realm despite the real-world impossibility of his actions. Thus, much like nonsense itself, the fool Fansy does not ascribe to the limitations of logic, making his whims, the origin of his foolish role, paradoxically transcendent. Additionally, the subject matter of this nonsense does not conform to expected thought structures, defying predictable logic.

At Fansy’s entrance into the play, Magnyfycence immediately accuses him of drunkenness: “Me semeth that ye have dronken more than ye have bled” (260). Later, Fansy and Foly, the fools of Magnyfycence, engage in a lengthy comic scene replete with the discussion of fools, dogs, and nonsense rhyme-making. At the end of their interlude, they go to drink, again establishing a relationship between nonsense speakers and drunkenness.

FOLY. Who is mayster of the masshe fat?
FANSY. Ye[a], for he hathe a full dry soule.
CRAFTY CONVEYAUNCE. Cockes armes! Thou shalte kepe the brewhouse boule.
FOLY. But, may I drynke therof whylest that I stare?
CRAFTY CONVEYAUNCE. When Mesure is gone, what nedest thou spare?
Whan Mesure is gone, we may slee care.
FOLY. Nowe then goo we hens. Away the mare! (1320-1324)

Crafty Conveyaunce assigns Fansy and Foly to guarding the brewhouse. Even in the new, corrupted court, the fools do not have any measure of responsibility. With uselessness as the source of their evil, they are even separate from the other Vices of the play—less harmful and more buffoonish. As fools, they can only be expected to continue in their wanton ineffectuality, even in the new court. That this continuance involves alcohol underlines an already recognizable
association between drink and drunkenness with nonsense. Those nonsense speakers related to fool characters especially display such characteristics. Crafty Conveyaunce supplies an explanation for this connection: “When Mesure is gone, what nedest thou spare? / Whan Mesure is gone, we may slee care.” Magnyfycence chronicles a dangerous disregard of carefulness and consideration. Thus, even the Skelton’s high-court comedy carries some recognition of the celebratory force of nonsense-speaking fools, in this case manifest in drinking. This opulent defiance revels in the defiance of care, responsibility, and duty in favor of whimsical pleasures. Thus, festivity subverts virtues of self-denial, a temptation of common-folk and royalty alike.

The specific signals of dramatic nonsense depend on both the character and narrative with which the nonsense associates; however, nonsense verse consistently subverts established hierarchies through accessing a spirit of festivity. This festivity can be evoked in various ways; song and game borrow the celebratory atmospheres of holidays and celebrations, while nonsense lists use the concept of ridiculous excess to convey revelrous indulgence. The nonsense fool, a multi-faceted character, embodies the comic low, using the nonsense spirit of defiant, festive hedonism as a means of empowerment. Exploring these different manifestations of nonsense in medieval drama has helped to reveal some important consistencies in medieval nonsense. I will use these to better contextualize standalone medieval nonsense and establish a literary relationship of medieval to Victorian nonsense. In upcoming chapters, I examine a wide sampling of standalone medieval nonsense verse using the motifs and significations of dramatic nonsense just identified. In particular, I use the nonsense fool to elucidate the context of the nonsense speaker in standalone verse, eventually establishing resonances with Victorian nonsense speakers. The various realms of cognition and perceptions of reality conveyed through such characters are important to the construction of the nonsense world. I also delve into the conflations of animalia and madness found in both medieval and Victorian nonsense, especially
the different significations of the wild and the domestic animal characters. These analyses will elucidate the connection of medieval nonsense to the Victorian tradition.
Chapter Four:  
Contexts, Speakers, and Performance

Instead of the physical, fictional, and distinct characters that populate medieval plays, performers of standalone nonsense occupy a much more ambiguous relationship to the nonsense world. Though both nonsense forms were undoubtedly performance-based (sung or spoken), standalone verse’s removal from dramatic contexts creates a more blurred and casual relationship with the reality of its audience. Still, the examples of nonsense contexts and speakers found in medieval drama provide invaluable references from which to approach the characterization of their standalone counterparts. First-person narrative is constantly used in both medieval and Victorian nonsense verse, making the situation of the nonsense speaker a critical element of the genre throughout its literary history. The present chapter examines the commonalities of the treatment of context and speaker in both medieval standalone nonsense and Carrollian verse. The importance of performance to both traditions becomes evident in the frequent textual presentation of nonsense as orally performed; mock-ballads, carols, and other nonsense songs arise as important forms comprising both traditions. Several other performance motifs emerge across nonsense eras. Drinking, associated with celebration and excess, also reflects the dual nature of the nonsense speaker, a character that occupies the realm of comic lowness but is also elevated through nonsense. The perspectives of such characters develop as dominant thematic tensions in Victorian as well as medieval nonsense verse; this also arises in depictions of lying games and travel. Carrollian nonsense too exhibits these motifs and, more importantly, shares the effects created by these context and speaker characterizations.

Aurality and Music

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, nonsense verse possesses a distinctly auditory quality; it demands to be spoken and heard for its total enjoyment. As such (and also in part due to the range of literacy and scribal capabilities in medieval England), medieval nonsense likely
developed within voiced literary forms. This quality is not only self-evident: the appearances of nonsense in medieval drama repeatedly confirm its oral-performance nature. When nonsense arises in these plays, it consistently exists outside of the narrative, in distinct fragments. Often, these moments take the form of song or game—indications of the performance nature of standalone nonsense verse. Even beyond song and game, nonsense facilitates drama due to its common vocal performance advantages; it consistently uses repetition, assonance and alliteration, list-making, and dense rhyme, all of which gain particular force in spoken forms.

Carrollian verse also consists heavily of such devices; however, the performance emphasis on vocal forms in Carroll’s nonsense poems especially identifies his Victorian nonsense as descendant from the medieval tradition. For example, Carroll’s Mad Hatter, a nonsense-associated character which I discuss in depth in the next chapter, briefly acts as court fool (a nonsense-related role) for the Queen of Hearts in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, performing a nonsense song:

Twinkle, twinkle, little bat
How I wonder what you’re at!
Up above the world you fly,
Like a tea-tray in the sky.
Twinkle, twinkle—

First of all, the deviance of the poem from a nursery rhyme shows the clear divide between the genres. “Twinkle, twinkle, little star” on its own does not contain any of the incongruent absurdities that characterize nonsense; however, Carroll’s modifications create a nonsensical tone that deliberately turns the song into nonsense. Nonetheless, the poem preserves the well-known melody of the nursery rhyme (despite several vocabulary-based modifications, none impede the execution of the familiar melodic meter) and clearly occupies a performance situation.

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98 I extensively explored the appearance of nonsense as song and game in the first section of Chapter Three.
99 “Lewis Carroll, “The Mad Hatter’s Song” in The collected verse of Lewis Carroll (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1929), 63. All Carrollian verse is taken from this source unless otherwise noted. Line number is located in-text and page number is included in the citation.
in the narrative. Even the title given to the song, “The Mad Hatter’s Song,” indicates both musical context and the presence of a dominant speaker implicated in the nonsense itself. In fact, many of Carroll’s nonsense verse follows this title pattern: “The Mock-Turtle’s Song,” “The Duchess’s Lullaby,” “Alice’s Recitation,” “Humpty-Dumpty’s Recitation,” “The White Knight’s Ballad,” “The Red Queen’s Lullaby,” “The White Queen’s Riddle,” “The Mad Gardener’s Song,” “The Warden’s Charm,” “Bruno’s Song,” “Lady Muriel’s Song” and “The King-Fisher Song.” The titles of these poems stress the intertwining of performance context and nonsense speaker in nonsense verse. In each case, the nonsense verse is located in a definitively vocal and often musical context, as song, lullaby, ballad, or other spoken verse. Additionally, each immediately identifies the speaker of the nonsense as possessor of the nonsense, placing each speaker in close relation to the nonsense that she produces. In both medieval and Victorian traditions of nonsense, the poems are often spoken in first-person, or use quotations to emphasize the main nonsense speaker. The important emphasis on this performance- and character-based delivery of nonsense appears in the closing lines of the medieval poem “Song on Woman:”

He that made this songe full good,  
Came of the northe and of the sothern blode,  
And somewhat kyne to Robyn Hode;  
Yit all we be nat so. (32-35)

In an oft-repeated medieval motif, the speaker of the standalone nonsense emerges at the end of the poem, injecting himself into the nonsense. In this case, the speaker relates himself strongly to contemporary nonsense poems by describing his own essence as contradictory, “came of the northe and of the sothern blode,” and by reference to Robin Hood, a very common character in medieval nonsense poems. Thus, the speaker of the poem himself becomes nonsensical, a

100 Because all of the verses of AAIW and TTLG were published and sometimes initially produced separately by Carroll, they all have particular titles chosen by Lewis Carroll himself.  
101 “Song on Woman” in Reliquiae antiquae: scraps from ancient manuscripts, illustrating chiefly early English literature vol. 1, eds. Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell (London: John Russel Smith, 1845), 248.
member of the nonsense world, although he also occupies the real world as a physically present storyteller. This performance-based role echoes that of an actor in a drama, but has a more complex relationship to reality. Instead of entering a fictional world as an actor, the nonsense speaker draws the nonsense world into reality, often by attesting to its verity or by using some of the other constructs explored in this chapter. Musical nonsense undoubtedly confirms this performative nature, and the festivity of song and celebration help to create a world in which nonsense values may enter.

The medieval nonsense carol, “My Lady went to Canterbury” exemplifies the musical nonsense poem in medieval England. It is derived from “Kele’s Christmas Carols,” a series of folk-carols collected by Richard Kele in 1550. This set of brochures was typed and published in Phillip Bliss’ *Bibliographical Miscellanies* in 1813, and later republished by William Henry Husk in 1868 in his collection *Songs of the Nativity*. Though found among a collection of Christmas carols, the verses never mention Christmas or any associated traditions; in fact, the song only references Michaelmas, a holiday which falls on September 29. The carol is an unusual addition to the other carols. Husk makes an interesting explanation:

> It is probably the earliest of a class of pieces which were in great favour a century or so afterwards…under the denomination of “Mad Songs;” in which the incoherent utterances of a maniac are made the vehicle of amusement. The present is the only instance of such a production being found in a collection of carols, although none can doubt the power of such a disconnected rhapsody to excite the boisterous merriment of a group of Christmas revellers, forgetful of all care and reflection, and bent only on amusement.

With no direct references to Christmas beliefs and rituals, the song likely warranted inclusion in the collection for reasons of its celebratory associations, connected to a revelrous holiday.

