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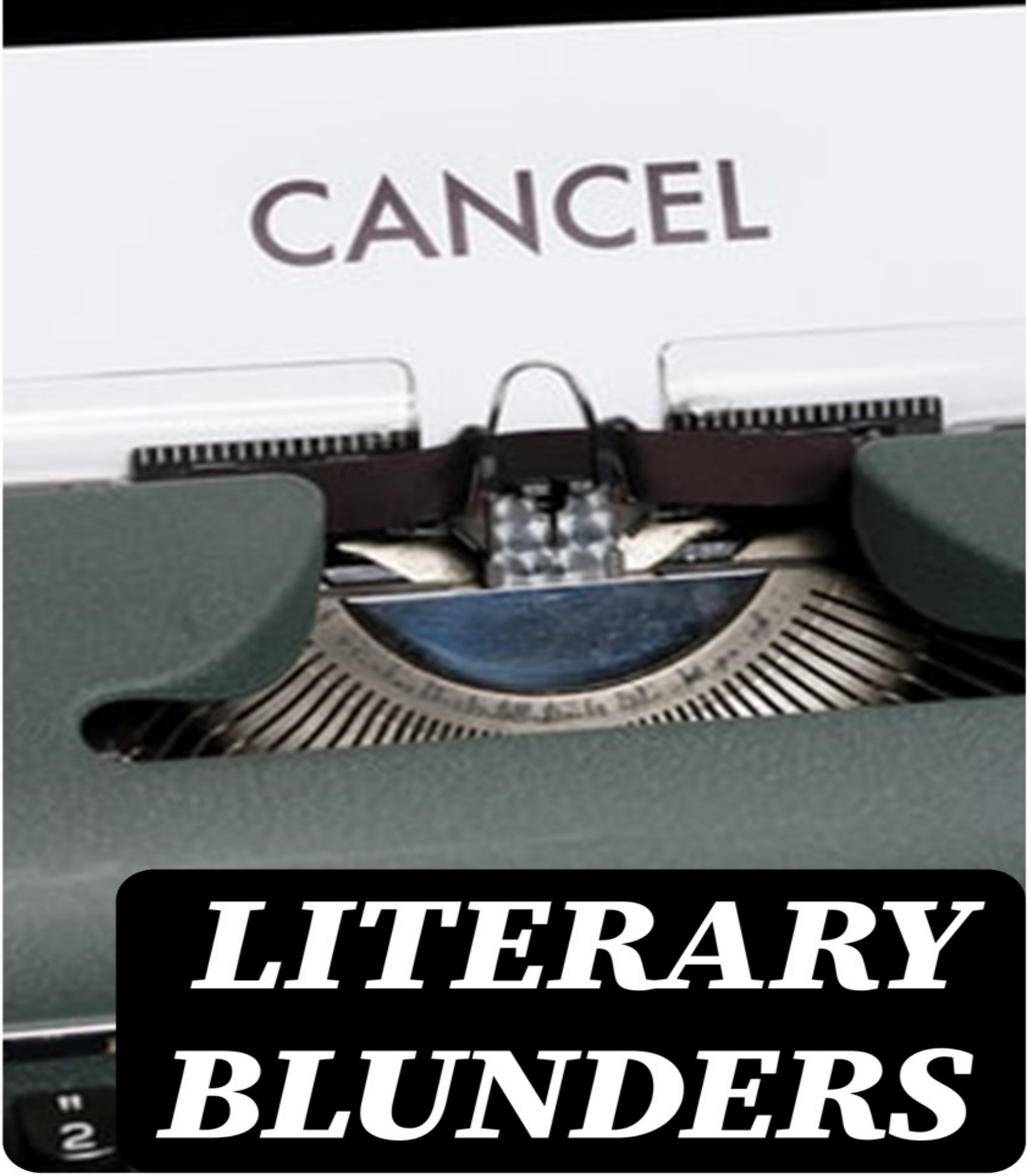


