14. The poor balance of the White Knight on the poker foreshadows his poor balance on horseback when Alice meets him later in Chapter 5.

15. Carroll originally intended to print the entire “Jabberwocky” in reversed form, but later decided to limit this to the first verse. The fact that the printing appeared reversed to Alice is evidence that she herself was not reversed by her passage through the mirror. As explained earlier, there are now scientific reasons for suspecting that an unreversed Alice could not exist for more than a fraction of a second in a looking-glass world. (See also Chapter 5, Note 10.)

There are other reasons for assuming Alice was not mirror reflected. Many of Tenniel’s pictures in the first book show her right-handed, and she continues to be right-handed in his pictures for the second book. Peter Newell’s art is ambiguous on this point, though in Chapter 9 his Alice holds a scepter in her left hand, not in her right as Tenniel has it.

Alice has no difficulty reading the Wasp’s newspaper in the long-lost “Wasp in a Wig” episode, so presumably, unlike “Jabberwocky,” it was not reversed. Also unreversed are “DUM” and “DEF” on the collars of the Tweedle brothers, the label on the Mad Hatter’s top hat, and “Queen Alice” over the door in Chapter 9. Brian Kinoshaw sent a detailed analysis of the left-right aspects of the book, all of which lead to the conclusion that neither Tenniel nor Carroll was consistent about who or what was mirror-reflected behind the looking glass.

16. The opening stanza of “Jabberwocky” first appeared in *Miscellany*, the last of a series of private little “periodicals” that young Carroll wrote, illustrated and hand-lettered for the amusement of his brothers and sisters. In an issue dated 1855 (Carroll was then twenty-three), under the heading “Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry,” the following “curious fragment” appears:

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CHES JABBERWOCK, AND OF GLORIOUS TIMES
IN GAY AND GAYLAND IN Y WAYS;
ALL MIMSIS WERE Y BOROGROVES;
AND Y MOME Raths OUTGRABE.
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Carroll then proceeds to interpret the words as follows:

“What manner of things?” said the Queen, looking over the book (in which Alice had put “The White Knight is sliding down the poker. He balances very badly”.

There was a book lying near Alice on the table, and while she sat watching the White King (for she was still a little anxious about him, and had the ink all ready to throw over him, in case he fainted again), she turned over the leaves, to find some part that she could read, —for it’s all in some language I don’t know,” she said to herself.

It was like this.

```
Twas brillig, and the slithy toves;
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsis were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
```

She puzzled over this for some time, but at last a bright thought struck her. “Why, it’s a Looking-glass book, of course! And, if I hold it up to a glass, the words will all go the right way again.”

This was the poem that Alice read.

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Jabberwocky

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsis were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jabberwock, bird, and snun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”
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"
Looking-Glass House

He took his vorpal\textsuperscript{30} sword in hand;  
Long time the manxome\textsuperscript{31} foe he sought—  
So rested he by the Tumtum\textsuperscript{32} tree,  
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish\textsuperscript{33} thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffling\textsuperscript{34} through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled\textsuperscript{35} as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!\textsuperscript{36}

Brillng (derived from the verb to brirl or brill), “the time of broiling dinner, i.e. the close of the afternoon.”  
Slythy (compounded of slm and lite).  
“Smooth and active.”  
Tove. A species of Badger. They had smooth white hair, long hind legs, and short horns like a stag; lived chiefly on cheese.  
Gyve, verb (derived from gyavour or glavour, “a dog”). To scratch like a dog.  
Gymbler (whence gimblet). “To screw out holes in anything.”  
Wash (derived from the verb to swab or soak).  
“The side of a hill” (from its being soaked by the rain).  
Mimsy (whence miserable and miserable).  
“Unhappy.”  
Borogove. An extint kind of Parrot. They had no wings, beaks turned up, and made their nests under sundials.  
Wem (whence Soleome, soleome, and solemn). “Grave.”  
Rath. A species of land turtle. Head erect; mouth like a shark: forelegs curved out so that the animal walked on its knees; smooth green body; lived on swallows and oysters.  
Outshrike, past tense of the verb to outshrike. (It is connected with old verb to shriek, or shrike, from which are derived “shriek” and “creak”). “Squeaked.”  

Hence the literal English of the passage is:  
“It was evening, and the smooth active badgers were scratching and boring holes in the hill-side; all unhappy were the parrots; and the grave turtles squeaked out.”  