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103 It is mentioned as “Nine myle to Michelmas” (9), further complicating any temporal location of the carol due to the common nonsense technique of conflating systems of measurement to topsy-turvy ends.

atmosphere. This aspect of nonsense carols is confirmed by the appearance of musical nonsense in drama; for example, the scatological mock-carol of the nonsense-speaking fiends in *Mankind* is associated with both Christmas carolling (referred to as “a Crystemes songe” (333) by Nowadays) and with hedonistic merrymaking. Like the *Mankind* carol, “My Lady went to Canterbury” also carries mocking tones, in this case loosely parodi
ing a romantic ballad. The refrain and first stanza follow:

My harte of gold as true as steele,
As I me lened to a bough,
In faith, but yf ye loue me well,
Lorde, so Robyn lough!
My lady went to Caunterbury
The Sainte to be her bothe.
She met with Cate of Malmesbury
Why wepyst thou in an apple rote? (1-8)

This refrain hardly seems nonsensical, and yet it belongs to a song rife with nonsense, ranging from *animalia* to *impossibilia*, along with many other nonsensical motifs. The components of a romantic ballad vaguely appear in the introduction: a true heart, Robin (a common medieval gallant), a lady, and a natural setting. These elements connect this carol with the medieval ballad tradition, and as such draw another strong association between nonsense, performance, and music. In fact, this example of standalone nonsense particularly demonstrates the flexibility of vocal forms, as it appears in multiple other provocative literary locations. Thomas Ravenscroft, an early compiler of British folk music, includes this stanza in his 1609 *Pammelia*:

My heart of gold as true as steele
As I me leant unto the bowres,
But if my Lady loue me well,
Lord so Robin lowres…
My Ladies gone to Canterbury,
S. Thomas be her boote.
She met with Kate of Malmsbury,

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106 See appendix for full text.
107 In fact, Carroll depicts a suitor named “Robin” in his poem “The Willow-Tree.”
Why weepst thou maple roote:
O sleepst thou wakst thou Jeffery Cooke (31-32)  

In this instance of the song, only a short stanza follows this introduction, but even this brief version is recognizably a nonsense song unconnected with Christmas. This evolution of a nonsense carol into the Early Modern period unequivocally shows the continuity of the tradition in voiced and performance-based forms; the changes in the carol demonstrate the fluidity that arises in oral tradition. However, despite these changes, the song also reveals the strength of such literary forms. The vocabulary and references found in the song, particularly to the Canterbury pilgrimage (in both versions), Saint Katherine of Kent (in the Kele version), and the antiquated vocabulary used in the Early Modern version (“bowres,” “lowres”) indicate even earlier origins for the nonsense song. In 1988, J.C. Holt and Toshiyuki Takamiya transcribed a previously unpublished manuscript, dated around 1450 (100 years older than the Kele version and 170 years older than the Ravenscroft), as “A new version of ‘A rhyme of Robin Hood.’” The first stanza reads thus:

Robyn Hudde in Berndale stode
He leynyd hym tyl a maple thystyll
The came owre lady and swete seynt Andrew
Slepes thow wakes thow Geoffrey Coke (1-4)

The parallels to the two aforementioned versions of “My Lady went to Caunterbury,” are striking, and to my knowledge previously unnoticed. The initial stanza of this particular song is almost identically reproduced by the character Ignorance in Rastell’s 1520 drama The Four Interludes, another late medieval morality play. When prompted to sing a “balet,” Ignorance

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110 Ibid., 225.
sings a long nonsense song involving the feats of Robin Hood. Douglas Grey, a Robin Hood scholar, explains the choice thus: “Ignorance’s song certainly gives memorable expression to the moralists’ view that Robin Hood songs are not only idle and time wasting but also very foolish.” It is not difficult to understand, then, the frequent appearance of Robin Hood in nonsense poems—both literary traditions occupy a realm of frivolity that also may be traversed by morality-play fiends.

Obviously, the medieval songs I have presented are highly interconnected; this fluidity arises from a rich oral tradition. Furthermore, all of these examples except for the Holt and Takamiya verse are explicitly musical, implying that this standalone poem was likely also musically performed. In fact, it is probably true that much of the standalone nonsense found in manuscripts was sung, necessitating the performance context that music requires. This condition, as well as the dominance of the character of the nonsense performer, appears to be a defining aspect of medieval nonsense.

In all of these poems (except Rastell’s Robin Hood), the first person use of “I” and “my,” as well as direct quotation and address appear frequently, implicating the nonsense speaker as an active perceiver and mediator of the nonsense world. The entanglement of the voiced, performance-aspect of nonsense and the nonsense speaker figures prominently in the work of Lewis Carroll as well. Even in the highly textual literary nonsense produced in the Victorian era, nonsense is depicted as highly vocal. Many nonsense poems that appear in narratives such as Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass were composed prior to the surrounding stories themselves; all of the embedded poems form the same kind of tangential and separate entertainment moments as nonsense within medieval drama. Carroll also produced a significant body of standalone nonsense that displays similar properties, emphasizing spoken

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verse and musicality and clearly identifying nonsense performers. “The King-Fisher Song” uses nonsense in its depiction of a courting ritual—essentially a mock-ballad—and clearly demonstrates the contextual continuities that I have asserted thus far. The poem begins:

King Fisher courted Lady Bird—
Sing Beans, sing Bones, sing Butterflies!
“Find me my match,” he said,
“With such a noble head—
With such a beard, as white as curd—
With such expressive eyes!” (1-6)114

As I have already mentioned, the title of this poem references both musical contexts and a specific nonsense performer. Unlike the other similar titles, however, “The King-Fisher Song” does not contain a possessive; this poem does not belong to the King-Fisher. In fact, the rest of the poem consists of Lady Bird responding to this first stanza with deconstructing (though still amusing) logic—she rejects King Fisher with, “So get you gone--’tis too absurd / To come a-courting me!” (23-24)—essentially citing King Fisher’s absurdity as his inadequacy. Despite the dominant, logical voice of Lady Bird in this poem, King Fisher’s nonsense becomes the subject of the poem—hence the title. His statement—he is looking for a match with a “noble head,” “a beard, as white as curd,” and “expressive eyes”—touches on absurdity with its random and somewhat unpredictable descriptive combinations, but the true nonsense of the poem is the interjecting, apparently musical verse in every stanza (written in italics). These lines even penetrate the speech of Lady Bird: “Sing Prunes, sing Prawns, sing Primrose-Hill!,” “Sing Flies, sing Frogs, sing Fiddle-strings!,” “Sing Cats, sing Corks, sing Cowslip-tea!” (8, 14, 20). These lyrics are clearly the most nonsensical elements of the poem, exhibiting the absurd combinations, alliterative listing, and animal and domestic imagery that so commonly define nonsense verse. Their musical format and poetic pervasiveness also locate them within the nonsense tradition.

The title of this poem, then, “The King-Fisher Song,” refers more directly to these musical interjections than the (also amusing) speech of the poem, making the subject of this poem both the nonsense lyrics and King Fisher himself. Though the lyrics are never specifically assigned to King Fisher, his performance is implied both by courting ritual and his association with the lyrics in the first stanza. Furthermore, King Fisher’s (a species of bird) pursuit of Lady Bird (a ladybug) could denote a slightly more sinister narrative; King Fisher may be tempting Lady Bird with his nonsense in order to entrap her, as insects are birds’ natural prey. In this context, nonsense becomes a vehicle of hedonistic attraction, another property which frequently appears in medieval nonsense. Altogether, King Fisher is in many ways a musical nonsense performer in the same tradition as the nonsense speakers of medieval poems. Even further, as the nonsense speaker he is also a subject of nonsense; this interaction of performer with subject is essential to both nonsense traditions.

The consistent relationship between nonsense and musicality also initiates festivity in much the same way in the medieval as well as the Victorian tradition. As I have mentioned, this is evident in the loose association of some nonsense songs with holidays (such as the shepherds’ Gloria and the nonsense in Christmas manuscripts). In Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, “The Mock-Turtle’s Song” demonstrates the celebratory invitation of nonsense in the Victorian age; its oft-repeated refrain (among travelling and animalia) goes, “Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, won’t you join the dance?” (5-6, 16-17). The entire song consists of an invitation for a small, slow snail to join the exuberant dance of the aquatic animals into the ocean. The activity is presented as exciting—the atmosphere is characterized by words like “faster” (1), “eagerly” (3), and “delightful” (7)—but the snail, unlike the other characters, is not strictly

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aquatic, making the dance into the ocean potentially hazardous. The festive spirit, like medieval nonsense, is a slightly dangerous rejection of logical concern, in this case the ability of a snail to join in an aquatic celebration. The voice of the song becomes a tempting solicitor, much like the fiends of morality plays (and even the King-Fisher) whose frivolous nonsense threatens the safety of salvation in exchange for hedonistic entertainment. The musical performance aspect of nonsense arises in both the medieval and Victorian tradition, demonstrating the continued significations of nonsense over time. This spirit of celebration and riotous performance also appears through other shared nonsense motifs.

**Drinking**

Drinking is another important celebratory and performative signal found throughout nonsense verse particularly associated with nonsense speakers. The motif appears throughout medieval dramatic nonsense. Nonsense speakers—especially those comic low related to the fool character—commonly appear as drunken or eager to drink. In particular, the comic doctor of *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament* is characterized as a drunkard, and in the overturned, fiend-ruled court of *Magnyfycence*, the nonsense speakers Fansy and Foly are assigned to guard the court’s brewery. The frequent concurrence of alcohol with comically low characters arises from the entertainment associations with alcoholic consumption; drinking is associated with drunkenness, which certainly facilitates the sexual, scatological, and illogical hilarity often found in nonsense speakers. The medieval theme of drunkenness is obviously not often found in the work of Lewis Carroll, as his work specifically speaks to children. However, drunkenness and excess does persist in the nonsense work of Carroll. In fact, the same celebratory connotation that I explored in the musicality of nonsense arises in an atmosphere of drinking. In the highly nonsense-associated scene of the “Mad Tea Party,” it is significant that the medievally-associated nonsense

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116 It is difficult to say how hazardous, since it is a nonsense world.
117 Carroll’s college rhymes, however, do include “A Bachanalian Ode.”
characters the Mad Hatter and the March Hare are presented in a celebratory, festive context—the association with tea may be derived from the association of drink and nonsense found in medieval literature. Of course, alcoholic drinks and their celebratory associations are not absent from Carroll’s work either (for one, the March Hare originally offers Alice wine at the tea party). In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice becomes a Queen alongside the Red and White Queens of Wonderland, prompting the celebratory song “Welcome Queen Alice:”

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Then fill up the glasses with treacle and ink,
Or anything else that is pleasant to drink;
Mix sand with the cider, and wool with the wine—
And welcome Queen Alice with ninety-times-nine! (13-16)
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This entire nonsense sequence forms a call to festivity. This excerpt not only demonstrates the celebratory associations of drinking (note that this sequence includes the alcoholic drinks cider and wine as well as nonsensical additions)—the excess of consumption also figures heavily into this invitation. The stanza forms a small list of potential (nonsense) beverages, including “treacle,” “ink,” “sand,” “cider,” “wool,” and “wine,” but also includes “anything else,” a non-specific phrase that contributes to an atmosphere of excess. This sense of listing and increase also culminates in the last line of the stanza, where Alice is welcomed “with ninety-times-nine,” a ninefold increase on the last line of a prior stanza, where she is welcomed with “thirty-times-three” (8). This manner of revelrous excess, often characterized by drinking and feasting, is similar to that found in the Chester Shepherds’ feast, where the ridiculousness of the listing feeds into an atmosphere of extravagance. Both the enumeration and the absurdity of items can create the nonsense atmosphere.