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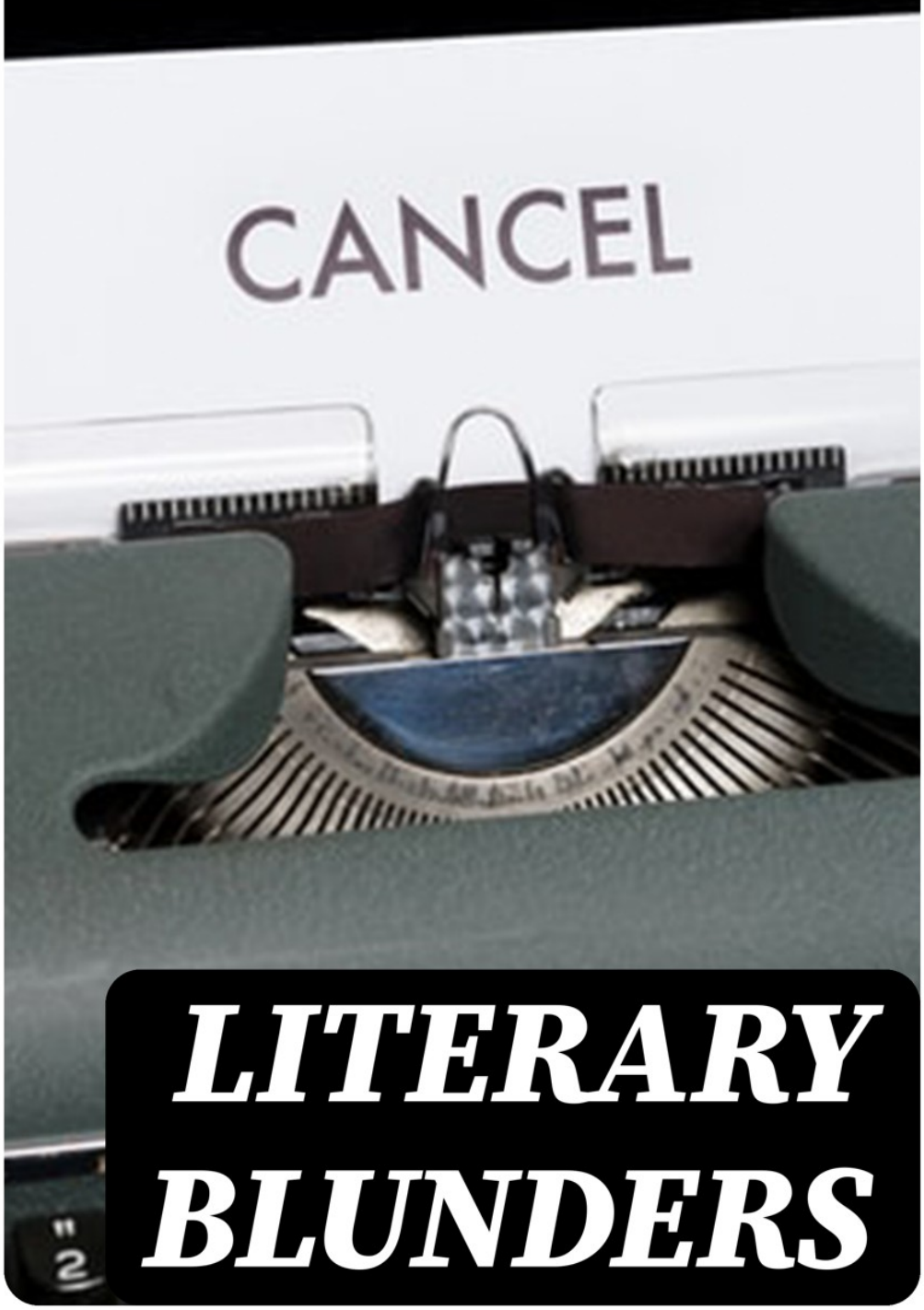


# LITERARY BLUNDERS

**Henry B. Wheatley**

# Literary Blunders

## A Chapter in the "History of Human Error"

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MACAULAY, in his life of Goldsmith in the *Encyclop<ae>dia Britannica*, relates that that author, in the *History of England*, tells us that Naseby is in Yorkshire, and that the mistake was not corrected when the book was reprinted. He further affirms that Goldsmith was nearly hoaxed into putting into the *History of Greece* an account of a battle between Alexander the Great and Montezuma. This, however, is scarcely a fair charge, for the backs of most of us need to be broad enough to bear the actual blunders we have made throughout life without having to bear those which we almost made.

