

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LITERARY BLUNDERS.



CHAPTER I.

BLUNDERS IN GENERAL.

THE words “blunder” and “mistake” are often treated as synonyms; thus we usually call our own blunders mistakes, and our friends style our mistakes blunders. In truth the class of blunders is a subdivision of the *genus* mistakes. Many mistakes are very serious in their consequences, but there is almost always some sense of fun connected with a blunder, which is a mistake usually caused by some mental confusion. Lexicographers state that it is an error due to stupidity and carelessness, but blunders are often caused

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Literary Blunders.*

by a too great sharpness and quickness. Sometimes a blunder is no mistake at all, as when a man blunders on the right explanation; thus he arrives at the right goal, but by an unorthodox road. Sir Roger L'Estrange says that "it is one thing to forget a matter of fact, and another to *blunder* upon the reason of it."

Some years ago there was an article in the *Saturday Review* on "the knowledge necessary to make a blunder," and this title gives the clue to what a blunder really is. It is caused by a confusion of two or more things, and unless something is known of these things a blunder cannot be made. A perfectly ignorant man has not sufficient knowledge to make a blunder.

An ordinary blunder may die, and do no great harm, but a literary blunder often has an extraordinary life. Of literary blunders probably the philological are the most persistent and the most difficult to kill. In this class may be mentioned (1) Ghost words, as they are called by Professor Skeat—words, that is, which have been registered, but which never really existed; (2) Real words that exist through a mis-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Blunders in General.* 3

take ; and (3) Absurd etymologies, a large division crammed with delicious blunders.

1. Professor Skeat, in his presidential address to the members of the Philological Society in 1886, gave a most interesting account of some hundred ghost words, or words which have no real existence. Those who wish to follow out this subject must refer to the *Philological Transactions*, but four specially curious instances may be mentioned here. These four words are "abacot," "knise," "morse," and "polien." *Abacot* is defined by Webster as "the cap of state formerly used by English kings, wrought into the figure of two crowns"; but Dr. Murray, when he was preparing the *New English Dictionary*, discovered that this was an interloper, and unworthy of a place in the language. It was found to be a mistake for *by-cocket*, which is the correct word. In spite of this exposure of the impostor, the word was allowed to stand, with a woodcut of an abacot, in an important dictionary published subsequently, although Dr. Murray's remarks were quoted. This shows how difficult it is to kill a word which has

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Literary Blunders.*

once found shelter in our dictionaries. *Knise* is a charming word which first appeared in a number of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1808. Fortunately for the fun of the thing, the word occurred in an article on Indian Missions, by Sydney Smith. We read, "The Hindoos have some very strange customs, which it would be desirable to abolish. Some swing on hooks, some run *knises* through their hands, and widows burn themselves to death." The reviewer was attacked for his statement by Mr. John Styles, and he replied in an article on Methodism printed in the *Edinburgh* in the following year. Sydney Smith wrote: "Mr. Styles is peculiarly severe upon us for not being more shocked at their piercing their limbs with *knises* . . . it is for us to explain the plan and nature of this terrible and unknown piece of mechanism. A *knise*, then, is neither more nor less than a false print in the *Edinburgh Review* for a knife; and from this blunder of the printer has Mr. Styles manufactured this Dædalean instrument of torture called a *knise*." A similar instance occurs in a misprint of a passage

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Blunders in General.* 5

of one of Scott's novels, but here there is the further amusing circumstance that the etymology of the false word was settled to the satisfaction of some of the readers. In the majority of editions of *The Monastery*, chapter x., we read: "Hardened wretch (said Father Eustace), art thou but this instant delivered from death, and dost thou so soon *morse* thoughts of slaughter?" This word is nothing but a misprint of *nurse*; but in *Notes and Queries* two independent correspondents accounted for the word *morse* etymologically. One explained it as "to prime," as when one primes a musket, from O. Fr. *amorce*, powder for the touchhole (Cotgrave), and the other by "to bite" (Lat. *mordere*), hence "to indulge in biting, stinging or gnawing thoughts of slaughter." The latter writes: "That the word as a misprint should have been printed and read by millions for fifty years without being challenged and altered exceeds the bounds of probability." Yet when the original MS. of Sir Walter Scott was consulted, it was found that the word was there plainly written *nurse*.

The Saxon letter for *th* (*þ*) has long

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Literary Blunders.*

been a sore puzzle to the uninitiated, and it came to be represented by the letter *y*. Most of those who think they are writing in a specially archaic manner when they spell “ye” for “the” are ignorant of this, and pronounce the article as if it were the pronoun. Dr. Skeat quotes a curious instance of the misreading of the thorn (*þ*) as *p*, by which a strange ghost word is evolved. Whitaker, in his edition of *Piers Plowman*, reads that Christ “*poled* for man,” which should be *tholed*, from *tholien*, to suffer, as there is no such verb as *polien*.