Drinking as a nonsense context goes beyond celebratory experiences. The medieval standalone poem “Mone in the mornyng” (c. 1450) displays the capability of drinking to initiate

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nonsense. It begins, “The mone in the mornyng merely rose, / When the sonne and the sevon sterres softly wer leyd / In a slommyng of slepe for-slockond with ale (1-3). The moon appears before an account of animalia and other absurdities in an atmosphere of lunatic associations. The unusual rise of the moon in the morning is associated with the drunkenness of the sun and stars; thus, drunkenness contributes to the initiation of nonsense that follows in the poem. Besides celebration, drinking invites nonsense due to its ability to chemically alter mental faculties—such a disruption of human logical capabilities naturally compares to the instability of reason in nonsense, making drinking a suitable induction of nonsense into reality. Furthermore, excessive drinking often occurs in comically low, buffoonish, and often unsavory characters: the nonsense performers.

Beyond context, the motif of drinking in nonsense also reveals some important properties of the performance nature of the nonsense speaker in both medieval and Victorian nonsense. The Chester Shepherds, whom I have identified as characters particularly in-line with the medieval atmosphere of nonsense, are heavy drinkers. Importantly, after every microcosmic nonsense performance (whether in list or, in Trowle’s case, animalia and topsy-turvy-based nonsense), the shepherds explicitly ask for a drink; the declarations address the audience as a permitting presence, implying that drink is the reward for a successful nonsense performance. This drink-as-reward motif also appears frequently in medieval standalone nonsense verse, and places nonsense speakers in a performance context. It also highlights the subjective perspective of the nonsense speaker. Consider the closing lines of “Herkyn to my tale” (c. 1450): “God as he

120 I will discuss the importance of such folkloric significations further in the following chapter.
At the completion of the nonsense tale, the speaker explicitly asks for a drink as a reward for her performance. In this case, the request occurs right after a common colloquialism, in part solidifying its strong presence as a medieval motif. Another version of “Herkyn to my tale,” despite some significant differences in middle content, has a very similar ending: “But God, as he made us, and mend us he may, / Save us and send us some drynke or we dye” (65-66). The preservation of this motif at the end of this alternate version confirms its thematic importance. This motif is significant enough to be carried across medieval versions both in content and in its location in the poem. The difference in these lines, the exchange of “for this dey” for “or we die,” arises from the similar Middle English pronunciation of “dey” and “die,” further evidence of the spoken tradition of literature involved in medieval nonsense. This little shift marks these phrases as exchangeable intensifiers for “save us and send us some drink,” present mainly to emphasize the drink-as-reward motif. The request places the speaker of the poem into a performance construct; the desire for reward necessitates that the previous actions deserve reward. However, in this type of acknowledgement the speaker also muddies the delineation between worlds of nonsense and reality, becoming a nonsense agent. These poems often contain multiple testaments to the verity of the nonsensical events, and the speaker becomes responsible for creating both absurd and convincing nonsense—the tension between these elements position the speaker like a double-agent, negotiating nonsense with reality through performance. As mentioned, these speakers therefore frequently exist outside of commonly-held logical value systems of honor, social structure, industry, and responsibility. Often in drama, such characters gain qualities of the fool: comic knavery, impropriety, trickery, and fiendishness. In standalone nonsense, the speaker becomes less rigidly a character, but still exhibits the characterized frailty.
of an individual whose performance involves absurdity and overt trickery. This becomes especially evident in these closing moments of standalone poems, where the speaker enters the poem’s content. In the previous examples, the conclusion mentions God’s making and mending of the speaker, a reference to the flaws of humankind and the speaker’s own need for amendment; this in part reveals that standalone nonsense speakers were also automatically comically low. So, these absurd speakers, during their performance, also possess the knavish characteristics of their dramatic counterparts, albeit muted due to the transient nature of their performances. Drinking, then, and the drink-as-reward motif, is involved in both the performance nature of the nonsense speaker and her occupation of the realm of the comic low. “Upon the Lonely Moor,” an earlier version of “The White Knight’s Ballad” contains much stronger speaker-constructing drinking references than the version that appears in *Through the Looking Glass*. The White Knight recounts his discussion with an old man, “that strange wanderer / Upon the lonely moor” (71-72), already marking the old man as both a nonsense marvel perceived by the Knight (“strange”) and a nonsense speaker (nonsense speakers are often “wanderers”—I pursue this in the following section). Because the old man’s speech comprises much of the poem, the White Knight becomes the audience to the old man’s nonsense and by recounting it, a nonsense speaker himself. The last four lines of the penultimate and antepenultimate stanzas of the poem follow:

…“And that’s the way” (he gave a wink)
“I get my living here,
And very gladly I will drink
Your Honour’s health in beer.”

…I duly thanked him, ere I went,
For all his stories queer,
But chiefly for his kind intent
To drink my health in beer. (53-56, 61-64)

122 And, with the use of “us,” may also implicate the audience.
These lines do loosely mimic a medieval drink-as-reward motif; their timely appearance at the conclusion of the old man’s tale and the impression of the polite finality of the event follow a similar pattern medieval verse. However, the relationship between these narrators provides the most poignant comparisons between medieval and Victorian nonsense speakers. Often, Carroll’s nonsense speakers present a complication upon the stereotypical nonsense fool, but in doing so they meaningfully comment on narrator perspective and the narrator’s occupation of the realm between truth and nonsense. Much of Carroll’s nonsense verse occurs in Wonderland, where almost any absurd event is possible, and yet the individual events in the story often occur in narrative form (rather than the first-person experience of Alice, for example). Such nonsense tales, discussed in depth in the following section, necessitate the same nonsense performer-audience relationship found in medieval standalone verse: “Upon the Lonely Moor” makes this relationship somewhat more explicit. The old man is the main nonsense speaker of the sequence: he is oft-quoted in the poem, a “strange wanderer,” and produces “stories queer.” His last words of the poem, included above, use drink as the conclusion to elaborate nonsense describing his manner of living. He also manages to circumvent logical value-systems (even in the topsy-turvy world of Wonderland), implied by the incredulity of the Knight. The differential between the Knight and the old man appears in signs of social class: the old man is a poor, absurd wanderer whom the illustrious White Knight happens upon—the old man addresses the knight as “your Honour.” Further, the old man is identified as the drinker in the poem—his drinking further distinguishes him as a lower, comic character. Even his beverage draws these associations, as the Knight is loosely connected with wine, a drink somewhat more associated with formality than the old man’s beer. Thus, even in Carrollian nonsense, the ethos of the nonsense speaker becomes both connected to and permitted by alcohol consumption. Drinking is also closely related to the role of nonsense speakers as the perceivers of a different realm; in both medieval
and Victorian nonsense, the perspectives of these complicated, low and yet empowered speakers emerges as a recurring theme. Their role as acting mediator of the real and nonsense worlds is strongly reflected in the conserved motifs of lying and travelling tales, but drinking also may be implicated in the perspective of the nonsense speaker, as drunkenness frequently co-occurs with nonsense in medieval drama. Alteration of the nonsense speaker’s perception pervades Victorian nonsense despite the absence of drunkenness—specifically, through the contextualization of nonsense poems as these traveler’s tales and lying games.

**Lying and Travelling Tales**

Two critical nonsense contexts that influence the construction of the nonsense speaker are lying and travelling tales; these often appear as nonsense settings that complicate the position of the nonsense speaker as mediator. The concluding stanza of the medieval lying song “I sawe a dog” shows the conflation of drinking and lying in the perspective of the nonsense narrator:

> I saw an ege etyng a pye;
> Geve me drynke, my mowthe ys drye;
> Ytt ys not long syth I made a lye;
> I will haue the whetson and I may. (27-30)

A line of obvious nonsense (an egg eating a pie) precedes both the drink-as-reward motif and another medieval nonsense motif, the whetstone-as-reward for a lying tale. In the Middle Ages, whetstones were hung around the necks of liars as a type of shaming punishment and became symbolic of the need to sharpen one’s wit to produce a more convincing lie. Its re-appropriation as a prize for nonsense exhibits a particularly topsy-turvy inversion of ethos in the nonsense speaker. The nonsense speaker appears to acknowledge the impossibilities of nonsense, and yet the prize becomes related to verity of the nonsense story. In practice, this reward likely

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fell to the most entertaining nonsense—created by the best performer. So, the successful performance of the nonsense speaker becomes both transgressive as a lie and valued as entertainment; again, the unique duality of the nonsense speaker arises, in this case through the nature of performance and impersonation. Unlike the context of a play, the primary setting of a nonsense performance is in reality. Part of the personae of standalone nonsense performers is the role of an honest storyteller; fiction becomes less surely separated from the reality of the moment, since the teller must purport to convince the audience to believe the absurd story. Rather than taking on a character, the nonsense speaker takes on a story, and must insist on the truth of absurdity. This inevitable positioning contributes to the conserved presentation of nonsense speakers as foolish and false, a presentation which continues in the work of Lewis Carroll. Carroll’s standalone poem “Ye Carpette Knyghte” is one of his many poems which mimics Middle English spelling and vocabulary, indicating some familiarity with medieval writing. The poem is a dialogue between the absurd Carpette Knyghte and an unidentified questioner. Yet again, Carroll inserts performance-based tension between nonsense speaker and audience in his textually-based work. The poem begins each of three stanzas with a declaration, the Knyghte asserting his possession of an element of his horse: “I have a horse” (1), “I have a saddel” (7), and “I have a bytte” (13). Of course, it turns out that these are actually a “horse of clothes” (6), “a mutton saddel” (11), and a “bytte of rhyme” (18). The speaker’s falsities, however ridiculous, still allow him the title of “Carpette Knyghte,” exhibiting the same type of duality in this false character that nonsense speakers assume in medieval nonsense: if the artifice succeeds in entertainment, the speaker inhabits the world of nonsense, implicated in her own lie. The Carpette Knyghte exhibits a high/low duality similar to the impersonators Fansy and Foly, facilitated by the lying structure of nonsense, which operates on the perspective of the nonsense