There were probably sundials on the top of the hill, and the “borogoves” were afraid that their nests would be undermined. The hill was probably full of the nests of “raths”, which ran out, squeaking with fear, on hearing the “toves” scratching outside. This is an obscure, but yet deeply-affecting, relic of ancient Poetry.

It is interesting to compare these explanations with those given by Humpty Dumpty in Chapter 6.

Few would dispute the fact that “Jabberwocky” is the greatest of all nonsense poems in English. It was so well known to English schoolboys in the late nineteenth century that five of its nonsense words appear casually in the conversation of students in Rudyard Kipling’s Stalky & Co. Alice herself, in the paragraph following the poem, puts her finger on the secret of the poem’s charm: “…it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t know exactly what they are.” Although the strange words have no precise meaning, they chime with subtle overtones.
There is an obvious similarity between nonsense verse of this sort and an abstract painting. The realistic artist is forced to copy nature, imposing on the copy as much as he can in the way of pleasing forms and colors; but the abstract artist is free to romp with the paint as much as he pleases. In similar fashion the nonsense poet does not have to search for ingenious ways of combining pattern and sense; he simply adopts a policy that is the opposite of the advice given by the Duchess in the previous book (see Chapter 9, Note 6)—he takes care of the sounds and allows the sense to take care of itself. The words he uses may suggest vague meanings, like an eye here and a foot there in a Picasso abstraction, or they may have no meaning at all—just a play of pleasant sounds like the play of nonobjective colors on a canvas.

Carroll was not, of course, the first to use this technique of double-talk in humorous verse. He was preceded by Edward Lear, and it is a curious fact that nowhere in the writings or letters of these two undisputed leaders of English nonsense did either of them refer to the other, nor is there evidence that they ever met. Since the time of Lear and Carroll there have been attempts to produce a more serious poetry of this sort—poems by the Dadaists, the Italian futurists, and Gertrude Stein, for example—but somehow when the technique is taken too seriously the results seem tiresome. I have yet to meet someone who could recite one of Miss Stein’s poetic efforts, but I have known a good many Carrollians who found that they knew the “Jabberwocky” by heart without ever having made a conscious effort to memorize it. Ogden Nash produced a fine piece of nonsense in his poem “Gedondillo” (“The Sharrot scudders nights in the quasran now,/The dorlin slinks undeceived in the grost . . .”), but even here there seems to be a bit too much straining for effect, whereas “Jabberwocky” has a careless lift and perfection that makes it the unique thing it is.

“Jabberwocky” was a favorite of the British astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington and is alluded to several times in his writings. In New Pathways in Science he likens the abstract syntactical structure of the poem to that modern branch of mathematics known as group theory. In The Nature of the Physical World he points out that the physicist’s description of an elementary particle is really a kind of Jabberwocky; words applied to “something unknown”

He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?38
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”

He chortled in his joy.

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“It seems very pretty,” she said when she had finished it, “but it’s rather hard to understand!” (You see she didn’t like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn’t make it out at all.) “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t exactly know what they are! However, somebody killed something: that’s clear, at any rate.”42

“But oh!” thought Alice, suddenly jumping up, “if I don’t make haste, I shall have to go back through the Looking-glass, before I’ve seen what the rest of the house is like! Let’s have a look at the garden first!” She was out of the room in a moment, and ran down stairs—or, at least, it wasn’t exactly running, but a new invention for getting down stairs quickly and easily, as Alice said to herself. She just kept the tips of her fingers on the hand-rail, and floated gently down without even touching the stairs with her feet: then she floated on through the hall, and would have gone straight out at the door in the same way, if she hadn’t caught hold of the door-post. She was getting a little giddy with so much floating in the air, and was rather glad to find herself walking again in the natural way.
that is “doing we don’t know what.” Because the description contains numbers, science is able to impose a certain amount of order on the phenomena and to make successful predictions about them.

"By contemplating eight circulating electrons in one atom and seven circulating electrons in another," Eddington writes,

we begin to realize the difference between oxygen and nitrogen. Eight althy toes gyre and gimbie in the oxygen cube, seven in nitrogen. By admitting a few numbers even “Jabberwocky” may become scientific. We can now venture on a prediction; if one of its toes escapes, oxygen will be masquerading in a garb properly belonging to nitrogen. In the stars and nebulae we do find such wolves in sheep’s clothing which might otherwise have startled us. It would not be a bad reminder of the essential unknownness of the fundamental entities of physics to translate it into “Jabberwocky”: provided all numbers—all metrical attributes—are unchanged, it does not suffer in the least.

