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Verse and Worse in Middle English: Defining Doggerel

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Anyone concerned with the outer limits of what constitutes verse in Middle English will want to pause over Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, a creaking popular romance quickly drawn to a halt by the Host, who condemns the teller's 'lewednesse' and prevents him wasting his auditors' time.¹ Critical studies of the tale have explored in some detail the ways in which it parodies popular romances by imitating aspects of their structure, content, and diction.² *Sir Thopas* also has the distinction of including the earliest occurrence of the phrase that springs most readily to mind as a descriptor of bad verse: 'This may wel be rym dogerel', as the Host announces (l. 925).

We all think we know what doggerel is. The word is used fairly loosely, in relation to both Middle English writings and those of other periods, as a synonym for 'inept verse'.³ Accordingly, the phrase 'rym doggerel' in *Sir Thopas* seems not to have occupied editors of Chaucer for very long: *The Riverside Chaucer* and W. W. Skeat's *Oxford Chaucer* do not gloss it at all; Jill Mann, in the most recent full edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, glosses it simply as 'dogerel (*sic*) rhyme'.⁴ Is it possible to refine our understanding of what doggerel meant to late medieval readers and authors? A volume honouring Oliver Pickering's scholarly work, itself concerned with many varieties of early English verse, and if not with doggerel-writers then sometimes at least with what he has called 'the achievements of poets who are not at the

¹ Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, VII, 919–32, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. L. D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 216.

² See primarily J. A. Burrow's notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 917, and his article 'Sir Thopas: An Agony in Three Fits', *Review of English Studies*, 22 (1971), 54–58. Other studies which explore aspects of the tale's form include Alan T. Gaylord, 'Chaucer's Dainty "Dogerel": The "Elvyssh" Prosody of "Sir Thopas"', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 1 (1979), 83–104; Glenn Wright, 'Modern Inconveniences: Rethinking the Parody in "The Tale of Sir Thopas"', *Genre*, 30 (1997), 167–94; and E. A. Jones, "'Loo, Lordes Myne, Heere Is a Fit!": The Structure of Chaucer's Sir Thopas', *Review of English Studies*, 51 (2000), 248–52.

³ The term is used, for example, by Eleanor P. Hammond in *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual* (New York, 1908), p. 268 (of the pseudo-Chaucerian 'How a Lover Praises his Lady'). Carleton Brown and R. H. Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 752, included in their subject index an entry for 'doggerel', although strangely — given the huge field at their disposal — attached to this only one item (a sermon tag, *IMEV* 49).

⁴ *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by W. W. Skeat, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894–97), V, 201; *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 991. No variants on 'dogerel' are attested in J.

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centre of the present-day taught canon', may be an appropriate home for some exploration of this question.⁵

Both *OED* and *MED* cites the Host's critique of *Sir Thopas* as the context of the earliest proper attestation.⁶ *MED*, which glosses the word as 'poor, worthless', cites the names of a hapless William Doggerel and John Dogerel, in records of 1277 and 1300 respectively, as its only other sources. The *OED* entry is fuller, and the various meanings it attaches to the word comprehend not just 'mean, trivial or undignified', but also 'comic', 'bastard', and 'burlesque'; and the more technical 'of irregular rhythm'. Only *OED* ventures as far as an etymology, suggesting a connection with 'dog' (as in 'dog-Latin'): 'bad, spurious, bastard, mongrel'.

Most of *OED*'s attestations are post-medieval, but the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century ones repay some study. Closest in date to *Sir Thopas* are two occurrences of 'doggerel' in a poem incorporated in the largely prose *newe cronycles* of England and France attributed (by the printer Rastell in an edition of 1533, STC 10660) to the London draper Robert Fabyan.⁷ Surviving in two early sixteenth-century manuscript copies, and first printed by Richard Pynson in 1516 (STC 10659), this work is spiced with many interpolated poems. Some are attributable to the chronicler, whose identity as Fabyan remains unconfirmed;⁸ some were incorporated from other sources — different chronicles and accounts, occasionally perhaps drawing on copies of 'balets' and 'bills' in common circulation. Still others may have been translations from French or Latin.⁹ The explicitly 'doggerel' verse occurs in a poem which marks the chronicle's change of focus from the history of England and France to an account of the history of London, and which enumerates the city's attractions:

[...]

The vytaile that herein is spente
In thre housholdys dayly tente
Atwene Rome and ryche Kent
Are none may them compare.

As of the mayre and shryves twayne
What myght I of the justyce sayne
Kept within this cytie playne
It were longe to declare.

For thoughe I shulde all day tell
Or chat with my **ryme dogerell**
Myght I not yet halfe do spell
This townys great honoure

[...]

M. Manly and E. Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales*, 8 vols (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1940), VII, 202.

⁵ *Individuality and Achievement in Middle English Poetry*, ed. by O. S. Pickering (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997), p. vii.