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speaker. The conclusion of this Carrollian poem underscores this character’s role as a nonsense
performer:

I have a bytte—a ryghte good bytte—
As shall bee seene yn tyme.
Ye jawe of horse yt wyll not fytte;
Yts use ys more sublyme.
Fayre Syr, how deemest thou of yt?
Yt ys—thys bytte of rhyme. (13-18)

This stanza makes a final leap similar to that which appears in medieval nonsense poems. It is
customary for the last few lines of the standalone verse to contain a direct address of the
nonsense speaker to the audience, and implicate herself as both performer and inhabitant of the
nonsense world. In his final lines, the Carpette Knyghte similarly equates his rhyme to his
nonsense-oriented linguistic constructions through the pun on his horse’s bit and a bit of rhyme.
In doing so, the Knyghte explicitly acknowledges the poetic artificiality of the nonsense; he
occupies roles of both performer of rhyme and nonsense character.

The travelling motif commonly found in nonsense also involves the agency of the
nonsense speaker and navigates the boundaries between nonsense and reality. Medieval nonsense
poems are commonly involved with travelling or journeying, as they provide opportunities for
observation in a different location and allow the possibility of absurdities beyond the purview of
the audience. Other nonsense can also mimic this motif; for example, by describing absurd
events as “news” or even to some extent, dreams—they work due to a similar circumvention of
logic by displacement or marveling. The Chester Shepherds’ boy, Trowle, is a nonsense
speaker not subject to directionality in his wanderings. I have also already briefly mentioned a
Victorian counterpart in the old man of “Upon the Lonely Moor,” who is described by the White
Knight as “that strange wanderer / Upon the lonely moor” (71-72). Through this motif, these

127 One such medieval poem uses this refrain for its absurdities: “Newes, newes, newes, newes! / Ye never herd so
many newes!” (1-2). See appendix for full text.
characters become the context for the presentation of their entire nonsense poems. The
sixteenth-century poem “Herkyn to my tale” uses this type of first-person traveler’s construct:

Herkyn to my tale that I schall to yow schew,
For of seche mervels have ye hard bot few;
Yf any of them be ontrue that I schall tell yow aftur,
Then wax I as pore as tho byschop of Chestur.
As I rode from Durram to Dowre I fond by tho hee street… (1-5) 128

As the nonsense takes the form of a traveler’s story, its plausibility is subject to both the
reliability of the narrator and the exceptional possibility of the absurd events occurring in some
different location. Described as “my tale,” the story clearly belongs to the speaker, yet it is not
presented as created fiction. By describing the events as “marvels have ye hard but few,” the
poem acknowledges the strangeness of the following events as a way of strengthening their
believability. Thus, the speaker becomes both performer of a fiction and a teller of a true story.
The amusing tension of this construct appears in the following line, where the speaker commits
herself to the truth of her nonsense by swearing an oath despite its inevitable and obvious falsity.
The speaker must violate her oath in service of her performance, lowering herself by insult while
succeeding in entertainment. 129 The presentation of the nonsense events as occurrences on the
speaker’s journey “from Durram to Dowre” also involves the construction of the speaker.
Because a journey necessitates constant movement, the speaker’s perception is dynamic and the
nonsense events can barely be attributed to a specific place. The journey motif effectively
dislocates nonsense events from a physical location, separating them from the physical
boundaries of geography, another concept dependent on the assumption of logical common
sense. During the recitation of the poem, however, the speaker stands squarely in front of her
audience, now subject to the confines of the present logic in a concrete location. A similar

129 Though the immediate meaning of this oath is obscure, it is possible and seems likely that this Bishop of Chester
was a wealthy individual at the time of the poem, thus making the speaker wealthy if she tells a lie. Whatever the
explicit meaning, the sense of the duality of the nonsense speaker as liar and entertainer is the dominant effect of the
lines. I am grateful to Rob Barrett for aiding in this interpretation.
travelling motif is applied throughout *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, where both nonsense experiences are predicated on the movement in and about Wonderland, a place where the normal laws of common sense and geography do not apply. Alice is very much a Carrollian nonsense speaker: she inhabits both real and nonsense worlds, and struggles to negotiate either world with the other. In “Alice’s Recitation,” she closely follows the nonsense speaker-as-traveler motif:

> I passed by his garden, and marked, with one eye,  
> How the owl and the oyster were sharing a pie;  
> While the duck and the Dodo, the lizard and cat  
> Were swimming in milk round the brim of a hat. (9-12)\(^{130}\)

As she spends much of her time in Wonderland, in this stanza Alice watches nonsensical events in passing; she perceives dynamic action as she herself moves, limiting the location of nonsense in either space or time. In this manner, travelling in Carrollian nonsense makes the same attempt at the evasion of logical constructs in order to create a more plausible nonsense through circumvention of common-sense restrictions. Of course, the speaker also becomes part of the tension between absurdities and truth-claiming. Inevitably, a tale told in the first-person becomes subject to the speaker’s reliability. In these verses, Alice speaks in the first person (“I passed”) and her perception is emphasized: she “marked, with one eye” the *animalia* nonsense events. This attention on the perceptions of Alice shows the inevitable reliance of the audience on the nonsense speaker. In medieval nonsense, this tension between absurdity and honesty of perception manifests in the characterization of the nonsense speaker as having a dual nature, lovably knavish or a sly impersonator. Such sharp duality does not appear as obviously in Carrollian nonsense speakers.\(^{131}\) However, in the case of Alice, the ability to traverse worlds of nonsense and reality manifests in her age. As a child, she has greater right to the flexibility of

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\(^{131}\) Consider the old man of “Upon the Lonely Moor” or the “mad” gardener of “The Mad Gardener’s Song.”
mind and imagination involved in belief in a world of nonsense; the belief in nonsense evolves from genuine lie to genuine imagination in Victorian nonsense, perhaps explaining the transition from the less age-located enjoyment of nonsense in the medieval period to the Victorian children’s genre. Although nonsense appears in seemingly different contexts in the medieval and Victorian ages, it is apparent that the same governing themes and motifs of the presentation of the nonsense world operate in both literatures, firmly uniting the broader significations of the English nonsense genre.
Chapter Five: Animalia, Madness, and Domestication

Nonsense verse creates its topsy-turvy atmosphere by relying heavily on reversals and inversions; one such mirroring technique, the introduction of animalia, endows animal characters with consciousness and humanlike qualities. The animals can cook, farm, sing, do battle—all manner of anthropomorphization arises in the animals of Victorian and medieval nonsense verse. The topsy-turvy reversal that animalia achieves is the exchange of the perceived poles of the animal and the human; making animals human-like implicitly questions human intellectual superiority in the natural world. Thus, the absurd and entertaining scenes of animalia in nonsense consider human consciousness through the advancement of animal consciousness. Animalia’s involvement with varied levels of consciousness also connects it closely to the tradition of madness in nonsense literature. This association of animals and madness appears consistently in medieval dramatic nonsense, signaling a significant connection in the genre: Foly recites animalia-based nonsense in Magnyfycence; Trowle the Chester shepherds’ apprentice and Fansy and Foly the fiends possess mangy dogs; a Towneley shepherd equates garbled nonsense with barking at the moon. Applying this drama-derived context to medieval and Victorian nonsense verse reveals that animals carry the same consciousness-querying properties in standalone nonsense poems, and remain closely involved with the concept of human madness.

Many of the animals of animalia arise simply due to necessities of rhyme, meter, or setting, but others appear frequently and consistently throughout standalone nonsense verse. Such recurring characters include cats, cows, geese, urchins (hedgehogs)—all animals whose commonness and relative domesticity anchor the destabilizing chaos of the animalia nonsense world. Particularly in reference to madness, domesticated animalia stabilizes the unknown, potentially threatening aspects of insanity. The depictions of animalia are not meant to overearnestly probe the origins of mental illness or the precariousness of the human situation that is
possible in this nonsense-based exploration of consciousness; instead, they question those serious logical systems that dominate life in favor of an altogether more entertaining state. Thus, domesticated animals (and domestic imagery) bridge the cognitive gap between wild animals and humanity that nonsense surveys—the balance between these mental realms is the root of both animalia and depictions of madness in nonsense literature. This theme clearly arises in medieval nonsense verse and continues in the Victorian tradition, but it also reveals folkloric origins through the use of particular animals that carry folkloric association with madness; the hare and the dog both consistently signal madness in nonsense literature in this way.

This chapter examines the convergences between madness and animalia in both medieval and Victorian nonsense literature. In particular, I use the folkloric, madness-associated hare and dog to define the manner in which animalia-based nonsense verse uses domestication and wildness to frame the commentary on madness’s alteration of human consciousness. The relationship of mad animals in medieval nonsense becomes clear by comparison to the “mad” inhabitants of Wonderland: the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Cheshire Cat. Ultimately, domestic animalia stabilizes the incomprehensible or uncontrollable aspects of human madness that compromise its unthreatening amusement while still lightheartedly probing the nature of human consciousness.

