20 Literary Characters:

A-Z of literary characters whose names became words we use today

1. Bluebeard

Character:

Bluebeard is a character in Charles Perrault's collection of fairy tales, *Contes de ma mère l'oye* (1697; *Tales of Mother Goose*). In the tale, Bluebeard is a wealthy man who, soon after his marriage, goes away, leaving his wife the keys to all the doors in his castle but forbidding her to open one of them. She disobeys and finds, in the locked room, the bodies of his former wives. On his return, Bluebeard discovers a spot of blood on one of the keys and threatens to cut off her head as a punishment for disobedience. The wife is saved by her brothers just as Bluebeard is about to strike the final blow.

Word meaning today:

The story was so notorious that his name was entered in the dictionary with the definition of "*a man who marries and kills one wife after another*," and the verb "**bluebearding**" has even appeared as a way to describe the crime of either killing a series of women, or seducing and abandoning a series of women

2. Brainiac

Character:
Brainiac is a fictional supervillain who first appeared in the DC comic books in 1958. There have been many reinventions of the character but the original Brainiac was a bald headed, green humanoid who came to earth and shrank cities, including Metropolis, in order to restore his own planet.

Word meaning today:
The word Brainiac is a blend of 'brainy' and 'maniac', which was a fitting description of the character. It is used these days to describe a highly intelligent person –it's lost the 'maniac' part so don't be offended if someone calls you one!

3. Frankenstein

Character:

A common misconception is to think Frankenstein is the monster in the 1818 story by Mary Shelley but **actually,** he is the scientist who created the monster, Victor Frankenstein. His character is an Italian-Swiss scientist who assembles a new 'body' out of parts and brings him to life using electricity. Frankenstein was always interested in alchemy and wanted to discover the elixir of life but becomes obsessed with tragic consequences.

Word meaning today:

The Oxford English Dictionary has since traced the earliest allusive use of its title back to 1827, when the writer Charles Lamb first used Frankenstein as a verb meaning "to assemble from disparate parts".

More recently it's inspired its own prefix denoting genetically modified or scientifically engineered produce, like "Frankenfoods" or "Frankencrops" and the film, "Frankenweenie".

4. Gargantua
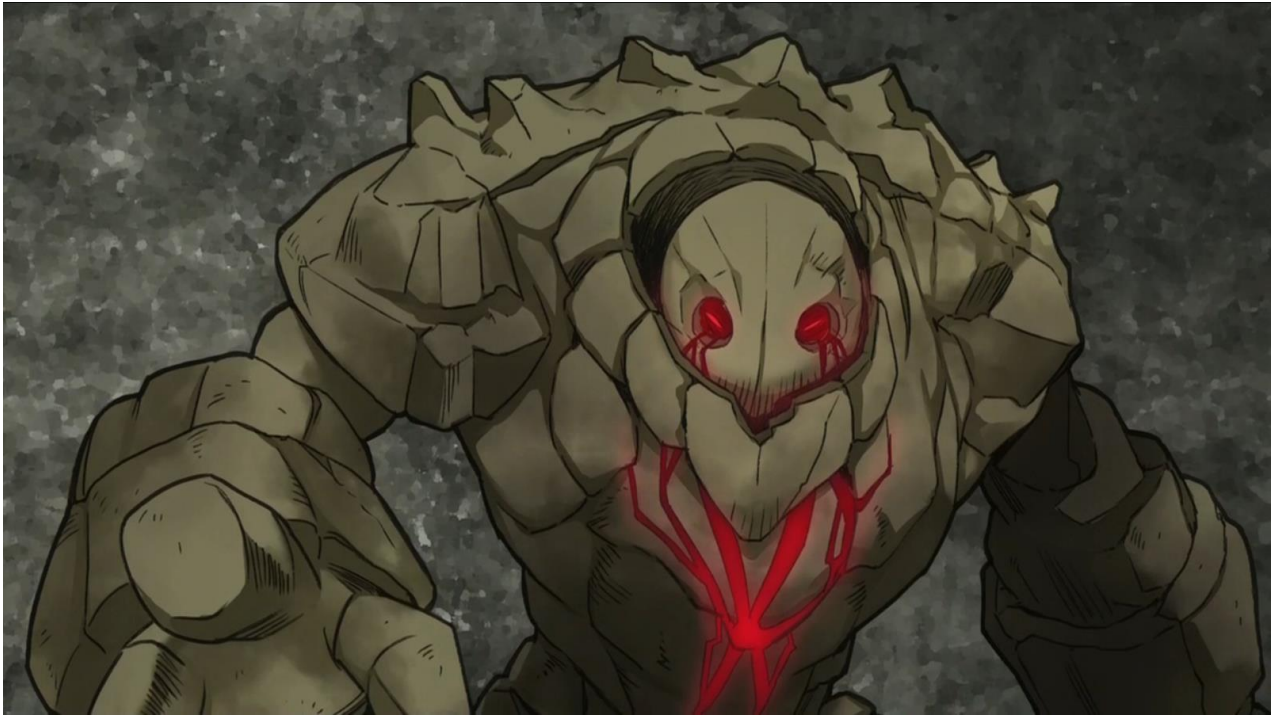
Character:
Gargantua was the name of a giant created by François Rabelais in a series of 16th-century comic novels. The books are well known for their coarseness and their crude humour. Gargantua is known for a ravening appetite (eating, for instance, six pilgrims in a salad)