⁶ See the *Online Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://www.oed.com/>) and the online *Middle English Dictionary* (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>).

⁷ R. Fabyan, *The New Chronicles of England and France*, ed. by Sir Henry Ellis (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1811).

⁸ M-R. McLaren, 'Fabyan, Robert (d. 1513)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (www.oxforddnb.com/).

⁹ One of the manuscript copies, in three volumes, is now Holkham Hall, MS 671, and London, British Library, MSS Cotton Nero C XI, parts I and II. The other manuscript copy, now Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Eng. 766, contains the later sections of the chronicle (that is, those in the two parts in Cotton Nero C XI).

Who so hym lykyth theyse verses to rede
 With favour I pray he wyll them spell.
 Let not the rudenesse of them hym lede
 For to dyspray[s]e thys **ryme dogorell**.
 Some parte of the honoure it doth you tell
 Of this olde cytie Troynovaunt —
 But not thereof the halfe dell,
 Cunnynge in the maker is so adaunt.

But thoughe he had the eloquence
 Of Tully, and the moralytie
 Of Senec, and the influence
 Of the swete sugred armone
 Of that fayre lady Caliope,
 Yet had he not cunnynge parfyght
 This cytie to prayse in eche degree
 As it shulde duely aske of ryght
 [...].¹⁰

These stanzas contain a curious mixture of the grandiloquent and the apologetic, with references to Tully, Seneca, and Calliope, alongside abject confessions of ‘rudenesse’ and a lack of ‘cunnynge’. The term ‘doggerel’ is used to define poetic composition which falls short of standards shaped by expectations of classically-influenced eloquence. It seems quite likely that an implicit reference to Chaucer plays around the tortured modesty topos developed over the course of these lines: London, after all, had its own Chaucerian credentials as ‘Troynovant’ — the town in which *Troilus and Criseyde* was conceived and written — and the forms of eloquence invoked here (‘Tully [...] Senec [...] the swete sugred armone | Of that fayre lady Caliope’) are reminiscent of those imputed to Chaucer elsewhere in fifteenth-century verse.¹¹ Such implied Chaucerian reference might be underlined by the movement from a simple four-line stanza into the more stately eight-line *ballade* stanza, with its Chaucerian *Monk’s Tale* authority.

The next *OED* citation offers doggerel in a different context: Skelton’s *Magnificence*, recently described as ‘a play about Henry VIII and the Tudor royal household, and [...] usually dated 1519 or shortly after’.¹² The reference comes at a point in the play where the scoundrel vices who attempt in various ways to fleece the central figure, *Magnificence*, have begun their tricks. Fancy, although initially dismissed from *Magnificence*’s presence because of his ungoverned manner of speaking, is now masquerading as ‘Largesse’. He has brought *Magnificence* a letter about his credentials, supposedly sent by a character called ‘Sad Circumspection’ but actually the work of another vice called Counterfeit Countenance. This individual, left on his own as ‘Largesse’/Fancy and *Magnificence* go out, embarks on a long and vigorous rap about his own craftiness:

The fullest account of the verse is that of William A. Ringler, Jr., *Bibliography and Index of English Verse in Manuscripts 1501–1558* (London and New York: Mansell, 1992), pp. 14 and 24.

¹⁰ Transcribed from ?Robert Fabyan, [*The newe cronycles of Englande and of Fraunce*] (pr. Pynson, 1516, STC 10659), sig. Aai verso. Punctuation and capitalization are editorial; contractions have been expanded and u/v normalized.

¹¹ See, for example, Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and his Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 44–50.

¹² John Scattergood, “‘Familiar and homely’”: The Intrusion and Articulation of Vice in Skelton’s *Magnifyfence*’, *Medieval English Theatre*, 27 (2005), 34–52.

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'Fancy hath catched in a fly-net
This noble man Magnificence,
Of Largesse under the pretence.
They have made me here to put the stone
But now will I, that they be gone,
In bastard rhyme, after the **doggerel** guise,
Tell you whereof my name doth rise.

For Counterfeit Countenance known am I;
This world is full of my folly.
I set not by him a fly
That cannot counterfeit a lie,
Swear and stare, and bide thereby,
And countenance it cleanly,
And defend it manerly.

A knave wyll counterfet nowe a knight,
A lurdayne lyke a lorde to syght,
A mynstrell lyke a man of might,
A tappyster lyke a lady bright
[...].¹³

The move here into what Counterfeit Countenance describes as 'bastard verse, after the doggerel guise' is a deliberate ploy; he 'adopts' doggerel for the particular purpose of a boastful, demonic rant about his own capabilities. And just as the Fabyan-author suggests by his choice of stanza form that doggerel verse is characteristically simple, so Counterfeit Countenance signals his descent into doggerel with a change from rhyme royal into monorhymed stanzas of seven shorter lines.