Lunacy and Animalia

The convergence of madness and animalia appears in the involvement of moon-lore in both medieval and Carrollian nonsense. The hare and the dog demonstrate particularly strong connections with moon-driven madness in medieval nonsense literature, but the effects of the moon on animal consciousness appear consistently in both medieval and Victorian nonsense. Naturally-derived lunacy thus acts as another initiator of the nonsense world, intimately connected with the topsy-turvydom of animalia. Dogs appear to signify lunacy and mental
instability—not contradictory to the lowliness of nonsense characters, which, as I have explored, are commonly characterized as mad or witless. The connection may be derived from the effects of the hot summer on canine behavior: a “popular superstition… refers to the setting and rising of Sirius, or the dog-star, as infusing madness into the canine race… The term ‘dog-day’ is still a common phrase… a belief in the injurious effects of heat upon dogs.”¹³² In the *Towneley Second Shepherds’ Play*, a shepherd responds to his companion’s garbled nonsense: “How madly ye crone / Do ye bark at the mone?” (661-662).¹³³ This statement conflates lunacy, nonsense, and dogs, clearly associating the animals with moon-induced madness.¹³⁴ The madness of hares also emerges with moon-lore in medieval literature and folklore. The hare appears frequently in medieval nonsense; its mythology is well-established. Similar to the “dog-days” that incited madness in dogs, hares were known to behave erratically during the spring breeding season—the origin of the folkloric madness of the March hare. Additionally, hares are “the animal most commonly linked with the moon…the hare’s lunar symbolism was strengthened by observation of its moonlit gambols,” displays which could contribute to the belief in the influence of the moon on lunatic behavior.¹³⁵ Clearly, the frequent appearances of hares and dogs in medieval nonsense come from their folkloric associations with madness; the moon’s inducement of madness also applies generally to madness in nonsense animals.

Consider the opening line of “The mone in the mornyng:” “The mone in the mornyng merely rose, / When the sonne and the sevon sterres softlye wer layd / In a slommuryng of slepe for-slockond with ale” (1-3). The word “merely” carries connotations of both happy joy and energetic madness; in *Magnyfycence*, the word is used to describe a March hare. Of course, the

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¹³⁴ See page 31 of Chapter Three.
moon is also associated with lunatics in folklore, and there is a long literary tradition of the mysterious and madness-inducing moon. These lines, which open a lengthy sequence of *animalia*, reveal important connections between *animalia* and moon-lore. Under the moon, the nonsense scene is associated with lunacy in general. This motif also works in Carroll’s first two stanzas of “The Walrus and the Carpenter.” The first describes the sun shining on the sea, “odd, because it was / The middle of the night” (5-6). The second offers the moon’s perspective:

The moon was shining sulkily, 
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done--
“It's very rude of him,” she said,
“To come and spoil the fun!” (7-12)

Like “The mone in the mornyng,” the sun and moon are personified in a poem with a significant presence of *animalia*, populated by a talking Walrus and oysters. These celestial bodies, then, set the tone for the entirety of the nonsense poem. In “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” the sun and moon are in opposition, unlike “The mone in the mornyng,” where the moon has complete dominion over the scene. However, the poem emphasizes imposition of the sun on the time of the moon; his “odd” presence has “no business to be there” at nighttime. Though the tension between the sun and the moon emerges in these stanzas, the scene clearly falls in the dominion of the moon (“‘The night is fine,’ the Walrus said” (83)) and the sun “spoil[s] the fun.” This fun, the property of night, carries with it associations of absurdity and nonsense. After all, the time of night, as the Walrus says, is the time “to talk of many things” (12):

‘Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--
Of cabbages--and kings--
And why the sea is boiling hot--
And whether pigs have wings.’ (12-16)

This accumulation of topics relies on the function of nonsense lists, and the last two topics

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discuss apparent absurdities, another device of nonsense. Thus, facilitated by lunar folkloric associations with madness, the realm of the moon merges with nonsense verse and realms to preside over *animalia* (and other nonsense situations) in Lewis Carroll’s Victorian literature as well as in medieval nonsense verse.

*Hares and wildness*

The folkloric conflation of madness, hares, and nonsense appears prominently in both medieval and Victorian nonsense. The March Hare’s folkloric madness demonstrates Lewis Carroll’s use of medieval symbolism, implicating Carroll in a broad tradition. However, the Hatter and the Hare also exhibit more explicit relationships to medieval nonsense. Carroll himself makes the literary origins of the Hatter and the Hare obvious through their re-appearance in *Through the Looking Glass*; they enter as “Hatta” and “Haigha” (pronounced to rhyme with “mayor”), “Anglo-Saxon Messenger[s]” performing “Anglo-Saxon attitudes.” The gestures, which Alice refers to as “curious,” involve “skipping up and down,” and “wriggling like an eel” and “great hands spread out like fans on each side.”¹³⁷ This strange description is meant to evoke the rigid and often unrealistic poses found in early medieval artworks.¹³⁸ The new names of the Hatter and Hare, Hatta and Haigha, also reference Old and Middle English Germanic pronunciations (much like Jabberwocky’s first stanza), uniquely placing these characters in relationship to medieval and earlier literatures. This strong medieval and folkloric resonance of Carroll’s March Hare and Mad Hatter sustains the commentary on consciousness found throughout *animalia*; the madness of these characters, like the wild, medieval hare, demonstrate the slightly threatening incomprehensibility present in the madness of Wonderland, the nonsense world.

Hares appear throughout medieval standalone nonsense as quite topsy-turvy and mad.

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¹³⁸ Ibid., 170, at Gardner’s note 3.
characters that oppose the comfort of domesticity and incite significant instability. In the poem, “Herkyn to my tale,” The hare appears towards the end of a poem entirely consisting of animalia seen on the speaker’s absurd journey: “Tho hare with hyr long gwode come dryvyng tho harrous” (44). The hare drives a harrow (“harrous”) led by oxen (a “gwode” is a “pointed rod for driving oxen”)—an anthropomorphized role practicing human agricultural duties. Not only are the expected behaviors of humans and animals inverted, but so is the ordering logic of animal size: the small hare is an unlikely master of multiple, large oxen. Additionally, the oxen are domesticated animals, while the hare is wild—in its untamed nature, the hare takes power over domesticated animals; its inability to be controlled by humans thus empowers it. Congruent with the nonsense readings in medieval drama, animalia and its characters do comment on this paradoxical raising of the wild, mad, and low through the nonsense world. Some appearances of the hare in standalone nonsense prove even more revealing about the nature of this particular animal. The medieval nonsense poem “The mone in the mornyng” depicts a flurry of chaotic nonsense scenes replete with animalia. The hare appears in the midst of the fictional “batell at Brakonwete,” between a jousting bear and an armor-clad bumblebee:

At the batell of Brakonwete, ther as the beyre justyd,
Sym Saer and the swynkote thei wer sworne brodur.
The hare and harthestone hurtuld to-geydur,
Whyle the homble-be hod was hacked al to cloutus. (10-13)

The impact of the hare with the hearthstone, the large, flat stone comprising the floor of a home’s fireplace, aptly fits the surrounding images of collision and reckless movement in this battle. The line itself exhibits strong alliteration, in this case on the /h/ of “hare,” “harthestone,” and “hurtuld;” in fact, this poem exhibits the same alliterative nonsense play as Foly’s game in

139 “Herkyn to my tale” in Reliquiae antiquae: scraps from ancient manuscripts, illustrating chiefly early English literature vol. 1, eds. Thomas Wright and James Orchard Halliwell (London: John Russell Smith, 1845), 81-82.
140 The Middle English Dictionary, s.v. “gwode” (The Regents of The University of Michigan, 2001).
Magnyfycence. Particularly due to the syllabic stress of the meter on the beginnings of each word, the common alliteration of nouns and verb emphasizes the quick, forward movement of the action embedded in the line. Additionally, this common /h/ in quick succession plays to the depicted collision itself. Overall, the poetic structure conveys significant aggressive force in this collision. This crash of the hare and hearthstone resonates beyond just the chaos of the battle of Brakonwete. The image of the hare cooking or sitting on the hearthstone often symbolized the threat of destruction in medieval lore (contradictions evoke the apocalyptic end of reason).

Connected to its madness, the hare sometimes acts as a harbinger of disaster in folklore; its co-occurrence with the hearthstone thus positions the hare as its opposite, and so the collision casts the hare as a threat to this symbol of domesticity. Obviously, the hare in “The mone in the mornyng” specifically evokes disaster (and apocalyptic madness), further anchoring the poem in a nonsensical atmosphere. Beyond that, the relationship between the hare and the hearthstone also elucidates a compelling aspect of *animalia* and nonsense in general. While the hare symbolizes the threatening madness of destruction in this image, the hearthstone has associations of safety and domesticity, and implicitly the organizing stability of civilization. In this, it becomes apparent that the threat to order which the wildness of the hare embodies acts identically to the destabilizing threat of nonsense.

The fifteenth-century nonsense poem “The Madman’s Song” also demonstrates the established medieval literary associations of hares and madness. It begins with two stanzas of punned scatology, but moves on to a somewhat extended discussion of the identity of the poem’s speaker, a rather unique feature of the poem. The nonsense speaker discusses his madness through game animals, first as a lazy deer, and then as a hare: “I am a hert, I am no are, / Onys I

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142 See appendix for full text.
fley, I wel no mare” (9-10). The stanza begins with exclusive identification; the madman is a deer and explicitly not a hare. The sequence demonstrates a laziness motif that appears repeatedly in nonsense, one which deals particularly with hunting. The “hert” will only flee once, and then “wel no mare,” refusing participation in the chase. The ambivalence to the hunter-hunted dynamic plays into the hierarchical deconstruction present throughout dramatic nonsense verse. In particular, Trowle displays such deconstructive laziness when he depicts his refusal to answer “for king ne duke.” Similarly, the rejection of the hunter-hunted paradigm becomes empowering for the speaker; it rejects the control of the established power dynamic. Again, wild animals circumvent the control of man differently and more completely than domestic animals. In the context of the defiance, this refusal to be hunted raises the animal’s—and in this case the speaker’s—status. Such verse begins to elucidate the general relationship of animals to nonsense. The following stanza, though, reveals more about the specific properties of the hare in animalia.