Word meaning today:
The adjective gargantuan, literally referring to anything of Gargantua's size, first appeared in the late 1500s, while a related (and criminally underused) noun gargantuism has been used to mean "an enormously extravagant but impractical idea" since the mid-19th century.

5. Goody-Two-Shoes

Character:

The original goody two-shoes was the title character in a nursery story, The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes, published anonymously in 1765 but usually credited to Oliver Goldsmith. Little Goody Two Shoes follows a recently-orphaned girl who rises above oppression by being an exemplar of moral and social virtue. She's rewarded for her hard work by a wedding proposal from a rich old man -- which I guess was a good thing back then.

Word meaning today:

This book popularized the term "goody two shoes," but the phrase had been around long before it. In the book, a small orphan girl named Margery Meanwell only owns one shoe. But then a rich man buys her a complete pair, and Margery is so delighted that she runs around the village, exclaiming: "Two shoes, ma'am! See, two shoes!" The nickname followed soon after. The phrase now refers to anyone who follows the rules and sets a good example – but it is often used in a derogatory way!

6. Grinch

Character:
The Grinch is a fictional character created by Dr. Seuss. He is a hairy, pot-bellied, pear-shaped, snub-nosed creature with a cat-like face and mean personality. He has spent the past 53 years living in seclusion on a cliff, overlooking the town of Whoville. The Grinch is said to be mean-tempered because he was born with a heart that is "two sizes too small". He especially hates the Christmas season, making particular note of how disturbing the various noises of Christmas time are to him, including the singing of Christmas carols.

Word meaning today:
This book popularized the term "being a grinch," and by the early 60s its title character – a bright green, grouchy, cave-dwelling monster – was already being figuratively employed to describe a spoilsport or grump. It is still used today to describe someone being mean for no reason.

7. Lothario

Character:

The English playwright Nicholas Rowe is often credited with inventing the original Lothario, who appeared as a character in his play The Fair Penitent in 1703, but in fact an equally lascivious character by the same name had already appeared in William Davenant's play The Cruel Brother almost a century earlier in 1630. In Rowe's play, Lothario is a notorious seducer, extremely attractive but beneath his charming exterior a haughty and unfeeling scoundrel. He seduces Calista, an unfaithful wife and later the fair penitent of the title. After the play was published, the character of Lothario became a stock figure in English literature.

Word meaning today:

As the character became well known, his name became progressively more generic, and since the 18th century the word lothario has been used for a foppish, unscrupulous rake, someone who behaves selfishly and irresponsibly in his relationships with women.

8. Malapropism

Character:

Mrs. Malaprop was a character in Sheridan's comedy, The Rivals, and has a habit of replacing words with incorrect and absurd utterances, producing a humorous effect. For example: "She's as headstrong as an allegory", apparently mistaking allegory for alligator. She goes on to talk about "the pineapple of politeness", instead of pinnacle, and her "oracular tongue" (instead of her vernacular), alongside a great many other tidally unintentional terrors.

Word meaning today:

Malapropism finds its origins in the French phrase mal a propos, which means "inappropriate." It is the use of an incorrect word in place of a similar-sounding word, which results in a nonsensical and humorous expression.