'Bastard' rhyme of this kind of course features with some frequency in Skelton's work, to the extent that 'Skeltonics' has become a readily accepted term for verse written in short monorhymed lines. The various attempts to explain his predilection for this form, and to explore its origins and manifestations in the Middle English period, are summarized in John Scattergood's notes to this passage in his edition of *Magnificence*, where he also directs readers to the lines in *Colyn Clout* where Skelton talks of his 'ragged | Tattered and jagged | Rudely rayne-beaten, | Rusty and mothe-eaten' way of writing.¹⁴ John Norton-Smith wrote of Skeltonics (or monorhymed doggerel) as a demotic, subliterate form, possibly with origins in a type of verse epistle practised in East Anglia (examples of which may be found in the Paston Letters), and which may have come Skelton's way when he lived in Diss.¹⁵ R. S. Kinsman preferred to see the origins of Skeltonics in Middle English monorhymed lyrics, most of which seem to be on the subject of death, and he signalled in illustration the well-known 'Signs of death' lyric which begins, 'Wanne mine eyhnen misten, | And mine heren sissen, | And mi nose koldet, | And mi tunge ffoldet'.¹⁶

Whatever may have prompted Skelton to favour this way of writing, it seems from the *Magnificence* extract that he and probably his readers understood 'doggerel' verse to

¹³ John Skelton, *Magnifyfence, a goodly interlude and a mery* [Treveris for Rastell, 1530?], (STC 22607); quoted from *Magnificence*, ed. by Paula Neuss (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 91, ll. 403–16.

¹⁴ *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, ed. by John Scattergood (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 437.

¹⁵ John Norton-Smith, 'The Origins of Skeltonics', *Essays in Criticism*, 23 (1973), 57–62.

¹⁶ Robert S. Kinsman, 'Skelton's "Uppon a Deedman's Hed": New Light on the Origin of the Skeltonic', *Studies in*

be doggerel because of its form, and specifically its rhyme scheme; it is ‘bastard’ because ‘half-way’ to being verse. This is approximately the definition that was to appear in George Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*, first printed in 1589 (STC 20519). Puttenham talks about doggerel in the fourth chapter of Book II, ‘Of Proportion’, which deals with pauses, most particularly the caesura and its virtues. Apart from pleasing the ear, the caesural pause restrains ‘the licentiousnesse of rymers’ who otherwise might be tempted to ‘let their rymes runne out at length’ and forget to shape their lines harmoniously. The most swingeing criticism is reserved for those who do not observe form in rhyme: ‘For a rymer that will be tyed to no rules at all, but range as he list, may easily utter what he will: but such maner of Poesie is called in our vulgar, ryme dogrell, with which rebuke we will in no case our maker should be touched.’¹⁷ The other sixteenth-century citation in *OED*, from John Bale’s *Apology* of c. 1550 (STC 1275), uses the word as simple abuse, seeming to reach for it as some sort of alliterative reflex: ‘Ye haue sucked muche of the diuinite doggerel of that drunken papist Johan Eckius, in thys matter’.¹⁸

One further early attestation of ‘doggerel’ not cited in *OED* is worth exploring for the emphasis it adds to the definitions considered thus far. It occurs in London, British Library, MS Additional 17492, the so-called ‘Devonshire manuscript’ associated with Sir Thomas Wyatt and his circle. This is a collection of short, miscellaneous poems, copied in different hands over a number of years; it has featured in recent scholarship partly because some of the hands may be those of female members of this circle, and partly because some of its contents appear to make cryptic reference to Wyatt’s relationship with Anne Boleyn.¹⁹ Folio 65v of this collection includes seven lines of verse, beginning ‘to countarffete a mery mode [...]’, at the end of which the scribe has written ‘ryme dogrel how many | myle to meghelmas’:

To countarffete a mery mode
 Yn morning mynd I think yt best;
 Ffor wons yn rayn I wor a nood
 Wel the war wet that barhed stood;
 But syns that clokes be good for dowt,
 The bagars prouerbe ffynd I good:
 Betar a path than a halle owte.
 ryme dogrel how many | myle to meghelmas.²⁰

Raymond Southall noted this tag in his 1964 study of Wyatt and suggested that it must indicate a melody appropriate to the words of ‘to countarffete a mery mode [...]’.²¹ R. L. Greene, in his comprehensive edition of early carols, pointed out a likely song, with an echo of the key phrase

Philology, 50 (1953), 101–09.

¹⁷ Quoted from *The Arte of English Poesie* by George Puttenham, ed. by Gladys D. Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), pp. 75–76 (u/v and long s are here regularized).

¹⁸ *The apology of Johan Bale agaynste a ranke Papyst ... M.CCCCC.L.*, [S. Mierdman f.] (J. Day) [1550?] (STC 1275), fol. xciii.

¹⁹ See most recently, Seth Lerer, *Courtly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII: Literary Culture and the Arts of Deceit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 122–60.