The poem continues:

I am an hare, I am non hert,
Onys I fley and let a fert;
Ye mow se by my hod
My hert is nowt, my hed is wod. (13-16)

This fourth and last stanza begins with an exclusive identification that inverts that of the previous stanza, producing a self-contradiction common in nonsense, where the speaker embodies absurd impossibilities. In this case, being and not being both a deer and hare is logically impossible, but not for the shifting illogic of the mad speaker of the poem. This stanza is modeled on the previous, but makes decidedly different assertions; the subversion of the hunted-hunter paradigm is replaced with the construction of madness in the hare. After comparing himself to the hare, the

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speaker “fley[s]” and “let[s] out a fert,” a humorously scatological reference that clearly places the speaker in the realm of the comic low with behavior again reminiscent of Trowle’s defiance. Thus, the deer and hare embody different qualities of defiant humor commonly found in nonsense speakers; in this case, the pairing of the prey’s flight with a fart belittles the pursuit and thus, the pursuers. The last two lines of the stanza offer the strongest characterization of the speaker of the poem and in fact place him firmly as the “mad” nonsense speaker that the title of the poem implies. Whereas the deer-identifying speaker is a “swyere god” (12), the hare-speaker’s “hert is nowt” and “hed is wod.” This description works powerfully by negating the previous comparison with the deer; the pun on “hert” operates on both ‘deer’ and ‘heart,’ connecting the earlier stanza with the poem’s final line. Instead of locating the speaker’s nonsense in the nobleness and dignity of the deer or heart, the speaker insists that his “hed is wod,” clearly identifying his nonsense as madness, under the folkloric purview of the hare. This occurrence demonstrates the explicit symbolic potential of the hare and its role in nonsense poetry in tandem with mad nonsense speakers. The intense defiance of these characters, the hunted deer and hare, towards their putatively human hunters enables them to defy human logical processes. Madness enables this circumvention of power and manifests in the nonsense poem. In both cases, the wild animals display a dismissive carelessness towards their hunters, destabilizing the power of human over animal and creating a somewhat unsettling nonsense world (particularly in a hunting context which possesses the potential for violence). Again, through its wild madness, the hare exhibits a clear threat to human superiority in medieval nonsense.

In Magnifycence, the nonsense fool Fansy reveals this association of madness, hares, and
nonsense in drama, describing himself as “as mery as a March hare” (920).\textsuperscript{146} The March hare in particular carries the strongest folkloric associations with madness and thus with nonsense. In Lewis Carroll’s \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} and \textit{Through the Looking Glass}, two characters in particular exhibit the conflation of hares, madness, and nonsense continuing into Victorian literature: the Mad Hatter and the March Hare. These characters first appear in \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} at the “Mad Tea-Party,” but the Cheshire Cat introduces them into the story while directing Alice to her next adventure:

“In THAT direction,” the Cat said, waving its right paw round, “lives a Hatter, and in THAT direction,” waving the other paw, “lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad.”

“But I don't want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can't help that,” said the Cat: “we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.”\textsuperscript{147}

Though the Cat famously calls all of the residents of Wonderland as mad, the text of the both \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} and \textit{Through the Looking Glass} only use the word “mad” in reference to the Hatter, the Hare, and the Cheshire Cat himself.\textsuperscript{148} In fact, I have found that the word “mad” only appears in the books in this conversation and in the following chapter, “A Mad Tea Party,” where Alice encounters the Hare and the Hatter. It is remarkable that even Wonderland, only certain characters carry this appellation; it marks them as particularly entangled in the folkloric and literary-historical associations of nonsensical madness. The close connection of the Hatter and Hare with nonsense thus forges a strong connection between medieval nonsense and Carroll’s Victorian version.\textsuperscript{149} The Hatter and the Hare never appear separately in the Alice books—they are constitutive of each other. Their close relationship denotes the close symbolism of the March Hare with human madness; the fact that these

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[148] Alice is not mad, she is a nonsense speaker and observer—she can occupy both worlds.
\item[149] I will discuss the larger significance of the Cheshire Cat to \textit{animalia} in the story later on this chapter.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
characters are so similar confirms the association of animalia with human madness as alterations of typical human consciousness. This folkloric reference which Carroll employs connects him to the tradition of nonsense verse (both standalone and dramatic) that uses this motif, but the character’s association with the Hatter also draws a strong connection to the nonsense of the medieval period, which conflates hare symbolism with human madness.

Importantly, these mad characters behave rather aggressively towards Alice. As soon as she approaches the party, the Hatter and Hare yell “No room! No room!” at her, rejecting her from their sphere of consciousness and from identification, making the human alien in their nonsense realm. The entirety of the chapter “A Mad Tea Party,” which depicts the conversation between Alice, the Hatter, and the Hare (and the dormouse), conveys the tension between Alice and these mad characters. Already apprehensive about confronting madness, she is then excluded from the nonsense of the scene, making her subject to its subversion. Her conversations reflect this; the Hare and the Hatter constantly defy her attempts at logical reasoning, to her bewilderment: “Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. ‘I don't quite understand you,’ she said, as politely as she could.” Her attempts at logical communication are repeatedly mocked or duped by these characters—the Hatter even directs his famously unanswerable “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” at Alice in this scene, embodying the antagonistic, destabilizing potential of nonsense to human reasoning. Thus, the madness of the Hare and Hatter is of the human-destabilizing sort achieved by the wildness of the hare in medieval verse. This aggression eventually causes Alice to depart from the group entirely:

This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off; the Dormouse fell asleep instantly, and neither of the others took the least notice of her going, though she looked back once or twice,

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151 Ibid., 54.
152 Ibid., 55.
half hoping that they would call after her: the last time she saw them, they were trying to put the Dormouse into the teapot.\textsuperscript{153}

The madness of the Hare and Hatter is completely inaccessible to Alice; as such, she becomes subject to its subversion and rejection—her subtle desire for inclusion reflects her own unconscious recognition of this event, but it is ultimately frustrated. The type of madness present in both the March Hare (animal wildness) and the Mad Hatter (human consciousness) alienates Alice and threatens the supremacy of her own logical human cognition, as is evident in the aggressive anti-logic of the Hatter and Hare (though they are not overtly sinister—that would push the duality of the nonsense speaker too far). Clearly, the role of the mad hare appears consistently throughout both the medieval and the Carrollian traditions, in fact embodying the same sort of human-destabilizing nonsense. Of course, over-reliance on wild nonsense must be tempered so nonsense retains its primarily lighthearted tone; in \textit{animalia}, this is achieved through use of the familiar and the domestic.

\textit{Dogs and domestication}

Dogs also emerge as animals particularly associated with nonsensical madness in medieval verse, but their domestication places them in a different relationship to humankind, and thus to human madness. They contain a certain duality in their domesticity which allows them both human and animal associations; they straddle both realms, stabilizing the threatening potential of nonsense by bridging the cognitive gap between the human and the animal. Domesticated dogs appear with remarkable frequency in medieval dramatic nonsense, occasionally in references in verse but also as companions to nonsense fools. In particular, the canine accompaniment of low nonsense fools such as Fansy, Foly, and Trowle establishes a consistency of appearance that is repeated in standalone verse. The folklore of domestic dogs explains their dual symbolism. While dogs did symbolize “affection, companionship, courage,\textsuperscript{153} 

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 56.
devotion, fidelity, flattery, inquisitiveness, intelligence, [and] protection,” they also could symbolize “dirty habits, lowliness, [and] scavengery.” Importantly, their domestication also figures significantly into this folklore: “as a descendent of jackals and wolves, symbolizes the elevation of lower forms of life.” Such a double-sided persona compliments the subversive tendencies of nonsense verse and its ability to empower the lowly. In fact, “‘dog’ is used to express false dignity or display; thus to ‘put on the dog’ is to conduct oneself in a deceitful or pretentious manner;” such performed falsity resonates with the fiends infiltrating the court of Magnyfycence and Trowle’s curious confidence in the Chester Shepherds’ Play. The anchoring of this connection in the moon and the dog-star of the night sky that I mentioned earlier in the chapter connects the domesticated dog and all of its associations to nonsensical madness. The entanglement of dogs and nonsense verse even appears etymologically. The Oxford English Dictionary defines doggerel rhyme as: “Of verse: comic, burlesque, and usually composed in irregular rhythm. Also: (of verse or writing) badly composed or expressed; trivial” and describes it as probably derived from “dog.” It is a term for haphazard or ill-formed verse with origins at least as old as Chaucer, and is applied to Fansy and Foly’s nonsense verse in Magnyfycence.

Dogs appear with a hare in the late fifteenth-century standalone nonsense poem “The cricket and the greshope.” The positioning of these two nonsense animals in the scene demonstrates their different relationships to human consciousness. The poem consists of three stanzas, each depicting an amusingly incongruous situation. The second stanza of the poem features a hare and hounds in another reversed-hunting situation:

The hare sete upon the hill and chappind her shone
And swere by the knappes that were ther-upon
Hat she would not rise ne gon

155 The Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “doggerel.”
Till she see twenty houndes and a won. (5-8)\textsuperscript{156}

A hare fastens her shoe atop a hill, and swears by the buttons on her shoe that she will not rise from the hill until she sees twenty-one hounds. The hare and dogs in this stanza evoke the lighthearted madness of nonsense. As seen, the hare brings the illogic to the stanza; not only does the animal wear shoes, but she swears upon buttons, placing her within a very different value system in a nonsense world. Most importantly, unlike a typical dog-hunting-rabbit situation, the hare is calmly waiting for the dogs, actually desiring to see them. This reversal upsets the hierarchy of predation embedded in hunting, a repeated motif in nonsense poetry. The role of the dogs, the hunters-by-proxy, in this deconstruction calls for further examination. First of all, in this scene, the dogs stand in for human hunters, showing the closeness to the human realm established by domestication. Further, the hounds are reduced to an unthreatening spectacle by the hare, and their role reduced to silly frivolity—in this, they themselves begin to inhabit a nonsense role (and absorb the destabilization of human cognition as scapegoats for the disempowered hunters). Their positioning in \textit{animalia} signals differently than the mad hare due to their domestication. More closely associated with humans and human-based hierarchies, dogs appear to embody the same dualities exploited in nonsense verse. Firstly, they inhabit a position between wildness and humanness through domestication, a useful transition in the realm of \textit{animalia}; this appears in the previous stanza, where the domesticated hounds oppose the wild hare as an agent of man but still keep the stanza strictly within an animal world. Secondly, especially in drama, their flexible high/low status is a symbolically important aspect of the animal. The appearances of both elite hunting hounds and mangy animals like Trowle’s Dottynolle demonstrate the versatility of dogs in nonsense verse. This versatility, which appears in their folkloric associations, makes them apt companions for nonsense speakers. Their social

flexibility degrades the significance of such hierarchical classifications while their traversal of poles still allows for topsy-turvy inversion. The dog that appears in the fifteenth-century nonsense ballad “My Lady went to Canterbury” demonstrate their capacity for comic lowness in standalone nonsense in the same manner as their dramatic counterparts:

I swere by Saint Katheryn of Kent,  
The gose gothe to the grene;  
All our dogges tayle is brent;  
It is not as I wene. (29-32)\(^{157}\)

This stanza belongs to the second half of the song, which begins in a mock-love ballad form and seems to transition subtly to *animalia* and tall tale nonsense.\(^{158}\) These lines make an oath attesting to the truth of the following statement, a motif in nonsense typically preceding absurd statements. In this case, the following line is fairly innocuous (though it exhibits nonsense’s alliterative play): “the gose gothe to the grene.” The next statement, “All our dogges tayle is brent,” then, emerges as the most absurd assertion of the stanza. A dog with a burnt tail presents an unlikely but perhaps not absurd image, unless canine folkloric signals are considered. As mentioned, dogs exhibit both the capacity to represent nobility and knavery depending on their presentation. Curtail dogs, with shortened tails, were dogs not suited for sporting, an activity with elite connotations.\(^{159}\) Thus, the dog certainly assumes lowness from the damage of its tail, marking it as mangy and practically useless. This type of lazy, silly dog unites these nonsense animals to those in drama. Interestingly, though, this dog’s type of laziness is not threatening like the subversive laziness of prey animals; while these wild animals are destabilizing in their madness, dogs are silly frivolities.

