

MRS. MALAPROP, THE AD(WO)MAN

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Webster's unabridged dictionary (Third Edition) defines a malapropism as "a usually humorous misapplication of a word or phrase; specifically, a blundering use of a word that sounds somewhat like the one intended but is ludicrously wrong in the context." The term is derived from Mrs. Malaprop, a lady in Richard Sheridan's 1775 comedy, "The Rivals," noted for her misuse of words. Ever since then, humorists have delighted in constructing malapropisms such as

- I saw an allegory on the bank of the Nile
- The children were so noisome that he was unable to sleep
- You will be suitably rewarded if your behavior is meretricious
- On this new mattress, you will sleep fitfully like a king

Just as there is a difference between a live television show and a recorded one (on which all embarrassing moments have been bleeped out), so there is a difference between manufactured malapropisms and the real McCoy. Two recent advertisements have convinced me that Mrs. Malaprop is alive and well and living on Madison Avenue:

- In the New York Times for June 9, 1971, the Doubleday Bookstore announced the sale of a 1908 Sears, Roebuck catalogue: "Dad will spend many an hour pouring over this 736-page perfect reproduction of . . ."
- A flyer issued by Herbach & Rademan, Inc. (an electronic supply house in Philadelphia) extolled the virtues of their health lounge chair vibrator kit: "Why not transform your ordinary reclining lounge or health chair into a really relaxing, enervating vibrating chair?"

Beautiful mistakes like these don't come along very often, but when they do they deserve full documentation. Have Word Ways readers spotted others?