

author

Do authors become actors, when they talk in public? If they do, they can claim linguistic justification. *Author* comes from Latin *auctor*, originally from a verb *augere* 'to make grow, originate.' *Actor* has the same origin. Both words arrived in English in the 14th century, and their similar spellings—*auctor* and *actour*—caused them to be often confused. This may have been the reason why an *h* was added to the former—we find

aucthour, and then *author*—to help distinguish the two. *Author* then took off, and generated a whole family of derivatives. In the 16th century, we find *authorer* (meaning an ‘originator’ of something), *authorage* (we say *authorship* today), *author-craft*, *authorical* (for modern *authorial*), and *authoridate* (‘to attribute to an author’). It’s a pity some of these have gone. What else are we celebrating in a thesaurus but *author-craft*?

literature

It's interesting how the original English meaning of this word is surfacing again. When it arrived in the language, in the 14th century, it had a general sense of 'acquaintance with books' or 'literary culture'—a sense which the *Oxford English Dictionary* glosses as "now rare and obsolescent." It was overtaken in the 18th century by the familiar modern use—for the written output of professional creative writers. But the earliest sense has returned, as is evident from the author listings at any literary festival, where we find politicians, scientists, philosophers, and all kinds of cultural commentators alongside novelists, poets, and dramatists. Literature is big business these days. It has even generated its own abbreviation: *lit*, as in *English Lit*, *lit crit*, and *chick lit*. But beware, when you encounter *lit* in earlier centuries. The modern usage didn't arise until the 1850s. So when we read in 1662 of a writer going into "a litt-hows," he wasn't thinking about books. *Lit* is also a medieval word for 'hue' or 'stain.' He was going to get some cloth dyed.

story

People tell stories about their stories at literature festivals. It's interesting how the meaning of this word has come full circle. Originally, in the 13th century, stories had to be true: the word was a synonym for 'history'—indeed, it came from Latin *historia*. But very soon it was applied to stories alleged to be true, and then (by the 16th century) to stories that were definitely not true. Today, the original meaning seems to be reasserting itself: I've lost track of the number of historical television programmes called "The story of something-or-other." Maybe it's time to resuscitate the verb use too: in the 16th century, there was a splendid usage: *to story forth*, meaning 'to proclaim the story of.' It's what happens in dictionaries and thesauruses, after all. Which reminds me of the story that Eric Partridge tells, in *The Gentle Art of Lexicography*, of the old lady who borrowed a dictionary from the town library. She returned it with the comment: "A very unusual book indeed—but the stories are extremely short, aren't they?"