Alternately, the fifteenth-century nonsense poem “Herkyn to my tale” uses dogs as a pseudo-elate symbol. On a nonsense journey, the poem’s speaker states: “Fordurmore I went, and


\(^{158}\) I discuss the significance of traveler’s tales beginning on page 75 of Chapter Four.

moo marvels I founde; / A norchon by tho fyre rostyng a greyhownde” (27-28). This inverted image signals similarly to the fearless rabbit of “The cricket and the greshope,” though the relationship between the animals does not follow a predator-prey paradigm so closely. Instead, the hedgehog is shy, wild (but common), and small, while the greyhound is large, domesticated but well-bred, and an aggressive hunter. This type of inversion shows the versatility of the dog as a symbol, and its ability to both symbolize animalia-based nonsensical madness and be upended by more threatening wild animals. Significantly, the elite dogs become the object of nonsense scenes, while more common dogs often perform the inversions in nonsense poems. A sixteenth-century animalia-based ballad “I sawe a dog” opens its first stanza with a dog boiling “sowse:” “I sawe a dog sethyng sowse / And an ape thetchyng an howse / And a pudyng etyng a mowse” (3-5). Appearing alongside an ape and an animated sausage (“pudyng”), in this poem the dog is an anthropomorphized nonsense agent. Besides such animalia, this poem also uses the absurdity of the inanimate-made-animate sausage; the idea of food in the act of consumption demonstrates the particular absurdity of the scenes in this ballad. With neither the strangeness of the sausage nor the exoticism of the ape, the cooking dog seems unremarkable for a nonsense poem, yet as the opening line of the ballad, it has a certain privilege. The consistent appearance of dogs in nonsense poetry, both dramatic and standalone, further implies relevance of the animal to the genre not previously considered. As I have mentioned, the dual nature of the dog as both elite and mangy contributes to the topsy-turvy potentialities of nonsense. Additionally, its domesticity—its very commonness—becomes important to its nonsense role. In “I sawe a dog,” the dog opens the poem due to its mild familiarity; it operates within the highly domestic

160 In “Herkons to my tale,” these lines are replaced with “Yeyt furthermore as I roode, moo marvels I saw, / I sawe where a marchand rostyde a semmeow” (27-28). Much of the rest of the poem is the same, though there is a substantial addition to the poem in the second version. The flexibility of nonsense and the variability of medieval documentation are both likely contributors to this occurrence.

161 In medieval vernacular, sowse was pickled parts of a pig or the sauce in which it was cooked. The Middle English Dictionary online, s.v. “sowse” (The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2001); “I sawe a dog” in The Early English Carols, ed. Richard Leighton Greene (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1935), 317.
imagery of nonsense verse. Subject to the same needs as its human counterparts, this dog displays an amusing level of sophistication for an animal, but, boiling pickled pig, only forms a silly image of domestic duty. Thus, the use of domestic imagery and animals is an important nonsense mechanism that tows the line between nonsense and the fantastic—the overuse of the exotic or uncontrollable would compromise the unthreatening amusement of nonsense.

Dogs do not occur with the same consistency in Victorian nonsense as they do in medieval examples, probably a product of the decrease of their folkloric significations (largely caused by a diminishing of their status-signification and the prominence of hunting). However, the domestic flexibility of dogs arises in Carroll’s nonsense world in the third and last “mad” character of Wonderland: the Cheshire Cat. His discussion with Alice on madness continues thus:

“How do you know I'm mad?” said Alice.
“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn't have come here.”
Alice didn't think that proved it at all; however, she went on “And how do you know that you're mad?”
“To begin with,” said the Cat, “a dog's not mad. You grant that?”
“I suppose so,” said Alice.
“Well, then,” the Cat went on, “you see, a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad.”
“I call it purring, not growling,” said Alice.
“Call it what you like,” said the Cat.

As I have mentioned, though the Cat claims that all of the residents of Wonderland are mad, only three characters are specifically labeled as mad in the entirety of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. I have already discussed the significance of the madness of the mad Hatter and the March Hare—the third truly mad character is the Cheshire Cat. This character, though not as directly connected to the medieval nonsense tradition as the hare or the dog, still meaningfully straddles the worlds of madness and human consciousness

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162 Their relative scarcity could also be due to the phobias of both Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear.
through its domestication. In fact, the Cat directly associates itself with dogs, locating itself as a domestic house animal. As the main companion animals of humans, they occupy very similar positions as paragons of domestication, making them practically interchangeable in this modern context. Like medieval verse, their inherent familiarity becomes part of the usefulness of the animals as characters in the nonsense world. After Alice voices her discomfort with “mad people” (a phobia which the Hare and Hatter do little to alleviate), the Cheshire Cat unthreateningly draws Alice into the nonsense world, creating a logical path by which she may participate in it. This manner of invitation allows Alice to become part of the nonsense’s entertainment instead of subject to its subversions, as she is in her interactions with the Hare and the Hatter. Actually, the Cheshire Cat acts as a sort of nonsense world ambassador to Alice throughout the book, repeatedly engaging her and explaining aspects of Wonderland to the bewildered girl. As a domestic animal, he connects more closely with the human Alice, becoming for her an object of beloved curiosity instead of unpredictable madness. This reflects the symbolic capacities of dogs in medieval nonsense and their tendency to emphasize frivolity and silliness instead of subversion. This familiarity allows Alice to enter into a dialogue with the cat, able to offer opinions on the madness of dogs and the behavior of cats. Her ability to participate in this conversation, derived from her familiarity with these animals, speaks to the role of such animals in nonsense verse to ease animalia’s critique of human consciousness.
Conclusion

This study has examined the literary-historical trajectory of nonsense verse in the English tradition to come to define it as an overarching genre of British literature. To define this literature as a genre, a clear definition around “literary nonsense” required construction due to the complicating intertwinement of nonsense with subjective intuition. I have shown that although nonsense may initially present as gibberish, the underlying sense-making constructions required for the subversion of understood logic allow nonsense to also appear as language-based absurdities. This definition encompasses *animalia*, *impossibilia*, ridiculous and unwieldy combinations of images, lists of absurd length, and even some parodies. Like other fictional genres, nonsense participates in sub-universe creation, creating realms filled with fancies and absurdities. Nonsense scenes are fantastic—but they differ from other fantasy, science fiction, and absurdist genres due to their unique relationship to the “real” world (the world of the audience or reader of nonsense).

These genres create their universes uniquely. Fantasy realms evade common-sense through magic, an unquestioned force entirely unaccountable to and inaccessible by, the real world. Similarly, science fiction uses incredible technological advancement to evade the critique of realism; it can access the real world through this adherence to scientific law or elegant manipulations of it, but it remains apparently obedient to reason. Science fiction and fantasy both rely on repositioning in time or space as another means to circumvent logic, occupying alternate worlds that completely avoid the boundaries of our reality. Literature of the absurd seems closer to nonsense’s direct rejection of reality, but unlike nonsense it *pointedly* refuses to place itself in any logical system—its absurdity overtly and purposefully rejects reality (I have explained the incompatibility of purposefulness with nonsense). This genre also often becomes entangled with human psychology, a discipline which endeavors to explicate the labyrinth of the mind, directly opposing the satisfied inexplicability of the nonsense universe.

Instead of exclusive location in an alternate realm, conceived in either time or space, nonsense uniquely penetrates the world of its perceiver in order to directly challenge the logical sense- and value-making systems of humankind. It insists on the objective truth of its absurdities and so defies the supremacy of sense-based systems as a world-ordering force. Thus, the particular poignancy of nonsense literature over other nonsense forms is that word-based nonsense hijacks the innate human logical vehicle of language to inject nonsense into the real world. It forces logic to betray itself, and thus resists the assumed infallibility of common sense. Such is the power of nonsense. Though certainly provocative, such subversions do not act as threatening attacks on order; rather, they service the construction of a celebratory and entertaining spirit which evades the limiting cares and responsibilities of the real world. The nonsense world, dense with frivolities, must also then be highly ephemeral; its intersections with reality cannot be prolonged, paradoxically requiring proximity to reality yet independence from its practical cares.

The sub-universes of fantasy, science fiction, absurdity, and nonsense all rely on the observation that the human imagination naturally defies the very logic it creates—the mind already conceives, and technically thus exists in a different realm from reality. While fantastic realms reflect our own through this ability to imagine, nonsense worlds acknowledge the paradox of the mind itself; imagination becomes an argument to something (though the something is left somewhat undefined).

For all the various world-creating, logic-evading, escape-enabling activities of these genres, they all appear to insist on the same thing: human reason is hopelessly limited. This seems to be widely received as quite heartening.
Appendix

This appendix includes the full texts of all of the standalone medieval nonsense poems referenced in this thesis. Bibliographical information is included for the publications from which they were obtained, though the provenances of their manuscripts are not included here. Each poem is accompanied by brief explanatory or contextualizing information; these notes are meant to be neither exhaustive nor definitive.


Transcribed circa 1550. A nonsense poem presented under the context of a speaker relating “strange news.” Over six stanzas (with some corruption), it recounts *animalia*, *impossibilia*, and general absurdity—all are very commercial or domestic images. “Robyn” and “Jake Dawe” characters make appearances. General *abab* rhyme scheme in quartets.

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*Newes newes newes*

Ye never herd so many newes!

A . . . . upon a strawe,

Cudlyng of my cowe;

Ther came to me Jake Dawe

---

*Our dame mylked the mares talle;*

The cate was lykynge the potte;

Our mayd came out wyt a flye;

And layd her under fat.