9. Mentor
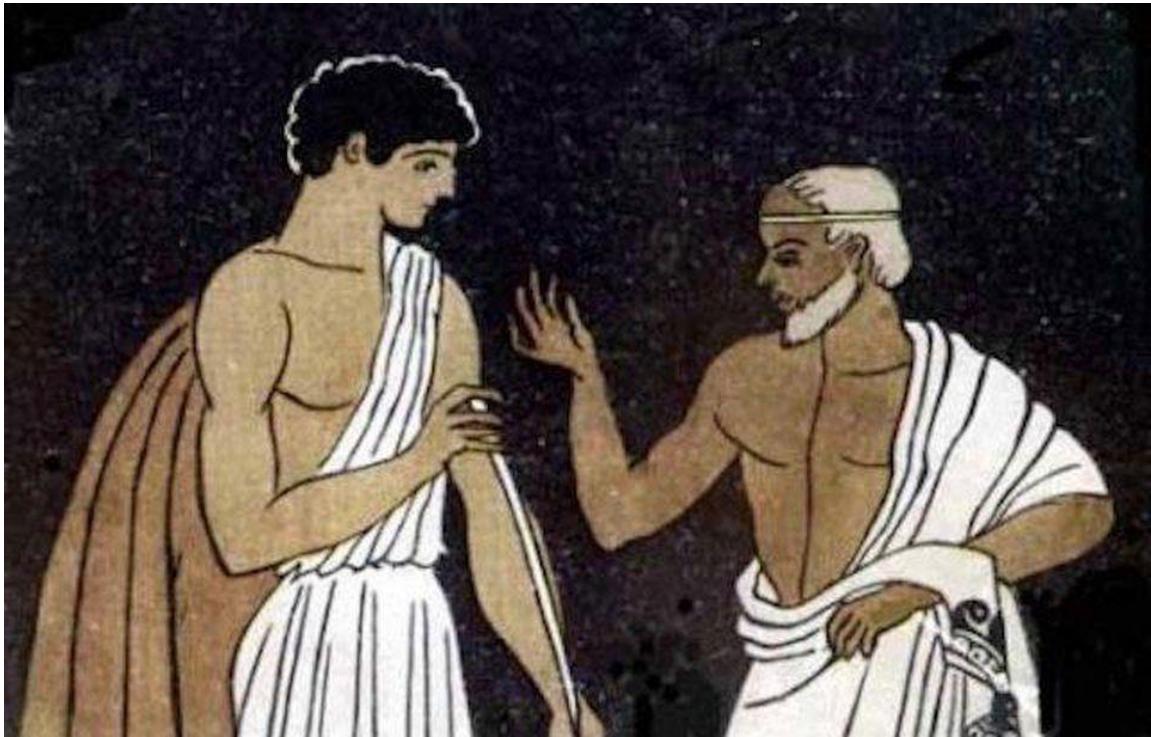
Character:
Taking his name from a Greek word meaning "purpose" or "intent", Mentor was a friend and adviser of Odysseus in Homer's Odyssey, written in the 8th century BC. Mentor was the son of Alcimus. In his old age Mentor was a friend of Odysseus. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he placed Mentor and Eumaeus (Odysseus' swineherd) in charge of his son Telemachus, and of Odysseus' palace. The goddess Athena disguised herself as Mentor to offer advice to Telemachus.

Word meaning today:
Because of Mentor's relationship with Telemachus, and the disguised Athena's encouragement and practical plans for dealing with personal dilemmas, the personal name Mentor has been adopted in Latin and other languages, including English, as a term meaning someone who imparts wisdom to and shares knowledge with a less-experienced colleague.