Goldsmith was a very remarkable instance of a man who undertook to write books on subjects of which he knew <p 32>nothing. Thus, Johnson said that if he could tell a horse from a cow that was the extent of his knowledge of zoology; and yet the *History of Animated Nature* can still be read with pleasure from the charm of the author's style.

Some authors are so careless in the construction of their works as to contradict in one part what they have already stated in another. In the year 1828 an amusing work was published on the clubs of London, which contained a chapter on Fighting Fitzgerald, of whom the author writes: ``That Mr. Fitzgerald (unlike his countrymen generally) was totally devoid of generosity, no one who ever knew him will doubt.'' In another chapter on the same person the author flatly contradicts his own judgment: ``In summing up the catalogue of his vices, however, we ought not to shut our eyes upon his virtues; of the latter, he certainly possessed that one for which his countrymen have always been so famous, generosity.'' The scissors- and-paste compilers are peculiarly liable to such errors as these; and a writer in the *Quarterly Review* proved the *M<e'>moires <p 33>de Louis XVIII*. (published in 1832) to be a mendacious compilation

from the *M<e'>moires de Bachaumont* by giving examples of the compiler's blundering. One of these muddles is well worth quoting, and it occurs in the following passage: ``Seven bishops—of *Puy*, Gallard de Terraube; of *Langres*, La Luzerne; of *Rhodez*, Seignelay-Colbert; of *Gast*, Le Tria; of *Blois*, Laussiere Themines; of *Nancy*, Fontanges; of *Alais*, Beausset; of *Nevers*, Seguiran.'' Had the compiler taken the trouble to count his own list, he would have seen that he had given eight names instead of seven, and so have suspected that something was wrong; but he was not paid to think. The fact is that there is no such place as Gast, and there was no such person as Le Tria. The Bishop of Rhodez was Seignelay-Colbert de Castle Hill, a descendant of the Scotch family of Cuthbert of Castle Hill, in Inverness-shire; and Bachaumont misled his successor by writing Gast Le Hill for Castle Hill. The introduction of a stop and a little more misspelling resulted in the blunder as we now find it. <p 34>

Authors and editors are very apt to take things for granted, and they thus fall into errors which might have been escaped if they had made inquiries. Pope, in a note on *Measure for Measure*, informs us that the story was taken from Cinthio's novel *Dec*. 8 *Nov*. 5, thus contracting the words decade and novel. Warburton, in his edition of Shakespeare, was misled by these contractions, and fills them up as December 8 and November 5. Many blunders are merely clerical errors of the authors, who are led into them by a curious association of ideas; thus, in the *Lives of the Londonderrys*, Sir Archibald Alison, when describing the funeral of the Duke of Wellington in St. Paul's, speaks of one of the pall-bearers as Sir Peregrine Pickle, instead of Sir Peregrine Maitland. Dickens, in *Bleak House*, calls Harold Skimpole Leonard throughout an entire number, but returns to the old name in a subsequent one.

Few authors require to be more on their guard against mistakes than historians, especially as they are peculiarly liable to fall into them. What shall we think of <p 35>the authority of a school book when we find the statement that Louis Napoleon was Consul in 1853 before he became Emperor of the French?

We must now pass from a book of small value to an important work on the history of England; but it will be necessary first to make a few explanatory remarks. Our readers know that English kings for several centuries claimed the power of curing scrofula, or king's evil; but they may not be so well acquainted with the fact that the French sovereigns were believed to enjoy the same miraculous power. Such, however, was the case; and tradition reported that a phial filled with holy oil was sent down from heaven to be used for the anointing of the kings at their coronation. We can illustrate this by an anecdote of Napoleon. Lafayette and the first Consul had a conversation one day on the government of the United States. Bonaparte did not agree with Lafayette's views, and the latter told him that ``he was desirous of having the little phial broke over his head.'' This *sainte ampulle*, or holy vessel, was an important object in the <p 36>ceremony, and the virtue of the oil was to confer the power of cure upon the anointed king. This the historian could not have known, or he would not have written: ``The French were confident in themselves, in their fortunes; in the special gifts by which they held the stars.'' If this were all the information that was given us, we should be left in a perfect state of bewilderment while trying to understand how the French could hold the stars, or, if they were able to hold them, what good it would do them; but the historian adds a note which, although it contains some new blunders, gives the clue to an explanation of an otherwise inexplicable passage. It is as follows: ``The Cardinal of Lorraine showed Sir William Pickering the precious ointment of St. Ampull,