---

*In ther came our next neyghbur,*

Frome when I cannot tell,

But ther begane a hard scouer;

‘Have you any musterd to sell?’

---

*A cowe had stolyn a calfe away*

And put her in a sake;

---

*Forsoth, I sel no puddynge today;*

‘Mysters, what doo youe lake?’

---

*Robyn ys gone to Hu[n]tyngton*

To bye our gase a flye;

Lyke Spip, my yongest son,

Was huntyng of a snalle.

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*Our mayd John was her tomorowe;*

I wote not where she forwende;

Our cate yett syke and takythe gret sorowe;

Transcribed circa 1450. This poem, while not true nonsense, is remarkable for its usage of several nonsense techniques including *impossibilia* and contradictions. It also exhibits repetition and meter reminiscent of many contemporary nonsense poems and is a useful counterpart of the other nonsense fragments in this study. Effectually, the poem makes use of literary nonsense techniques and the nonsense tradition in general to make a point about the inconstancy of women; its hijacking of nonsense is therefore contextually useful. It also includes a very productive reference to Robin Hood as a nonsense speaker, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

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**SONG ON WOMAN.**

From MS. Lambeth, 306, fol. 136, of the fifteenth century.

**Women, women, love of women**  
Make bare purs with some men.  
Some be nyse as a nanne hene,  
3it al thei be nat so;  
Some be lewde, some all be shreude,  
Go shrewes wher thei goo.

Sum be nyse, and some be fonde,  
And some be tame y undirstonde,  
And some cane take brede of a manys honde;  
Yit all thei be nat so.

Some cane part withouten hire,  
And some make bate in eviri chire,  
And some cheke-mate withoute sire;  
Yit all they be nat so.

Some be lewde, and some be schreued;  
Go wher they go.

Some be browne, and some be whit,  
And some be tender as accripe;  
And some of theym be chiry ripe;  
Yit all thei be not soo.

Sume be lewde, &c.

Some of them be treue of love,  
Beneth the gerdelle, but nat above;  
And in a hode above cane chove;  
Yit all thei do nat soo.

Some be lewde, &c.

Some cane whister, and some cane crie;  
Some cane flater, and some cane lye;  
And some can sette the moke awrie;  
Yit all thei do nat soo.

Some be lewde, &c.

He that made this songe full good,  
Came of the northe and of the sothern blode,  
And somewhat kyne to Robyn Hode;  
Yit all we be nat soo.

Some be lewde, &c.

Transcribed circa 1550 (though its references indicate earlier composition). A nonsense poem of eight, four-lined stanzas with an *abab* rhyme scheme. The refrain and first stanza appear to be repeated in some form in many other medieval carols. Notably, some of the lines are shared with “Robyn Hudde in Berndale stode,” also examined in this study.
4.

Transcribed circa 1450. Four stanzas of unrhymed nonsense; notes say that one stanza of “doggerel” added to the manuscript later, sixteenth century—shows some recognition of style and tradition. Very similar to lines in Rastell’s later interlude *The Four Elements* (sung by character Ignorance), as noted by Holt and Takamiya. Appears to straddle different nonsense traditions in its relationship to fiends in morality plays, Robin Hood poems, mock-ballad (like “My lady went to Canterbury”), and general *impossibilia* and absurdities. A picture of the original manuscript is included for reference.

1 Robyn Hudde in Bernsdale stode
He leynd hym tyll a maple thystyll
Then came owre lady and swete seynt Andrew
Slepes thow wakes thow Geoffrey Coke

5 A hundreth wynter the water was brawde
I cannot tell yow how depe
He toke a gose neck in hys hond
And ouer the water he went

9 Jack boy ys thy boo i-broke
Or hase any man done the wrygulde wrage
He toke a bend boo in hys hond
And set hym down by þe fyre

13 My dame began to spyn a threde
Hyr nose stode al acrokyd into the sowth
Who dar be so harde darde
As to cack under the walles of Dover

15: five lines of doggerel, sixteenth century.
To-morow alleluya sc(-->)g be lockyd
And yn the stockes ffast (-->)ckyd stokyt
ffast by the legges he shal neuer come
oute of sorow tyll gose and pygges be his
borow buttur chese and eggs
Transcribed circa 1450. Twenty-nine unrhymed lines. Highly alliterative, *animalia* and absurdities placed in the context of the moon and drunkenness. Some female ballad characters appear, as well as a rather virile Robin Hood.
6.7.

Both transcribed circa 1450. Two nearly identical versions of the same nonsense poem, though “Herkons” is significantly longer than “Herkyn.” Both present lengthy scenes of *animalia*, *impossibilita*, and absurdity with very topsy-turvy results. They are presented in the context of traveler’s tale and both contain the drink-as-reward motif as well as truth-lie tensions.
Herkons to my tale, that I schalle here schow,  
For of syche merweles I have breede fowe;  
Yf anny of them be a ly, that I telle here natur,  
I wolde I were us bare as the beschappe of Chester!  
As I went frow Dowyre to Dorram, I met by the strete  
A fox and a solmert had .xx. sette.  
The skat stalkyde one hylle, and tyte of here skynne;  
The codlyng calde at the churche dore, and bad let him in.  
The samun sang the hy mas, the heyryng vas the clark,  
The porpos at the organs, ther was a golly wark.  
Ther was a gret offlyng that ylke day,  
For ther was alle that I rekun up one this a-ray:  
Waspis and eysturis, and gret cart-sadyllys,  
Moskettus in morres, caudrons and ladyllys,  
The pakenel and the perche, the mennaun and the roche,  
The kerbultus and the stykylbaky, the fondyry and the loche.  
The bordok hyde behynde, sen wolde he not be,  
With hym rode the gornarde, symly for to se.  
Jet was ther mor, the sothe yf I yow telle,  
The conegure and the wessylle rode one a plons-whylle;  
The kelvynge and the thornbake, and the gret whalle.  
The crabe and the loppysterere jeyt were thei ther alle,  
Eyche one toke a penne of ther punch, and offyrde at the mas,  
The eyster offyrde .i.j. d. and sayde he wolde pay no las.  
When thei this offyring made, the sothe yf I yow say,  
The Pame sondaie be-lele that gere one Mydesunday.  
Jeyt forthermore as I roode, moo merveles I saw,  
I sawe where a marchand rostyd a semmcow.  
Ther denyvers metts reykyn them yf I couthe,  
Sawe I never non syche, by northe nere be sof[n]the.  
Ther whas rostyd akon, moulyde brede, aw sourue alle,  
Whettesons and fyre-brendys choppysde in kelle.  
Soutteries in sorrope, sadelers in scove,  
Mylywards in mertrous, syche have I sen ful foe.  
Ther wer mylstennis in molde, with cart-whyllus in durrde,  
Ther wer stedis of Spayn welle poudrynt in past,  
They wer fasside with charkolle, for that was noo wast.  
Ther were tynkerris in tartottus, the met was fulle goode.  
The sowe sate one him benche, and harppyde Robyn Hooode.  

The schulerde schowttyde in a schalmes, the torbot trompyde to that,  
The raton rybyde, the fox fedylde, therio claryrde the catte.*  
With a synyn souge the smyt, the laverok louttyde withalle,  
The humblu-be haundylt a horne-pypp, her fyngurs wer smalle.  
The gos gogult ever more, the gam was better to here,  
Herde [I] noo syche mastryys this .vii. yere.  
Then ther com masfattus in mertros alle soow,  
Borhammys and beyntsteyllys, for thei myst not gooo,  
Potistenis and paunyaris, and gret long battus,  
Hammyrs and horne sponnyys, and scroude mossaile cattus.  
Mockeforcuus and dressesycynus com trottynge one sparrroos;  
The bare come with a long gonde, drywying the harrous.  
Ther com tryntetius and touynyng-stonys, and elson bladys,  
Colruskus and copstolus, one gret whyle-barrows,  
.xxx. salt ellys, and eych of them a scheyfarroos,  
Ratouns and rattus, and long cart-whellys.†  
Gnytus and smayllus cam routtyng in schyppus.  
To formsus and a stole radde one a mas-boke,  
Fifty fyre-brendus, and eyche of them aroke.  
Dore-bondys stukyng one stylltus, in ther hondus gret oke[s],  
The storeyn stode be-hynde the dore scharpyng stakys.  
Alle this I sawe that I have here tolde,  
And monny moo merveles uppon Cottyswolke.  
But I them foregot as I went by the way,  
Therfor at this tym no more can I tel nor saye.  
But God, as he made us, and mend us he may,  
Save us and sende us sum drynk or we dye.  

Explecyt trutallis, etc.  

* Cabe, in the MS. † Sic, MS. perhaps for whopps (whips).

Transcribed circa 1550. Seven stanzas in *aaab* rhyme scheme. Almost entirely *animalia* with the occasional anthropomorphized food item. The poem, called “A Lying Poem” by the editors, has a refrain which refers to a whetstone—the burden essentially means ‘I will prove the best liar.’ Additionally, there is also a drink-as-reward motif at the end of the sequence.
9.

Transcribed circa 1450. Very structured and rhythmic. The first two stanzas seem very distinct from the second two stanzas—it seems possible that the poem was originally made up of two others. Scatological, mocking, comically low speaker gains empowerment through madness and defiance.

Be God and Saint Hillare,
Mi clerk was of il lare,
Wan he red hillar
    Long in is pistil.
I swere be mi chatter,
I weld that Sis Allkar,
Rihte with hir ers bar
    Had pist in this wistil.
I am a hert, I am no are,
Onys I flye, I wel no mare;
It is i-write in my hod,
That I am a swyere god.

I am an hare, I am non hert,
Onys I flye and let a fert;
3e mow se by my hod,
My hert is nowt, my hed is wod.
10.

Transcribed circa 1475. This poem is highly organized with a very distinct structure. Three four-lined stanzas in rhymed couplets. Each stanza depicts an incongruous scene, culminating in the pseudo-sexual joke of the final stanza. Significant animalia presence.

The cricket and the greshope wenten hem to fight,
With helme and haburjone all redy dight;
The flee bare the baner as a doughty knight;
The cherubud trumped with all his might.

The hare sete upon the hill and chappind her shone,
And swere by the knappes which were ther-upon
That she would not rise ne gon
Till she see twenty houndes and a won.

The milner sete upon the hill,
And all the hennes of the town drew him till.
The milner said: ‘Shew, henne, shew!
I may not shake my bagge for you.’