

## Out of the Swamp, Into the McMansion

We couldn't have been more wrong.

Yesterday a fellow word-lover and I were chatting in the lobby of the bank. He wondered about the origins of luxury and deluxe, both of us agreeing that they were likely related to the Latin root *lucere*, "to shine." Seemed logical. These days luxury is associated with extravagance, pleasure and rich, sumptuous living. Deluxe cars, deluxe appliances, deluxe hotels. Luxury seems synonymous with shiny things.

Nope. I did find one source, Eric Partridge's "Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English," which noted that "perhaps" there was a connection between the two.

But all other sources point to rank plant growth.

Yeah. Think swamp.

Let's call it the Cinderella Effect. The word enters the world as an underappreciated stepdaughter, is sneered at and spat upon, and then, through a series of happy accidents, gets to live in the palace with bazillion percale sheets, sterling silver candelabras and crystal dishes for the dog bowls.

So let's start with the sordid beginnings. It comes from the Indo-European root *leug-*, meaning "to turn, bend and twist," specifically referring to plant growth. It's from this same root we get our Germanic words *leek*, *garlic* and *lock* (as in a bending together or a strand of hair that turns and winds around the face).

In Latin the root surfaced as *luxus*, meaning "excess, extravagance," originally of plants "growing obliquely or to excess."

Yeah. That's right, Ms. Full Length Fur Coat. Luxury is nothing more than unrestrained marsh fecundity.

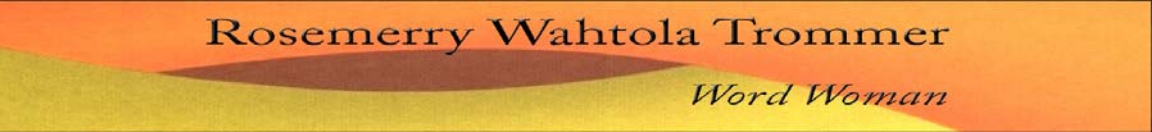
I guess that there's nothing wrong with fecundity. But *luxuria* came to mean "unrestrained self-indulgence, uninhibited gratification." According to John Ciardi in "A Browser's Dictionary," the early Christian writers employed *luxuria* as a metaphorical way to represent all things *not* associated with the good life. It was the *opposite* of the Four Natural Virtues (justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude).

Our poor Cinderella *luxuria*. There she was. Just an exuberant plant who got associated with the wrong crowd and next thing you know, *luxuria* was tied with the Roman orgy, which as Ciardi explains, "began with abandoned gluttony and proceeded to abandoned sexuality; hence, the opposite of Christian restraint, whence easily narrowed to 'carnal abandon, lust.' The sin, be it noted does not lie in sexual desire, which is a God-given appetite, but in the unrestrained abandonment to lust."

Writers such as Dante and Shakespeare continued to vilify our fair heroine. In "Inferno," Dante has "*Cleopatra lussuriosa*," or "Lustful Cleopatra," abandoned to the gratification of her eroticism. And the bard himself writes in "Hamlet" how "the royal bed of Denmark" has been made "a couch for cursed luxury," meaning a breeding ground for lust.

An irony here. Through the 16<sup>th</sup> century, *luxury* meant *lust*. Meanwhile the word *lust*, which came from a Germanic root, meant "joyous, powerful, according to one's deepest desires."

So as *lust* slid down into the mire of misconduct, *luxury* rose into the upper echelons where it still resides today. With addresses in Telluride, Paris, and Dallas.



Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

*Word Woman*

Brava for little *luxury*, pulling herself up by her bootstraps. Let's see if *decadence* can pull off the same feat.

*Poet and presenter Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer is the author of If You Listen, a three-time award winning book of poetry, editor of Charity: True Stories of Giving and Receiving, and leads TAG: You're It seminars on creativity, positive attitude and finding purpose. Visit her at [www.wordwoman.com](http://www.wordwoman.com).*