"Jabberwocky" has been translated skilfully into several languages. There are two Latin versions. One by Augustus A. Vansittart, fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, was issued as a pamphlet by the Oxford University Press in 1881 and will be found on page 144 of Stuart Collingwood’s biography of Carroll. The other version, by Carroll’s uncle, Hassard H. Dodgson, is in The Lewis Carroll Picture Book on page 364. (The Gaborboeius Press, a whimsical London publishing house, derives its name from Uncle Hassard’s Latin word for Jabberwock.)

The following French translation by Frank L. Warrin first appeared in The New Yorker (January 10, 1931). (I quote from Mrs. Lennon’s book, where it is reprinted.)

Le Jaseroque

Il brille: les têtes lubriques
Se garent en virillant dans le guare,
Ennivités sont les goupebouques,
Et le ménemarde horogreave.

Garde-toi du Jaseroque, mon fils!
La gueule qui mort; la griffe qui prend!
Garde-toi de l’oiseau Jabe, écoste
Le fremieux Band-à-prend.

Son glaise vorseil en main il va—
Tà la recherche du faune manseant;
Puis arrivé à l’arbre Té-Té,
Il y reste, rifechevant.

Pendant qu’il pense, tout affermé
Le Jaseroque, à l’ail flambant,
Vient siblant par le bois tulipoges,
Et burlote en venant.

Un deux, un deux, par le milieu,
Le glaise vorseil fust pat-à-pant!
La bête défaite, avec sa tête,
Il rentre gallophamant.

As-tu t’ui le Jaseroque?
Viens à mon cœur fils rayonnain!
O jour frablejeus! Callous! Callous!
Il cortule dans sa joie.

Il brille: les têtes lubriques
Se garent en virillant dans le guare,
Ennivités sont les goupebouques,
Et le ménemarde horogreave.

A magnificent German translation was made by Robert Scott, an eminent Greek scholar who had collaborated with Dean Liddell (Alice’s father) on a Greek lexicum. It first appeared in an article, "The Jabberwocky Traced to Its True Source," Macmillan’s Magazine (February 1872). Using the pseudonym of Thomas Chatterton, Scott tells of attending a seance at which the spirit of one Herrmann von Schwindel insists that Carroll’s poem is simply an English translation of the following old German ballad:

Der Jammerwoch

Es brillig war: Die schlichte Town
Wirten und winnemten in Waben;
Und aller-münsige Bungozen
Die mohmen Bäth ausgaben.

Bewahre doch vor Jammerwoch!—
Die Zähne knirschen, Krallen kratzen!
Bewahre vor Juphab—Vogel, vor
Frömischen Bandschnitzten!

Er griff sein vorges Schwertchen zu,
Er suchte lang das manchaam’ Ding;
Dann, stehend unten Tantum Baum,
Er an-zu-denken-fing.

Als stand er tief in Andacht auf
Des Jamberwochens Augen-feuer
Durch tulpen Wald mit wiffel kam
Ein burteind weheueher!

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17. The Oxford English Dictionary lists slithy as a variant of sleekly, an obsolete word meaning slovenly, but in Chapter 6 Humpty Dumpty gives slithy a different interpretation.

18. Toes should be pronounced to rhyme with groves, Carroll tells us in his preface to The Hunting of the Snark.

19. The Oxford English Dictionary traces gyre back to 1420 as a word meaning to turn or whirl around. This agrees with Humpty Dumpty’s interpretation.

20. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, gimble is a variant spelling of gimbal. Gimbals are pivoted rings used for various purposes, such as suspending a ship’s compass so that it remains horizontal while the ship rolls. Humpty Dumpty makes clear, however, that the verb gimble is here used in a different sense.

21. Mimsy is the first of eight nonsense words in Jabberwocky that are used again in The Hunting of the Snark. It appears in Fit 7, verse 9. “And chanted in mimsiest tones.” In Carroll’s time, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, mimsy (with an e) meant “prim, prudish, contemptible.” Perhaps Carroll had this in mind.