Dr. J. A. H. Murray, the learned editor of the Philological Society’s *New English Dictionary*, quotes two amusing instances of ghost words in a communication to *Notes and Queries* (7th S., vii. 305). He says: “Possessors of Jamieson’s Scottish Dictionary will do well to strike out the fictitious entry *cietezour*, cited from Bellenden’s *Chronicle* in the plural *cietezouris*, which is merely a misreading of *cietezanis* (*i.e.* with Scottish $z = \text{z} = y$), *cieteyanis* or *citeyanis*, Bellenden’s regular word for *citizens*. One regrets to see this absurd

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Blunders in General.* 7

mistake copied from Jamieson (unfortunately without acknowledgment) by the compilers of Cassell's *Encyclopædic Dictionary*."

"Some editions of Drayton's *Barons Wars*, Bk. VI., st. xxxvii., read—

“‘ And ciffy Cynthus with a thousand birds,’

which nonsense is solemnly reproduced in Campbell's *Specimens of the British Poets*, iii. 16. It may save some readers a needless reference to the dictionary to remember that it is a misprint for *cliffy*, a favourite word of Drayton's."

2. In contrast to supposed words that never did exist, are real words that exist through a mistake, such as *apron* and *adder*, where the *n*, which really belongs to the word itself, has been supposed, mistakenly, to belong to the article ; thus *apron* should be *napron* (Fr. *naperon*), and *adder* should be *nadder* (A.-S. *næddre*). An amusing confusion has arisen in respect to the Ridings of Yorkshire, of which there are three. The word should be *triding*, but the *t* has got lost in the adjective, as West Triding became West Riding. The origin of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Literary Blunders.*

the word has thus been quite lost sight of, and at the first organisation of the Province of Upper Canada, in 1798, the county of Lincoln was divided into *four* ridings and the county of York into *two*. York was afterwards supplied with *four*.

Sir Henry Bennet, in the reign of Charles II., took his title of Earl of Arlington owing to a blunder. The proper name of the village in Middlesex is Harlington.

A curious misunderstanding in the Marriage Service has given us two words instead of one. We now vow to remain united till death us *do part*, but the original declaration, as given in the first Prayer Book of Edward VI., was: "I, N., take thee N., to my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us depart [or separate]."

It is not worth while here to register the many words which have taken their present spelling through a mistaken view of their etymology. They are too numerous, and the consideration of them would open up a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Blunders in General. 9

question quite distinct from the one now under consideration.

3. Absurd etymology was once the rule, because guessing without any knowledge of the historical forms of words was general; and still, in spite of the modern school of philology, which has shown us the right way, much wild guessing continues to be prevalent. It is not, however, often that we can point to such a brilliant instance of blundering etymology as that to be found in Barlow's English Dictionary (1772). The word *porcelain* is there said to be "derived from *pour cent anes*, French for a hundred years, it having been imagined that the materials were matured underground for that term of years."

Richardson, the novelist, suggests an etymology almost equal to this. He writes, "What does correspondence mean? It is a word of Latin origin: a compound word; and the two elements here brought together are *respondeo*, I answer, and *cor*, the heart: *i.e.*, I answer feelingly, I reply not so much to the head as to the heart."

Dr. Ash's English Dictionary, published in 1775, is an exceedingly useful work, as

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05199-6 - Literary Blunders: A Chapter in the History of Human Error

Henry Benjamin Wheatley

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Literary Blunders.*

containing many words and forms of words nowhere else registered, but it contains some curious mistakes. The chief and best-known one is the explanation of the word *curmudgeon*—"from the French *cœur*, unknown, and *mechant*, a correspondent." The only explanation of this absurdly confused etymology is that an ignorant man was employed to copy from Johnson's Dictionary, where the authority was given as "an unknown correspondent," and he, supposing these words to be a translation of the French, set them down as such. The two words *esoteric* and *exoteric* were not so frequently used in the last century as they are now; so perhaps there may be some excuse for the following entry: "Esoteric (adj. an incorrect spelling) exoteric." Dr. Ash could not have been well read in Arthurian literature, or he would not have turned the noble knight Sir Gawaine into a woman, "the sister of King Arthur." There is a story of a blunder in Littleton's Latin Dictionary, which further research has proved to be no mistake at all. It is said that when the Doctor was compiling his work, and