10. Micawber
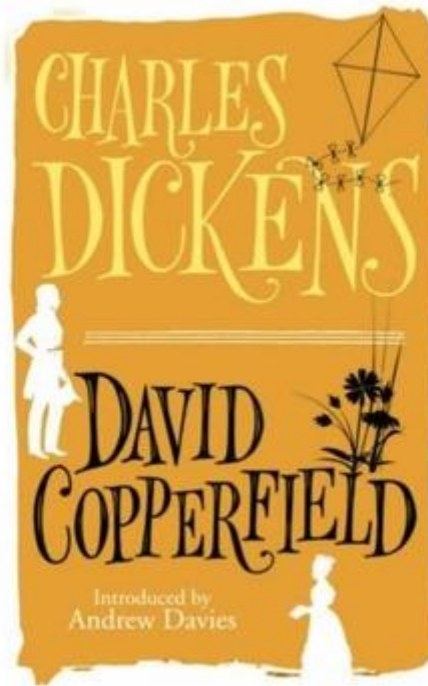
Character:
Wilkins Micawber, an eternally optimistic and frequently impoverished character from Charles Dickens, is widely believed to have been modelled on Dickens' father, John, who spent time in a debtors prison when Charles was a boy. Although Mr. Micawber is a somewhat ridiculous figure who expresses himself in exaggerated terms, he is also basically a good man who eventually helps to expose the villainy of Uriah Heep and serves as one of the heroes of "David Copperfield."

Word meaning today:
Many other character names from Dickens novels have been turned into words. Micawber now means an careless person who lives in expectation of an upturn in his fortunes.

11. Milquetoast
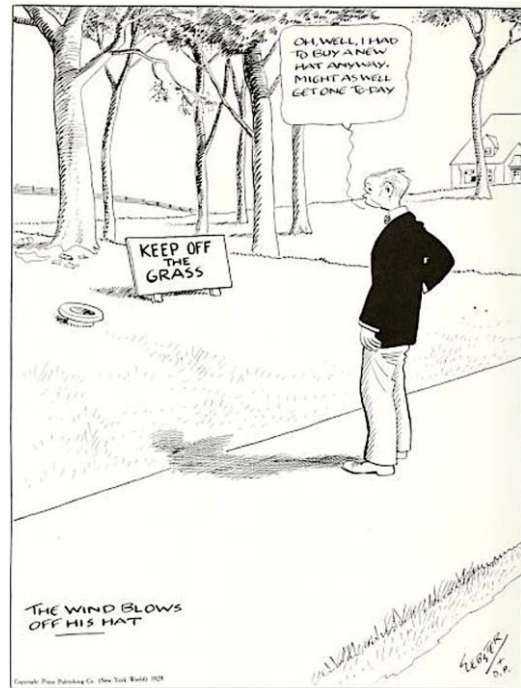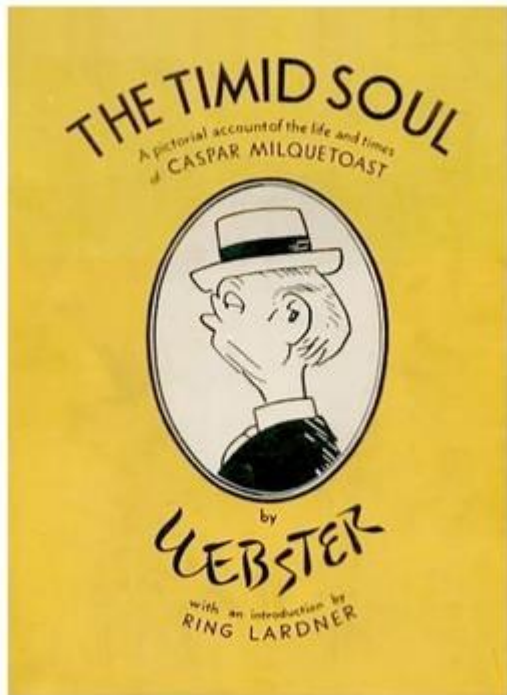
Character:
Comic strips may not seem like the most likely source to have provided English with new words, but they have actually been quite fertile in this regard.
Milquetoast is one such word: it comes from the name of Caspar Milquetoast, a character invented by cartoonist H. T. Webster in 1924 for his strip Timid Soul (it was based on milk toast, a dish of toast softened in milk). Casper Milquetoast, who through the subtle brutalities of everyday life became a sort of hero for the timid soul and the 'original snowflake'.

Word meaning today:
Because of this character, the word 'milquetoast' has come to mean a timid, meek, or apologetic person.