22. In his preface to the Snark, Carroll writes: “The first ‘o’ in ‘borogoves’ is pronounced like the ‘o’ in ‘borrow.’ I have heard people try to give it the sound of the ‘o’ in ‘worry.’ Such is Human Perversity.” The word is commonly mispronounced as “borogoves” by Carrollian novitiates, and this misspelling even appears in some American editions of the book.

23. Mome has a number of obsolete meanings such as mother, a blockhead, a carping critic, a buffoon, none of which, judging from Humpty Dumpty’s interpretation, Carroll had in mind.

24. According to Humpty Dumpty, a rath is a green pig but in Carroll’s day it was a well-known old Irish word for an enclosure, usually a circular earthen wall, serving as a fort and place of residence for the head of a tribe.

26. The Jabberwock is not mentioned in the *Snark*, but in a letter to Mrs. Chataway (the mother of one of his child-friends) Carroll explains that the scene of the *Snark* is “an island frequented by the Jujub and the Bandersnatch—no doubt the very island where the Jabberwock was slain.”

When a class in the Girls’ Latin School, Boston, asked Carroll’s permission to name their school magazine *The Jabberwock*, he replied:

Mr. Lewis Carroll has much pleasure in giving to the editors of the proposed magazine permission to use the title they wish for. He finds that the Anglo-Saxon word “woer” or “woor” signifies “offspring” or “fruit.” Taking “jabber” in its ordinary acceptance of “excited and voluble discussion,” this would give the meaning of “the result of much excited discussion.” Whether this phrase will have any application to the projected periodical, it will be for the future historian of American literature to determine. Mr. Carroll wishes all success to the forthcoming magazine.

27. The Jujub is mentioned five times in the *Snark*: Fit 4, verse 18, and Fit 5, verses 8, 9, 21, and 29.

28. “... those frumious jaws,” *Snark*, Fit 7, verse 5. In the *Snark*’s preface Carroll writes:

> For instance, take the two words “fuming” and “furious.” Make up your mind that you will say both words, but leave it unsettled which you will say first. Now open your mouth and speak. If your thoughts incline ever so little towards “fuming,” you will say “fuming-furious”; if they turn, by even a hair’s breadth, towards “furious,” you will say “furious-fuming”; but if you have that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say “frumious.” Supposing that, when Pistol uttered the well-known words:

> **Under which king, Beowian?**
> **Speak or die!**

Justice Shallow had felt certain that it was either William or Richard, but had not been able to settle which, so that he could not possibly say either name before the other; can it be doubted that, rather than die, he would have gasped out “Rilehian”?

29. The Bandersnatch is mentioned again in Chapter 7, and in the *Snark*, Fit 7, verses 3, 4, and 6.

30. Alexander L. Taylor, in his book on Carroll, *The White Knight*, shows how to get *vorpal* by taking letters alternately from *verbal* and *gospel*, but there is no evidence that Carroll resorted to such involved techniques in coining his words. In fact Carroll wrote to a child-friend: “I am afraid I can't explain 'vorpal blade' for you—not yet 'tulgey wood.' ”

31. *Manx* was the Celtic name for the Isle of Man, hence the word came to be used in England for anything pertaining to the island. Its language was called *Manx*, its inhabitants *Manxmen*, and so on. Whether Carroll had this in mind when he coined *manxmeen* is not known.

32. *Tum-tum* was a common colloquialism in Carroll’s day, referring to the sound of a stringed instrument, especially when monotonously strummed.

33. “The Bellman looked affish, and wrinkled his brow,” *Snark*, Fit 4, verse 1. In a letter to child-friend Maud Standen, 1877, Carroll wrote that “affish” suggested to him “a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner roughish, and the temper huffish.”

34. *Whiffing* is not a Carrollian word. It had a variety of meanings in Carroll’s time, but usually had reference to blowing unsteadily in short puffs, hence it came to be a slang term for being variable and evasive. In an earlier century *schiffling* meant smoking and drinking.

35. “If you take the three verbs ‘bleat,’ ‘murmur,’ and ‘warble,’” Carroll wrote in the letter cited above, “and select the bits I have underlined, it certainly makes ‘bubule’: though I am afraid I can’t distinctly remember having made it in that way.” The word (apparently a combination of *burst* and *bubule*) had long been used in England as a variant of *bubbling* (e.g., the burbling brook), as well as a word meaning “to perplex, confuse, or muddle” (“His life fallen into a horribly burbled state,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes from an 1883 letter of Mrs. Carlyle’s). In modern aeronautics *bubbling* refers to the turbulence that develops when air is not flowing smoothly around an object.