wherewith the King of France was sacred, which he said was sent from heaven above a thousand years ago, and since by miracle preserved, through whose virtue also the king held *les estroilles*.'' From this we might imagine that the holy Ampulla was a person; but the clue to the whole confusion is to be <p 37>found in the last word of the sentence. As the French language does not contain any such word as *estroilles*, there can be no doubt that it stands for old French *escroilles*, or the king's evil. The change of a few letters has here made the mighty difference between the power of curing scrofula and the gift of holding the stars.

In some copies of John Britton's *Descriptive Sketches of Tunbridge Wells* (1832) the following extraordinary passage will be found: ``Judge Jefferies, a man who has rendered his name infamous in the annals of history by the cruelty and injustice he manifested in presiding at the trial of King Charles I.'' The book was no sooner issued than the author became aware of his astonishing chronological blunder, and he did all in his power to set the matter right; but a mistake in print can never be entirely obliterated. However much trouble may be taken to suppress a book, some copies will be sure to escape, and, becoming valuable by the attempted suppression, attract all the more attention.

Scott makes David Ramsay, in the <p 38>*Fortunes of Nigel* (chapter ii.), swear ``by the bones of the immortal Napier.'' It would perhaps be rank heresy to suppose that Sir Walter did not know that ``Napier's bones'' were an apparatus for purposes of calculation, but he certainly puts the expression in such an ambiguous form that many of his readers are likely to suppose that the actual bones of Napier's body were intended.

Some of the most curious of blunders are those made by learned men who without thought set down something

which at another time they would recognise as a mistake. The following passage from Mr. Gladstone's *Gleanings of Past Years* (vol. i., p. 26), in which the author confuses Daniel with Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego, has been pointed out: ``The fierce light that beats upon a throne is sometimes like the heat of that furnace in which only Daniel could walk unscathed, too fierce for those whose place it is to stand in its vicinity.'' Who would expect to find Macaulay blundering on a subject he knew so well as the story of the *Faerie Queene*! and yet this is what he <p 39>wrote in a review of Southey's edition of the *Pilgrim's Progress*: ``Nay, even Spenser himself, though assuredly one of the greatest poets that ever lived, could not succeed in the attempt to make allegory interesting.... One unpardonable fault, the fault of tediousness, pervades the whole of the *Fairy Queen*. We become sick of Cardinal Virtues and Deadly Sins, and long for the society of plain men and women. Of the persons who read the first Canto, not one in ten reaches the end of the first book, and not one in a hundred perseveres to the end of the poem. Very few and very weary are those who are in at the death of the Blatant Beast.''[5] Macaulay knew well enough that the Blatant Beast did not die in the poem as Spenser left it.

[5] *Edinburgh Review*, vol. liv. (1831), p. 452.

The newspaper writers are great sinners, and what with the frequent ignorance and haste of the authors and the carelessness of the printers a complete farrago of nonsense is sometimes concocted between them. A proper name is seldom given correctly in a daily paper, and it is a <p 40>frequently heard remark that no notice of an event is published in which an error in the names or qualifications of