12. Pamphlet
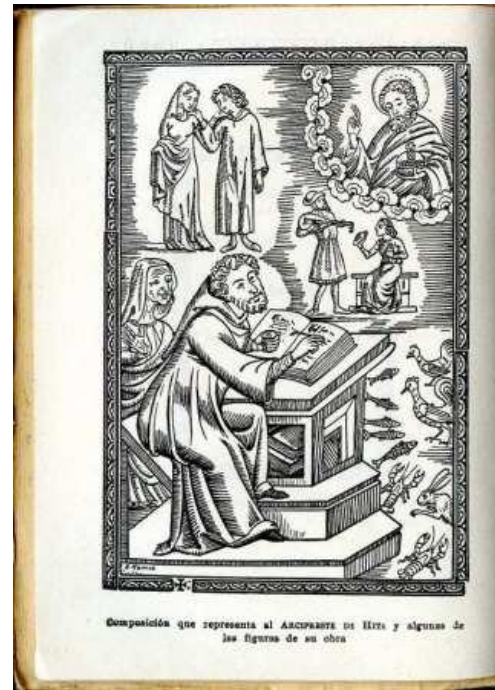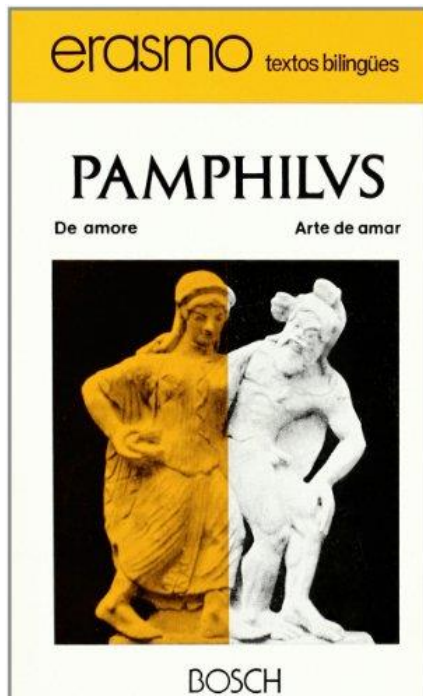
Character:
Pamphilus, de Amore ("Pamphilus, or About Love") was a 12th-century Latin love poem describing the romantic adventures of its eponymous Greek hero and his lover Galatea. Little is known of its origins other than that it was written somewhere on the continent (most likely France) in the late 1100s, but what is known is that it proved immensely popular: its 720 lines were read, reread, reprinted and redistributed all over Europe throughout the 13th century, to the extent that references to it have been uncovered in literatures everywhere from Norway in the north to Italy in the south.

Word meaning today:
The poem proved so popular that the short, folded, uncovered booklets it was printed in eventually became known as pamphlets, which has spawned the word we use today.

13. Pandarus

Character:

Pandarus has appeared in many older works of literature is a character in Chaucer's classic poem Troilus and Criseyde; he assisted the lovers in this poem in their romance. Pandarus works "busily" as a matchmaker throughout the poem. However, his love procurement relies heavily on coercion. Pandarus bullies Troilus, betrays Criseyde's love, and constantly weaves elaborate lies. Chaucer constructs an entirely different character from his source, Boccaccio, and by closely examining Pandarus, readers can see that Chaucer has in fact created a villain who manufactures a love story predicated largely on deception.

Word meaning today:

The initial meaning in English was in reference to someone who acted as a go-between for a pair of lovers, a facilitator of romance. However, soon after the word began to take on slightly...less noble shades. Pander began to be used as a term for a pimp, or a person who procured the services of a prostitute. These days, it means someone who caters to and often exploits the weaknesses of others.

14. Pangloss
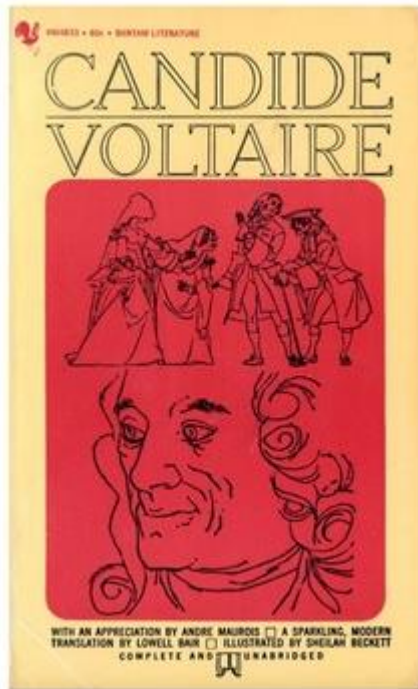
Character:

Master Pangloss, the tutor for the titular character of Voltaire's novel Candide, was prone to making such pronouncements as "they, who assert that everything is right, do not express themselves correctly; they should say that everything is best." This optimistic sentiment is the main target of Voltaire's satire. Pangloss's philosophy parodies the ideas of the Enlightenment thinker G. W. von Leibniz. Leibniz maintains that an all-good, all-powerful God had created the world and that, therefore, the world must be perfect.