²⁰ London, British Library, MS Additional 17492, fol. 65v; K. Muir, ‘Unpublished Poems in the Devonshire MS’, *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society (Literature and History)*, 6 (1947), 253–82 (p. 277). The ‘bagars prouerbe’ in the last line is not easy to construe: it may be some variant of ‘one beggar is woe that another by the door should go’, B237 in M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950).

²¹ *The Courtly Maker: An Essay on the Poetry of Wyatt and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), p. 9.

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‘how many myle to meghelmes’ at the start of its second stanza, that could have supplied the missing tune:²²

*My harte of golde as true as stele
As I me lened to a bough,
In fayth, but yf ye loue me well,
Lord, so Robyn lough!*

My lady went to Caunterbury,
The Saynt to be her bothe;
She met with Cate of Malmesbury;
Why wepest thou in an apple rote?
My harte of golde as true as stele
[...]

Nyne myle to Mychelmas,
Our dame began to brew;
Mychell set his mare to gras;
Lord, so fast it snew!
My harte of golde as true as stele
[...].²³

If the tune to this carol is what was indicated by the cryptic note in the Devonshire manuscript, it is possible to assume that the scribe remembered the carol as a piece of exuberant nonsense — which it manifestly is — and meant by ‘ryme dogrel how many l myle to meghelmas’ something like ‘sing these words to the tune of that nonsense poem with the words “how many l myle to meghelmas” in it.’

From the evidence amassed so far of very late Middle English uses of the word ‘doggerel’ we can conclude that it was not a word in frequent use, at least in written form, and that it had several shades of meaning, some of which point to specific features of its nature as verse rather than simply condemning it. ‘Inept’, ‘monorhymed’, and ‘nonsensical’ are the primary categories. There seems a good possibility that the word might originate with Chaucer; and some grounds for supposing that its continued use had some Chaucerian authority. The Fabyan-author and Skelton certainly knew their Chaucer (as did Bale and Puttenham, of course), and the scribe of the Devonshire manuscript extract may have done as well, since it has been demonstrated that other contributions to this manuscript take the form of extracts copied from Thynne’s printed edition of Chaucer’s works.²⁴

²² *The Early English Carols*, ed. by R. L. Greene, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 504–05.

²³ *Christmas carols*, Southwark, P. Treveris [1528?], STC 5204.3, A3v–4v; *Early English Carols*, ed. by Greene, pp. 290–91. The date of ‘c. 1550’ attributed to the text by Greene is slightly misleading: the printed book in which the carol survives is an amalgam of several small pamphlets, one of which is STC 5204.3; see William A. Ringler, Jr., *Bibliography and Index of English Verse Printed 1476–1558* (London and New York: Mansell, 1988), p. 69. The date of [1528?] suggested by STC is sufficiently early to allow for the hypothesis that the song was in circulation at the time when the Devonshire manuscript was being compiled.

²⁴ Ethel Seaton, ‘The Devonshire Manuscript and its Medieval Fragments’, *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 7 (1956), 55–56; R. C. Harrier, ‘A Printed Source for the Devonshire Manuscript’, *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 11 (1960), 54. A slightly later reference to doggerel, not included in *OED*, has been pointed out to me by Dr Kate McClune. An early-seventeenth-century verse ‘libell’ sent by Sir William Fowler to Sir David Wod, beginning ‘Sir, I devyned what would insewe l That double drinks would mak yow spew [...]’, is headed in the single surviving manuscript ‘Dogrell’; see *The Works of William Fowler*, ed. by Henry W. Meikle, James Craigie, and John Purves, Scottish Text Society, second series 6, third series 7 and 13 (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1914–39), I, 320.

The different emphases suggested in this small sample of late Middle English references to ‘doggerel’ are reflected in much of the popular and ephemeral verse surviving from the period. While a full-blown taxonomy of doggerel is unlikely to be either possible or desirable, the isolation of some rough categories affords an unusual opportunity to map some generally overlooked areas of popular literary production, and to remark the ways in which doggerel forms of writing can illustrate fashions and trends. Inept verse seems the obvious place to start: inept in that it is, in *OED*’s useful word, ‘trivial’. The ineptness or incompetence might reside in the fact that the metre and/or the rhyme are insufficient; the form and subject matter are inappropriately matched; the stanza forms break down; the sense is unclear (combinations of some or all of these features are possible). It is easy enough to find verse like this in manuscripts and early printed books from the Middle English period, just as it is easy enough to find it today in greetings cards or ‘*in memoriam*’ columns, or in popular song lyrics. Such verse survives in the form of bookplates, ownership inscriptions, epitaphs, songs; sometimes embedded in sermons, letters, students’ notebooks; from contexts like social or ceremonial occasions; and in the form of inscriptions on artefacts of different kinds.²⁵ The person- or occasion-specific nature of many of these bits of doggerel is an important aspect of their being. Many of them are poems composed for a particular purpose, or a particular audience, like the snippets of verse found in letter collections, for example, or the stanzas used for banquets or ceremonial occasions, or for insertion in a *liber amicorum*. Occasionally in manuscripts such poems survive in holograph copies, and it is possible to observe in trial attempts and deletions something of the process of their composition.²⁶