the actors in it ``is not detected by those acquainted with the circumstances.'' The contributor of the following bit of information to the *Week's News* (Nov. 18th, 1871) must have had a very vague notion of what a monosyllable is, or he would not have written, ``The author of *Dorothy, De Cressy*, etc., has another novel nearly ready for the press, which, with the writer's partiality for monosyllabic titles, is named *Thomasina*.'' He is perhaps the same person who remarked on the late Mr. Robertson's fondness for monosyllables as titles for his plays, and after instancing *Caste, Ours*, and *School*, ended his list with *Society*. We can, however, fly at higher game than this, for some twenty years ago a writer in the *Times* fell into the mistake of describing the entrance of one of the German states into the Zollverein in terms that proved him to be labouring under the misconception that the great Customs- Union was a new organisation. Another source of error in the papers is the hurry <p 41>with which bits of news are printed before they have been authenticated. Each editor wishes to get the start of his neighbour, and the consequence is that they are frequently deceived. In a number of the *Literary Gazette* for 1837 there is a paragraph headed ``Sir Michael Faraday,'' in which the great philosopher is congratulated upon the title which had been conferred upon him. Another source of blundering is the attempt to answer an opponent before his argument is thoroughly understood. A few years ago a gentleman made a note in the *Notes and Queries* to the effect that a certain custom was at least 1400 years old, and was probably introduced into England in the fifth century. Soon afterwards another gentleman wrote to the same journal, ``Assuredly this custom was general before A.D. 1400''; but how he obtained that date out of the previous communication no one can tell.

The *Times* made a strange blunder in describing a gallery of pictures: ``Mr. Robertson's group of `Susannah and the

Elders,' with the name of Pordenone, contains some passages of glowing colour <p 42>which must be set off against a good deal of clumsy drawing in the central figure of the chaste *maiden*.'' As bad as this was the confusion in the mind of the critic of the New Gallery, who spoke of Mr. Hall<e'>'s *Paolo and Francesca* as that masterly study and production of the old Adam phase of human nature which Milton hit off so sublimely in the *Inferno*.

A writer in the *Notes and Queries* confused Beersheba with Bathsheba, and conferred on the woman the name of the place.

It has often been remarked that a thorough knowledge of the English Bible is an education of itself, and a correspondence in the *Times* in August 1888 shows the value of a knowledge of the Liturgy of the Church of England. In a leading article occurred the passage, ``We have no doubt whatever that Scotch judges and juries will administer indifferent justice.'' A correspondent in Glasgow, who supposed *indifferent* to mean *inferior*, wrote to complain at the insinuation that a Scotch jury would not do its duty. The editor of the *Times* had little <p 43>difficulty in answering this by referring to the prayer for the Church militant, where are the words, ``Grant unto her [the Queen's] whole Council and to all that are put in authority under her, that they may truly and indifferently minister justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of Thy true religion, and virtue.''

The compiler of an Anthology made the following remarks in his preface: ``In making a selection of this kind one sails between Scylla and Charybdis—the hackneyed and the strange. I have done my best to steer clear of both these rocks.'' A leader-writer in a morning paper a few months ago made the same blunder when he wrote: ``As a matter of

fact, Mr. Gladstone was bound to bump against either Scylla or Charybdis.'' It has generally been supposed that Scylla only was a rock.

A most extraordinary blunder was made in *Scientific American* eight or ten years ago. An engraving of a handsome Chelsea china vase was presented with the following description: ``In England no <p 44>regular hard porcelain is made, but a soft porcelain of great beauty is produced from kaolin, phosphate of lime, and calcined silica. The principal works are situated at Chelsea. The export of these English porcelains is considerable, and it is a curious fact that they are largely imported into China, where they are highly esteemed. Our engraving shows a richly ornamented vase in soft porcelain from the works at Chelsea.'' It could scarcely have been premised that any one would be so ignorant as to suppose that Chelsea china was still manufactured, and this paragraph is a good illustration of the evils of journalists writing on subjects about which they know nothing.

Critics who are supposed to be immaculate often blunder when sitting in judgment on the sins of authors. They are frequently puzzled by reprints, and led into error by the disinclination of publishers to give particulars in the preface as to a book which was written many years before its republication. A few years ago was issued a reprint of the <p 45>translation of the *Arabian Nights*, by Jonathan Scott, LL.D., which was first published in 1811. A reviewer having the book before him overlooked this important fact, and straightway proceeded to ``slate'' Dr. Scott for his supposed work of supererogation in making a new translation when Lane's held the field, the fact really being that Scott's translation preceded Lane's by nearly thirty years.