Word meaning today:

The character has helped create the word 'Panglossian, which means marked by the view that all is for the best in this best of possible worlds. The novel, a satire on the subject of philosophical optimism, is Voltaire's best-known work. In large part due to this popularity the fictional tutor has seen his name forever associated with unfettered and irrational optimism.

15. Pecksniff

Seth Pecksniff
by Phiz

Character:
In Dickens's Martin Chuzzlewit (1844), Seth Pecksniff is the sanctimonious, hypocritical architect who, we are told, "has never designed or built anything".
He is usually shown, as in the illustration, with his hair rising in a prominent quiff, because of his mannerism of "rubbing his hair up very stiff upon his head."

Word meaning today:
His name is the inspiration for the adjective **pecksniffian**, meaning "hypocritical", as well as a host of other derivatives including peckniffianism and pecksniffery.

16. Quixote

Character:
The novel Don Quixote de la Mancha by Miguel de Cervantes (published in 1605 and 1615), is widely regarded as one of the greatest works of literature ever. The name of the hero of this work, Don Quixote, is used as a term for an impractical idealist.

Word meaning today:
The word now means idealistic and utterly impractical; especially marked by rash lofty romantic ideas or chivalrous action doomed to fail.

Used without the honorific Don, quixote by itself also refers to a quixotic person. And most common of all is that adjective, quixotic, used to refer to a person who is always "tilting at windmills" (a phrase denoting fighting imagined or illusory foes, taken from a scene in the book where Quixote attacks a windmill, thinking it a giant).

17. Scrooge

Character:
Ebenezer Scrooge is the protagonist of Charles Dickens' 1843 novella, A Christmas Carol. At the beginning of the novella, Scrooge is a cold-hearted miser who despises Christmas. The tale of his redemption by three spirits has become a defining tale of the Christmas holiday in the English-speaking world.

Word meaning today:
A scrooge is a person who is stingy with money: scrooges would rather do anything than part with a buck.