These forms of doggerel might be thought of as genuinely inept, produced by people having a go at something at which they are not very skilled, even perhaps in which they are not very interested. But there are clearly other categories of doggerel deliberately conceived to be clumsy, primarily for extra-memorable effect: verse we might think of as ‘designer doggerel’. ‘Thirty days hath September’, with its long medieval lineage is one example; other mnemonics include this one:

He that intendyth too wrytt & to rede
Vnto these vowells he most take hede:
Ther be bit v, they be full trwe,
That is to sey, a, e, i, o, and w.²⁷

The doggerel verse studied by Ralph Hanna in Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.4.32 is designed to be remembered: ‘the verse-form here imposed on instructional lists’, as Hanna notes, ‘may identify this doggerel as mnemonic devices to outline basic points for a not very sophisticated congregation.’²⁸

Memorably awkward rhyme schemes or metrical patterns of doggerel kinds are also a feature of riddles, and of spells and charms, which survive in relatively large numbers from the Middle English period, offering protection against perils such as illness, bleeding, thieves,

²⁵ See Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, *A New Index of Middle English Verse* (London: British Library, 2005), hereafter abbreviated to *NIMEV*; examples of these different forms of verse can be found in the subject index.

²⁶ For some late fifteenth-century examples, see *The Armburgh Papers*, ed. by Christine Carpenter (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), pp. 155–68, and Deborah Youngs, *Humphrey Newton (1466–1536): An Early Tudor Gentleman* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 177–200.

²⁷ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS e Mus. 88, fol. 94v; *NIMEV* 1152.22. ‘Thirty days hath September’ is *NIMEV* 3571. Other such doggerel mnemonics include *NIMEV* 3347.77 (how to find leap year and Sunday letters), and 3572 (how to remember the number of teeth in the mouth).

²⁸ Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 10.

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rats, toothache, or worms in children.²⁹ The ‘night-spell’ uttered by John the Carpenter in *The Miller’s Tale*, to protect his house and its inhabitants from ‘elves and wightes’, is a charm of this sort:

Jhesu Crist and Seinte Benedight,
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,
For nyghtes verye, the white *pater-noster*!
Where wentestow, Seinte Petres soster?³⁰

As Douglas Gray points out in his notes to the text in *The Riverside Chaucer*, this is very close to the doggerel (and similarly mostly incomprehensible) spell spoken by the third shepherd in the Towneley *First Shepherds’ Play*:

For ferde we be fright, a crosse lett vs kest
Cryst-crosse, benedyght eest and west —
For drede.
Ihesus onazorus,
Crucyefixus
Morcus, Andreus,
God be oure spede!³¹

Part of the joke, in both these narratives, is that the doggerel spells come from the mouths of simple, unlearned characters from whom we would hardly expect a rhyme royal stanza or a roundel. But the spells nonetheless have their own uncanny memorableness which transcends purposes of humour. The same might be said of those Middle English lyrics which make their points because of, rather than in spite of, what looks like incompetent construction. The ‘Signs of death’ poem ‘Wanne mine eyhnen misten’, already mentioned above in connection with Kinsman’s argument about Skeltonics, is one example.³² Others include the enigmatic, often deeply compressed and aphoristic sorts of doggerel which embody political comment, both specific and more general:

Lex is leyd adowne
And *veritas* is but small
Amor ys owt of towne
And *caritas* ys gon with all.³³

Prophecies like ‘The Cock in the North’ are more expansive forms.³⁴ We might consider alongside these the verses concerning the events of 1381 included in letters attributed to John Ball which are incorporated in Thomas Walsingham’s *Historia Anglicana* and Henry Knighton’s *Chronicon*:

Nowe ryȝt & myȝt,
Wylle and skylle,
God spede [euerydele] [...]

²⁹ See *NIMEV*, subject index, under ‘Riddles’ and ‘Charms’.

³⁰ *The Canterbury Tales*, I. 3483–86; see *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson, pp. 72 and 846.

³¹ *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, ed. by A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), p. 37. The shepherds’ attempts to reproduce the angels’ ‘Gloria in excelsis deo’, in various of the cycles, lead to some comic doggerel: see Richard Rastall, *The Heavens Singing: Music in Early English Religious Drama* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), pp. 344–64.

³² *NIMEV* 3998; *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, ed. by Carleton Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 130. For other versions see *NIMEV*, subject index, under ‘Death, signs of’.

³³ *NIMEV* 1870; *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Carleton Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 347, where the relationships of this to other poems are discussed.

³⁴ *NIMEV* 4029; see also subject index, under ‘Prophecies’.