36. *Snickersnee* is an old word for a large knife. It also means “to fight with a knife.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes from *The
Mikado, Act 2: “As I gnashed my teeth, when from its sheath I drew my snicker-snee.”

37. “The Beaver went simply galumphing about,” Snark, Fit 4, verse 17. This Carrollian word has entered the Oxford English Dictionary, where it is attributed to Carroll and defined as a combination of gallop and triumphant, meaning “to march on exultantly with irregular bounding movements.”

38. Tenniel’s striking illustration for this stanza was originally intended as the book’s frontispiece, but it was so horrendous that Carroll feared it might be best to open the book on a milder scene. In 1871 he conducted a private poll of about thirty mothers by sending them the following printed letter:

I am sending you, with this, a print of the proposed frontispiece for Through the Looking-glass. It has been suggested to me that it is too terrible a monster, and likely to alarm nervous and imaginative children, and that at any rate we had better begin the book with a pleasanter subject.

So I am submitting the question to a number of friends, for which purpose I have had copies of the frontispiece printed off.

We have three courses open to us:
(1) To retain it as the frontispiece.
(2) To transfer it to its proper place in the book (where the ballad occurs which it is intended to illustrate) and substitute a new frontispiece.
(3) To omit it altogether.

The last named course would be a great sacrifice of the time and trouble which the picture cost, and it would be a pity to adopt it unless it is really necessary.

I should be grateful to have your opinion, (tested by exhibiting the picture to any children you think fit) as to which of these courses is best.

Evidently most of the mothers favored the second course, for the picture of the White Knight on horseback became the frontispiece.

Correspondent Mrs. Henry Morss, Jr., found a striking similarity between Tenniel’s Jabberwock and the dragon being slain by Saint George in a painting by Paolo Uccello, in London’s National Gallery. For other pictures of monsters that could have influenced Tenniel, see Chapter 8 of Michael Hanrath’s The Tenniel Illustrations to the “Alice” Books.

39. “But oh, beamish nephew, beware of the day,” Snark, Fit 3, verse 10. This is not a word invented by Carroll. The Oxford English Dictionary traces it back to 1530 as a variant of beaming, meaning “shining brightly, radiant.”

40. A species of arctic duck that winters in northern Scotland is called the cauloo after its evening call, “Cauloo! Cauloo!”

More likely, as readers Albert L. Blackwell and Mrs. Carlton S. Hyman each point out, Carroll had in mind two forms of a Greek word, kalos, meaning beautiful, good or fair. They would be pronounced as Carroll spells them, and would fit well the meaning of the line.

41. Chortled, a word coined by Carroll, also has worked its way into the Oxford English Dictionary, where it is defined as a blend of chuckle and snort.

42. Still far from clear is whether “Jabberwocky” is in some sense a parody. Roger Green, in the London Times Literary Supplement (March 1, 1957) and more recently in The Lewis Carroll Handbook (1962), suggests that Carroll may have had in mind “The Shepherd of the Giant Mountains,” a long German ballad about how a young shepherd slays a monstrous Griffin. The ballad had been translated by Carroll’s cousin, Manella Bute Smedley, and published in Sharpe’s London Magazine (March 7 and 21, 1846). “The similarity cannot be pinned down precisely,” writes Green. “Much is in the feeling and the atmosphere; the parody is of general style and outlook.”

In Useful and Instructive Poetry, written by Carroll when he was thirteen (it was his first book), there is a parody of a passage from
Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth, Second Part*, in which the Prince of Wales uses the word *biggen*. In Carroll's version he explains to the puzzled king that the word "means a kind of woolen nightcap." Later he introduces the word *rigol*.

"What meaneth 'rigol'?" asks the king.

"My liege, I know not," the prince replies, "save that it doth enter most apt into the metre."

"True, it doth," the king agrees. "But wherefore use a word which hath no meaning?"

The prince's answer has a prophetic reference to the nonsense words of "Jabberwocky": "My lord, the word is said, for it hath passed my lips, and all the powers upon this earth cannot unsay it."

For more on "Jabberwocky," including how Carroll's contemporaries responded to the poem and its influence on literature and the law, see Joseph Brabant's [*Some Observations on Jabberwocky*](cheshire_cat_press, 1997).