18. Roister-Doister
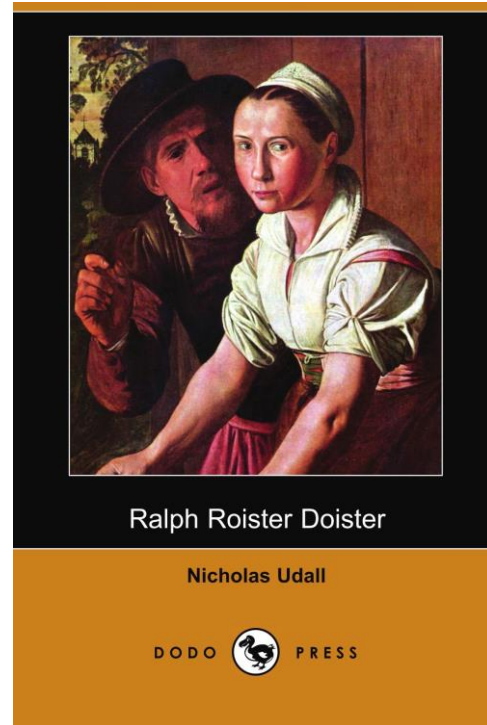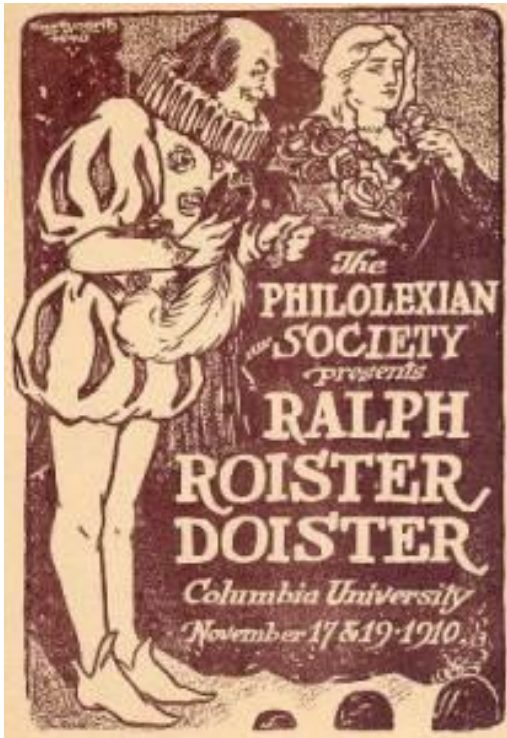
Character:

Roister-doistering derives from Ralph Roister-Doister, the eponymous character in a comic play by the English dramatist Nicholas Udall written in the mid-1550s. Ralph, a swaggering buffoon, thought he was irresistible to women. The play features a letter to the virtuous widow whom Ralph is wooing, written for him by somebody else. Appropriately for a play written by the master of Westminster School for his pupils to perform, the script makes a teaching point: Ralph reads it aloud with the wrong punctuation, so that it comes out as a string of insults instead of flatteries.

Word meaning today:

Roister has been used on its own to mean "a boisterous reveller or partygoer" since the mid-1500s, and is probably descended from rustre, an old French word meaning "coarse" or "violent".

19. Svengali

Character:
The mysterious magician Svengali appears in George du Maurier's novel Trilby (1894) in which he uses hypnosis to transform the title character from a tone-deaf laundry-worker into an operatic diva. vengali is a man who seduces, dominates, and exploits Trilby, a young Irish girl, and makes her a famous singer

Word meaning today:
Du Maurier's novel was immensely successful at the time of its publication (selling more than 200,000 copies in America alone in 1895), which doubtless helped to popularise not only the use of Svengali as a nickname for an illusionist or hypnotist, but also helped to gave Trilby hats their name.

20. Yahoo
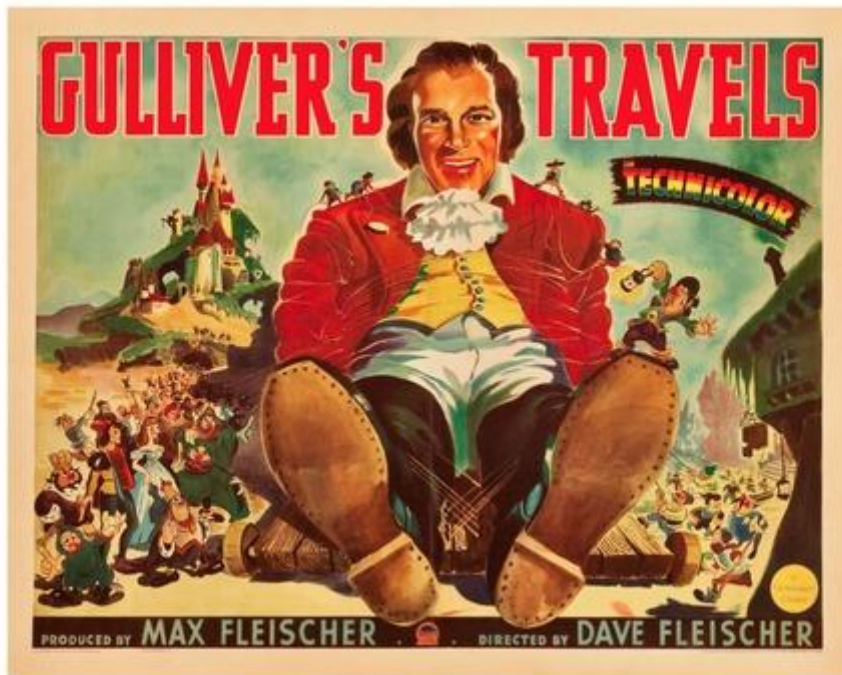
Character:
Yahoo comes to the English language from the fertile imagination of Jonathan Swift, author of the famed Gulliver's Travels (as well as the somewhat less-remembered Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue).

In Gulliver's Travels the Yahoos were an imaginary humanoid race, brutish and uncouth.

Word meaning today:
The word Yahoo means a rude, rowdy, uncouth person. It is also used to signal joy at something, as well as being the name of a popular search engine.