Iohan þe Mullere hap ygrounde smal, smal, smal;
 Þe Kynges sone of heuene schal paye for al.
 Be war or [3]e be wo;
 Knoweth 3our freende fro 3our foo;
 Haueth ynow, & seith 'Hoo';
 And do wel and better, and fleth synne,
 And sekeþ pees, and hold 3ou þerinne.
 And so biddeth Iohan Trewaman and alle his felawes.³⁵

The lines themselves surely qualify as doggerel in their relative formlessness and triteness. Richard Firth Green has written persuasively of the ways in which 'they reflect the world of the popular preacher, their proverbs and scraps of vernacular verse turning up in sermons, sermon notes, and preaching manuals throughout the fourteenth century'. But in their historical contexts, as documents from a period of social and political ferment, and their local contexts as well, embedded in important chronicles, they acquire a more profound significance; Walsingham himself noted that the sample included in his work is 'aenigmatibus plenam'.³⁶

The most self-conscious forms of designer doggerel are perhaps nonsense verses and burlesques. Nonsense verse has a fairly long Middle English history, taking in pieces like the so-called 'Drunkard's Song' from the Rawlinson fragments, learned nonsense songs in student collections, humorous nonsense carols, and more specific forms like versified lists of *impossibilia*.³⁷ One example is the following:

I saw iij hedles playen at a ball
 An hanlas man served hem all
 Whyll iij movthles men lay & low,
 iij legles a-way hem drow.³⁸

Although pieces of this sort are mostly one-off items, made up for the moment and not likely to be widely transmitted, the couplets just quoted survive in two manuscripts, one of which is a collection containing aids to learning Latin.³⁹ Another quite lengthy nonsense poem, beginning 'Herkenes to my tale that j schall her schow', survives in two fifteenth-century anthologies apparently originating in different parts of the country: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19. 3.1 (the Heege manuscript) and Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Brogyntyn ii.1 (formerly Porkington 10).⁴⁰ This is a flamboyant and

³⁵ Richard Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. by Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 176–200 (pp. 194–95, the first three lines from Knighton and the remaining ones from Walsingham); see also Susan Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', pp. 201–21 in the same volume; and Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 1994), pp. 13–66. Puttenham (*The Arte of English Poesie*, Book III, chapter 22) refers to these 'ambiguous speeches [...] propheticall rymes, which might be construed two or three wayes as well as to that one whereunto the rebelles applied it'; for some discussion of this section, see *The Arte of English Poesy* by George Puttenham: A Critical Edition, ed. by Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 414–16.

³⁶ Green, 'John Ball's Letters', pp. 187 and 182.

³⁷ The 'Drunkard's Song' (from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson D. 913) is NIMEV 694.11; for other categories, see NIMEV, subject index, under 'Impossibilities' and 'Nonsense'.

³⁸ NIMEV 1354; *Secular Lyrics of the XIV and XV Centuries*, ed. by R. H. Robbins, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 241.

³⁹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MSS Eng. poet. e. 1, and Rawlinson D. 328; Sanford B. Meech, 'A Collection of Proverbs in Rawlinson MS D 328', *Modern Philology*, 38 (1940), 113–32.

⁴⁰ NIMEV 1116; see *Reliquiae Antiquae*, ed. by T. Wright and J. O. Halliwell, 2 vols (London: William Pickering, 1841–3), I, 81–82, 85–86. For facsimiles, see Philippa Hardman, intro., *The Heege Manuscript: A Facsimile of*

comparatively extended piece of nonsense, with no hint of satirical function. It is unlike the extravagantly fantastic *Land of Cokayne* — a satire on religious and the clergy — and unlike anti-feminist lyrics in which lists of reversals and/or *impossibilia* serve a critical function ('When nettuls in winter bring forth rosys red, l *And* al maner of thorn trys ber fygyys naturally, l *And* ges ber perles in euery med [...] Than put women in trust and confydens').⁴¹ It can hardly be interpreted as parody, either, unless the object of its ridicule is simply 'verse'.

Parody and burlesque nonetheless seem to be forms whose aims very readily generated Middle English doggerel. The essence of parody, in the generally accepted definition, is that it is 'a mocking imitation of the style of a literary work or works, ridiculing the stylistic habits of an author or school by exaggerated mimicry'.⁴² Burlesque, although also concerned with ridicule, is assumed to have more to do with incongruity, 'either by treating its solemn subject in an undignified style (*see* travesty) or by applying its elevated style to a trivial subject' (for example, mock-epic such as *The Rape of the Lock*).⁴³ The distinction between the two categories is often blurred, but it has been helpfully explored in relation to Middle English texts in a discussion by Eric Stanley.⁴⁴ One point which emerges from Stanley's range of examples is that some examples of Middle English parody and burlesque are decidedly not doggerel. A number of the parodies he cites are very learned, making use of parts of the Mass or other liturgical fragments or cadences, and turning these in subtle and artful ways to uses which are considerably more than 'trivial' or 'mean' or 'undistinguished' (Skelton's *Philip Sparrow* features in this list). Some of the burlesques in his category of 'humorous tales of low life told in relation to higher life' (poems like *The Tournament of Tottenham*, where pots and pans are used as the accoutrements of chivalric contest; or the rather similar alliterative 'Battle of Brackonwet') do not quite deserve the appellation 'doggerel', either: they are funny and silly, but mostly quite cleverly sustained, and their jokes rely more on incongruity of content than on insufficiencies of style.⁴⁵ But the short love poem seems to have invited forms of both parody and burlesque which often tip over into doggerel verse, from Hoccleve's roundel on his lady, with the unforgettable compliment on 'Hir comly body shape as a footbal',⁴⁶ to the more leadenly comic lyric surviving in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Brogyntyn ii.1 and in Oxford, Balliol College, MS 354 (the commonplace book of the Londoner Richard Hill):

