

A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

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WIDOWED IN 1390¹

Christine de Pisan (1363 - 1429), a Venetian living in France, whose father was astrologer-physician to the King. At fifteen she was married to the charming and considerate twenty-four year old Etienne de Castel. When the King died, her father lost his post whereas Etienne did well under the new King. These were her happy years but alas, Etienne took ill suddenly and died, leaving Christine with three small children, a niece, two young brothers and an elderly mother to support. Life was difficult for a vulnerable widow (as always) and she found herself *surrounded on all sides by writs and pleas* and the odds very much stacked in favour of the unscrupulous.



She must have been a woman of great spirit and took to writing poetry for solace. Their publication was a modest success and she began to establish a reputation as a poetess. To progress however she needed an education but was unable to attend university so amazingly she taught herself. As a result she began to write *in a changed style, of greater subtlety and deeper substance*. We are talking of some 25 volumes.

Being a woman, she had curiosity value and her name began to spread by word of mouth amongst the nobles and wealthier bureaucrats. She was a prolific writer and was particularly fond of the allegorical dream-vision (think Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and *Parliament of Fowls*). She also wrote *Moral Teachings* and *Moral Proverbs* for her eldest son Jean when he went off to live in the household of the Earl of Salisbury. Her books

became very collectable and both the King and the Dukes of Burgundy added her work to their libraries (see right). Amongst her oeuvre was *The Shepherdess's Tale* about a love affair between an innocent shepherdess and a noble lord, containing much technical detail on the care of sheep. Other books covered subjects from *The Book of the Body Politic* to *The Book of Feats of Arms and of Chivalry* and *Christine's Vision* to *Human Life*, *Hours of Meditation on Our Lord*.



She caused a great deal of antagonism when she railed against the misogyny in the hugely popular *Romance of the Rose*. Even those in high places weighed in against Christine until the Chancellor of the University of Paris sided with her. She countered the criticism in a magnum opus *The City of Ladies*. Queen Isabeau requested a copy of all her written works in 1406 so Christine commissioned a handsome manuscript filled with exquisite illustrations. In 1418 she retired to an abbey, probably Poissy where her daughter was a nun. After eleven years of silence, she felt compelled to compose her final work - *Hymn to Joan of Arc*. I suppose, two women with much in common.

POSH

This is the title of a book by Michael Quinion (Penguin Books 2004), in which he sets the record straight over some of our language myths. Let us start with POSH which was widely accepted to come from P&O ships travelling to and from India. Tickets marked in this way indicated that wealthy travellers travelled on the shady side of the ship - Port Out Starboard Home. Unfortunately, this is denied by the company and there is really no evidence to support such a claim.

The most likely explanation is London street slang for money, possibly from the Romany *posh* meaning half and thus given to the halfpenny. Although in 1892 George and Weedon Grossmith had a character called Murray Posh in *Diary of a Nobody*, the first written use of the word appeared in *Punch* in 1918 when an RAF officer tells his mother: *Oh yes Mater, we had a posh time of it down there*.

Now, what about Cabal? This was believed to be an acronym from the initials of five leading members of Charles II's government (1667-73) - Clifford, Arlington, Buckingham, Ashley and Lauderdale (right⁴). Even I can see that this is too good to be true and anyway, the first acronym was AWOL (absent without leave) recorded in 1921. So, cabal really came into English from Latin *cabbala* via French *cabale* and of course referred to the esoteric secret Jewish system of mystical practices based on the Torah and known as the *Kabbalah*. By the middle of the seventeenth century the word had developed into a small



group with underhand intentions that were however short of being a conspiracy. It was actually applied to Charles' ministers, but meant really as a joke.

Lastly, to curry favour which of course has nothing to do with Indian food. One Gervais de Bus in the early 1300s wrote the *Roman de Fauvel* about a conniving stallion that was intended to be a satire on the corruption of social life. His name which referred to his brown-fawn colour was an anagram of the initial French for the sins of flattery, avarice, depravity, fickleness envy and cowardice. In England the story became known as *curry Favel*, curry referring to rubbing down as the horse was susceptible to flattery (figuratively stroking). Favel did not mean anything in English so by the early sixteenth century the title morphed into *currying Favour*.



A classic language myth is attached to the Elephant & Castle district of London. I, like many others, was brought up to believe that it was a corruption of the *Infanta of Castile* and was thought to refer to Eleanor of Castile, wife of Edward I. However, Eleanor was not an *infanta* (eldest daughter of the king of Spain without a claim to the throne) and no other monarch's wife fits. The symbol that is attached to this district's name is an elephant with a howdah on its back. This can be traced to a public house (original sign top right²) that had been converted from a smithy of the same name in 1760.



Blacksmith's had links to the Worshipful Company of Cutlers, a London craft guild founded in the thirteenth century that represented workers who made knives, scissors and surgical instruments. The guild used the same emblem (right³), no doubt as Indian elephants provided the ivory for knife handles. However, the Elephant & Castle is a not an unusual pub name and the livery company say they have no connection with that part of London. So I am not 100% convinced - though I do know that Eleanor of Castile is commemorated by Charing Cross.

