

In Praise of Misspelling

by
Alan Powers

Although English teachers customarily complain of their students' misspellings, I find many papers where the unintended pun provides a certain felicity, and even, occasionally, insight. At those times I have to restrain myself from commenting "well put" in the margins of obviously mistaken phrases, such as "Lady Chatterley listens to her unconscience."

Students love the word "realism" to describe approvingly what novelists or television writers are doing. This slippery word "reality" has never been better abused than by one student writing on Jane Eyre: "In Jane's walks, the author is describing the realty of Thornfield Hall." Or the hazards of real estate purchase without a registered broker? (There might be a resident mad relative upstairs, permanently ensconced.)

Even G. B. Shaw might approve the following assessment of disguises in Pygmalion: "Eliza Doolittle goes to the garden party disgusting as a duchess." She does—there's no denying it. Also, in the same play: "Shaw satirizes the boordom of small talk about the weather." We are all well familiar with that boordom that appears extensive as a kingdom.

Many other neologisms greet the novice teacher's eye, words that he or she has never seen before but that gain a particular meaning almost independent of the words they stand in place of. For instance, many entering freshmen describe themselves as "confussed," while others are either merely confused or nonplused. I hold "confussed" to be an admirable addition to the language, one whose meanings shade from "stymied" to distracted" to the more plain "confused." Let us define it thus:

con-fussed (rhymes with rust). *adj.* 1. a state of being distracted, especially about spelling double consonants after short vowels.

The young teacher can find himself or herself exasperated that writing students cannot spell the subject they are studying. Insight may replace exasperation, however, when such students describe the difficulty, for them, of "wrighting." This spelling, too, seems to gain an admirable new application in this context: "wrighting" should be the preferred spelling, for it connotes craft, skill, and hard work.

Of course, most commonly and depressingly, students misspell "writing" *writting*. This one is hard to defend. In fact, it's depressing because the doubled consonant after the short vowel is one of the few dependable aspects of English orthography. However, even this misspelling has enlightening applications. For instance, an instructor aware of the oral tradition that Shakespeare may have spent the three years just before 1591 as a law clerk or scrivener (witness his handwriting) will appreciate the following student biography of Shakespeare: "Sometime before 1591 Shakespeare must have begun writting." But then he stopped writting and began writing?

Such spellings can, then, provide a moment of light in cumbersome student prose; or, they can easily be overlooked, as I hope the reader has overlooked my misspelling, throughout, of *misspell*.