National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1 (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 2000), fol. 60r-v; and for MS Brogyntyn ii.1, http://www.llgc.org.uk/index.php?id=amiddleenglishmiscellanybro_fols_152r-154r.

⁴¹ For *The Land of Cokayne*, NIMEV 762, in London, British Library, MS Harley 913, fols 3r-6v, see *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. by R. H. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 121-27; the most extended anti-feminist fantasy of this kind is NIMEV 3999, quoted here from *Early English Carols*, ed. by Greene, p. 238 (see also NIMEV, subject index, under 'Women, poems on').

⁴² Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 161-62.

⁴³ Baldick, *Literary Terms*, p. 27.

⁴⁴ 'Parody in Early English Literature', *Poetica*, 27 (1988), 1-69.

⁴⁵ For the *Tournament of Tottenham* (NIMEV 2615), see Carol M. Meale, 'Romance and its Anti-Type? *The Tournament of Tottenham*, the Carnavalesque, and Popular Culture', in *Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions, Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall*, ed. by A. J. Minnis (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2001), pp. 103-27; 'The Battle of Brackonwet' (NIMEV 3435) is edited in Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'Some Medieval Manuscripts in the North-East Midlands', in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. by Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), pp. 125-41: 'This poem only makes sense — and there is not much of that — as a local production for a local audience. What the poet is doing is burlesquing the ancient heroes of traditional alliterative chronicle-poems and the far-away battle-fields of romance, transmuting them into housewives, innkeepers, jousting bears and dancing pigs fighting it out in the local villages' (pp. 137-38).

⁴⁶ *Selections from Hoccleve*, ed. by M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 30.

Lord, how shall I me complayn
Vnto myn own lady dere,
For to tell her of all my payn
That I fele this tyme of the yere
My love, yf that ye will here
Though I can no songis make
So this love changith my chere
That [whan] I slepe, I can not wake.⁴⁷

Occasionally the comic point in such love lyrics is made by the employment of an extravagantly aureate style as the vehicle for the tritest of sentiments.⁴⁸

Parody which concerns itself with the detail of verbal and stylistic texture seems the kind most likely to generate doggerel. In the opening section of the play *Mankind*, for example, Myscheffe mocks the Latinate diction and cultivated rhetorical and metrical polish of Mercy's opening speech:

For sekyrly ther shall be a streyt examynacyon,
The corn shall be savyde, the chaffe shall be brente.
I beseche yow hertyly, have this premediytacyon.⁴⁹

Myscheffe's aim is to parody Mercy's words, to make him sound nonsensical, and put him off ('leve yowr dalyacyon', l. 46). His speech here, as it continues in this part of the play, is a brilliant and self-conscious mimicry which half-echoes Mercy's Latinate diction, condenses the expansive eight-line *ballade* stanzas into a verse form which uses shorter, monorhymed lines, and generally makes nonsense of Mercy's pronouncements:

Mysse-masche, dryff-draff,
Sume was corn and sume was chaffe
My dame seyde my name was Raffe;
Onschett yowr lokke and take an halpeny.⁵⁰

No-one without some Latin, an extensive vocabulary, and an experienced sense of a variety of verse forms could produce this. It might be compared with the 'ranting' attributed to figures like Herod in some of the cycle plays, where 'normal' speech, distorted by figures of rhetoric and lexical choice associated with delusions of power and grandeur, ends up as something close to doggerel nonsense. Although it is a very short example, Chaucer's Parson's dismissive characterization of alliterative verse could be classed as a miniature instance of the doggerel parody: his response, when asked to tell his tale, is that he will speak in prose, as 'I kan nat geeste "rum, ram, ruf" by lettre'.⁵¹ The larger-scale parody of popular romance in *Sir Thopas* works with incongruity of content as well as with insufficiencies of style, of course: its 'rym', or form, is what particularly seems to attract the Host's opprobrium.