Doing a sideways leap: the chess piece known as a *castle* was originally a castle on the back of an elephant (right⁵) which at least explains how a castle can move. Its more correct term of *rook* comes from the Persian for chariot, but they sometimes looked more like mobile forts. Now chess began in India some 1500 years ago from where it spread to Persia and was modified. The conquest of Persia by Muslims brought it to Sicily and Andalusia from where it entered Europe. It reached its modern format in the fifteenth century. Chess came earlier to Russia so could have travelled to Scandinavia with the Vikings. The Crusaders also knew about chess, so is this another route to the pub name?



ROXELANA



She entered the Imperial Harem of the Ottoman Empire at 15, from a part of Poland that is now in Ukraine. She rose through the ranks and became the favourite concubine of Sultan Suleiman The Magnificent (left) who re-named her *Hürrem* or 'the smiling and endearing one'. Breaking Ottoman tradition, he unprecedentedly freed and married Hürrem, making her his legal wife. Sultans had previously married only foreign freeborn noblewomen, if at all they got married on the rare occasion and even then they reproduced only through slave concubines.

Hürrem (right) was the first ever imperial consort to receive the title, created for her, *Haseki Sultan*. Hürrem remained in the sultan's court for the rest of her life, enjoying an extremely loving and intimate relationship with her husband, and having at least six children with him, including the future sultan, Selim II, which makes her an ancestor of all the following sultans and present descendants of the Ottoman dynasty. Of Hürrem's six known children, five were male, breaking one of the oldest Ottoman customs according to which each concubine could only give the Sultan one male child, to maintain a balance of power between the various consorts. However, not only did Hürrem bear more children to the sultan after the birth of her first son in 1521, but she was also the mother of all of Suleiman's children during his sultanate born after her entry into the harem at the very beginning of his reign.



Hürrem eventually wielded enormous power, influencing and playing a central role in the politics of the Ottoman Empire. The correspondence between Suleiman (below) and Hürrem, unavailable until the nineteenth century, along with Suleiman's own diaries, confirms her status as the sultan's most trusted confidant and adviser. During his frequent absences, the pair exchanged passionate love letters. Hürrem included political information and warned of potential uprisings. She also played an active role in the affairs of the empire and even intervened in affairs between the empire and her former home, apparently helping Poland attain its privileged diplomatic status. She brought a feminine touch to diplomatic relations, sending diplomatic letters accompanied by personally embroidered articles to foreign leaders and their relatives.

Two of these notable contemporaries were Sigismund II Augustus, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania (r. 1548–1572) and Shahzada Sultanum, the favourite sister and intimate counsellor of Shah Tahmasp, who exchanged official letters with Hürrem Sultan as well as with an Ottoman royal princess who was probably Mihrumah Sultan, daughter of Hürrem and Suleiman.



Hürrem patronised major public works (including the Haseki Sultan Complex and the Hürrem Sultan Bathhouse). She died in April 1558, in Constantinople and was buried in an elegant and beautifully adorned mausoleum (left) adjacent to the site where her husband would join her eight years later in another mausoleum within the grand Süleymaniye Mosque complex in Istanbul.

HÉLOÏSE AND ABÉLARD

Many millions of visitors have streamed through the gates of the sprawling Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris since they first opened in the early 19th century. Some are drawn to a memorial tucked away in a corner just to the right of the cemetery's main entrance. It is the reputed resting place of the 12th-century abbess Héloïse of Argenteuil and her husband, philosopher Pierre Abélard.

The neo-Gothic tomb, with its effigies of the couple reclining peacefully, is a picturesque stone monument to love's persistence. For that reason, it became something of a pilgrimage site in the 19th century. The story that draws so many visitors even today is a tale of a doomed clandestine medieval romance – that of Abélard, the rising academic star who fell for his most gifted student, Héloïse (below⁷). It involves a forbidden love, a hidden pregnancy, a secret marriage, an escape in the guise of a nun, a castration, and a lengthy and final separation. If that précis reads like the plot of a television melodrama miniseries, it seemed no less sensational to people in the Middle Ages.



At Paris' heart lay the small island known as the Île de la Cité. Here Héloïse spent much of her adolescence living in her uncle Fulbert's household. He was part of the community of canons who served the basilica of Saint-Étienne, the now-vanished precursor to the cathedral of Notre-Dame.



Héloïse was highly intelligent, mastering not only Latin but also Greek and Hebrew – rare accomplishments for anyone in western Europe then, let alone a woman. A man with Héloïse's intellectual talents would have easily gained admission to the renowned cathedral school of Paris. However, the only way for a woman to acquire a higher-level education in that period was to employ a private tutor, so around 1115 or slightly later – when Héloïse was in her mid-teens – Fulbert hired the charismatic cleric Pierre Abélard to be her tutor.