The range of sources from which examples have been drawn in this discussion suggests that sensitivity to proprieties of style and diction in verse, as well as to conventions

⁴⁷ NIMEV 1957; *Songs, Carols and Other Miscellaneous Poems from the Balliol MS 354*, ed. by R. Dyboski, EETS o.s. 101 (1908), p. 119 (the poem is on fol. 252r of this MS); for the text in Brogyntyn ii.1, fols 59v–61r, see above, note 40. J. Anne George, '“Decent” Doggerel', *REED Newsletter*, 12 (1987), 23–25, discusses an early seventeenth-century parody of this kind.

⁴⁸ See, for example, the aureate lyric beginning 'O desireabull dyamunt distinit with diuersificacion', NIMEV 2412.5.

⁴⁹ *The Macro Plays*, ed. by Mark Eccles, EETS o.s. 262 (1969), p. 155, ll. 42–44. These sections of the play are discussed by Janette Dillon, 'Mankind and the Politics of "Englysch Latyn"', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 20 (1994), 41–64.

⁵⁰ *Mankind*, in *The Macro Plays*, ed. by Eccles, ll. 49–52.

⁵¹ 'The Parson's Prologue', *The Canterbury Tales*, X, 42–43, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson, p. 287.

Verse and Worse in Middle English: Defining Doggerel

appropriate to particular forms of poetic discourse, was widespread. ‘For literary parody’, as Eric Stanley remarks, ‘established literary forms are needed’; and we might add that in order for literary parody to be appreciated, these forms need to be relatively widely understood.⁵² The perspicacity of Middle English parodic writing — not just in self-consciously literary contexts but in the field of amateur versifying — suggests a widespread and relatively sophisticated acquaintance with ‘established literary forms’ and conventions, and one which accommodated a flexible and creative understanding of ‘doggerel’. At the very least, and especially in its parodic forms, Middle English doggerel can indicate something of contemporary understanding of and attitudes towards certain modes of writing, whether popular romance, or love lyric, or Latinate sermonizing. In so doing it makes a small but illuminating contribution to what we can reconstruct of Middle English literary critical discourse.

⁵² Stanley, ‘Parody in Early English Literature’, p. 1.

doggerel definition: 1. poetry that is silly or badly written 2. poetry that is silly or badly written. Learn more. This is no better verse, and possibly no worse, than much of the adolescent doggerel that is so often preserved by fond parents to prove that their child early gave signs of poetic and literary genius. Until the boys got hold of that doggerel he wrote, Johnny was sure they had not paid any attention to his occasional vague rhapsodies on the subject. Julia Boffey, *Verse and Worse in Middle English: Defining Doggerel*, pp. 33-44. Wendy R. Childs, *Chronicles and Politics in the Reign of Edward II*, pp. 45-55. Margaret Connolly, *An Edition and Study of A Revelation Shown to a Yorkshire Woman*, pp. 56-65. Ben Snook, pp. 150-52: Janie Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity: The Adaptation of Latin Rhetoric in Old English Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). Cathy Hume, pp. 152-53: Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević and Judith Weiss, eds, *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010). Alaric Hall, pp. 153-55: Massimiliano Bampi and Fulvio Ferrari, eds, *Lånrdomber oc skåmptan: Medieval Swedish Literature Reconsidered* (Uppsala: Svenska fornskriftsÅllskapet, 2008). Meaning of doggerel in English: doggerel. Pronunciation /ˈdɔːɡ(ɪ)r/. This is the type of truly bad language-mangling doggerel written by old ladies that appears on the letters pages of local newspapers. Most of the work was amateurish - ridiculous doggerel written by unskilled poets. I was writing po-mo doggerel at the age of 12, in a way. Late Middle English (as an adjective describing such verse): apparently from dog (used contemptuously, as in dog Latin) + -rel. Word of the day. goog. English Language & Usage Stack Exchange is a question and answer site for linguists, etymologists, and serious English language enthusiasts. It only takes a minute to sign up. Sign up to join this community. 'Doggerel' is not universally understood to be "ineffective". Quite the contrary, 'doggerel' is often defined as effective in achieving particular goals (inaesthetic in themselves, but perhaps subordinated to an overall esthetic goal proper to art) by reason of its crudity: doggerel loosely styled and irregular in measure especially for burlesque or comic effect; also : marked by triviality or inferiority. (Merriam-Webster, emphasis mine). Doggerel, a low, or trivial, form of verse, loosely constructed and often irregular, but effective because of its simple mnemonic rhyme and loping metre. This collection of about 300 Middle English primary texts was assembled over more than two decades in order to provide a publicly accessible, cross-searchable sampling of Middle English from a widely diverse range of genres, times, and places. Selection was directed towards broad inclusiveness, neglecting neither major works nor minor, but has always been constrained by the need to keep the texts public, so that anyone could access them. Beginning in the mid-90s with a few score texts obtained from the Oxford Text Archive, transcribed by the Library, or contributed by University of Michigan faculty, the collection enjoyed two spurts of growth. The first, funded by the Delmas Foundation, added about 75 texts in the year 2000; the second, in 2016-2018, added another 150 texts or so.