Born in 1079, Abélard was the eldest son of a minor noble family in Brittany, but had renounced his inheritance to pursue life as a scholar. During his career, he acquired a reputation for both brilliance and arrogance, thanks to challenging, unconventional writings such as his *Theologia, Sic et Non* (Yes and No) and *Scito te Ipsum* (Know Yourself). Having heard tell of Héloïse's beauty and intelligence, Abélard decided – before he had even met her – that “she was the one to bring to [his] bed”. He was not given to praising others’

intelligence lightly, but he wrote that *for her wealth in letters, she was supreme* and that her intellect “made her highly praised throughout the entire realm”.

Despite their age gap – roughly two decades – and the fact that he was her teacher, they quickly entered into a sexual relationship. They tried their best to keep this a secret but, once Héloïse became pregnant, that was no longer possible. She slipped out of the city disguised as a nun, and travelled to stay with Abélard’s family in Brittany. There she gave birth to a son, giving him the distinctive name Astrolabe, and the pair married in secret. Héloïse then hid at the convent of Argenteuil, just a little north-west of Paris, hoping to avoid her uncle’s anger at her behaviour – which was considered incredibly scandalous at the time. This plan backfired spectacularly. Héloïse’s relatives assumed that she had gone to the convent because Abélard had abandoned her, unmarried – and took their revenge at that perceived outrage by having Abélard attacked and castrated. This shocking outburst of violence had a number of consequences. With Abélard’s marriage now public knowledge at a time when the church was increasingly enforcing the requirement for clerical celibacy, he knew that he would not be able to continue his chosen career. His reputation, already precarious, was badly damaged. His former teacher Roscelin of Compiègne called Abélard “contemptuous” and guilty of “the filthiest violation of virginal modesty”.

The couple could not now remedy the situation by setting up a household together. Following the brutal attack and his castration, Abélard was no longer able to perform the act that was thought in the Middle Ages to be one of the defining aspects of a husband’s marital role. He later wrote that he “felt the shame more than the dismemberment” and “fell into such a state of despair that I thought of quitting the realm of Christendom and going over to the heathen” – a strong statement indeed from a devout Christian. In the event, Abélard became a monk at the royal abbey of Saint-Denis, just north of Paris, and urged Héloïse to take the veil herself.

She was initially reluctant to do so, feeling *no calling for the monastic profession, nor any religious devotion*, but she was unshakeably loyal to her husband and eventually gave in. She joined the Benedictine monastery at Argenteuil before moving to the Abbey of the Paraclete (Holy Spirit) in Ferreux-Quincey, about 60 miles south-east of Paris. There she served as abbess and, according to the Paraclete’s surviving sources, was a capable administrator who ensured that the establishment stayed on a firm financial and reputational footing.

After the exposure of his affair with Héloïse, Abélard retreated into religious life (below⁸) – but not from intellectual debate. He continued to quarrel with figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux, possibly the most influential theologian of the era, and his work was twice condemned as heretical by church councils. He was so unpopular in his role as the abbot of the monastery of St-Gildas-de-Rhuys in Brittany that he had to flee following an attempt on his life. He moved to the great monastery of Cluny in Burgundy and then finally retired, by then a sick, elderly man, to the priory of St Marcel, near Chalon-sur-Saône, where he died in 1142.

His remains were taken discreetly to the Abbey of the Paraclete where Héloïse was abbess; on her death in



1164, she was interred alongside him. Their remains were reputedly transferred to Père Lachaise in 1817, though some dispute whether the bones of either of them actually lie there. Even while separated by their monastic vows and living many miles apart, Abélard and Héloïse kept in touch. In the 1130s, Abélard wrote a kind of memoir, the *Historia Calamitatum* (History of Misfortunes), which provides an intimate portrait of his life and their story. After reading this text, Héloïse initiated an exchange of letters with Abélard that reveal the complexity and challenges of their relationship.

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1. Painting, from a compendium of Christine de Pizan's works commissioned in 1413, produced by her scriptorium in Paris. Photo courtesy of British Library, in the Public Domain. Article taken from *Most Wise & Valiant Ladies* by Andrea Hopkins (collins & Brown 1997). Christine de Pisan presenting her manuscript to King Charles VI of France. 1410. Courtesy of British Library.
2. <https://www.sfpersonaltrainerlondon.com/elephant-and-castle>
3. Wikimedia Commons.
4. The Crimson Bedchamber, portrait group of gentlemen with musical instruments, traditionally said to depict the Cabal Ministry of King Charles II (oil on canvas)
5. Courtesy of the Chess Museum.
6. John Baptist de Medina
7. Abelard and Heloise, from the Roman de la Rose, c.1460 © Bridgeman Images (History Today)
8. Abelard and his pupil Heloise by Edmund Leighton, 1882. In the Public Domain.