

## Voltaire's View

*"Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."*

The trial of **Éloïse Mercier** shows us how easily fear and **prejudice** can take the place of truth. A woman is accused of murder, not because the evidence is strong, but because her ideas are too free, too bold, too new.

She is not of noble birth. She is a widow, a midwife, and a suspected friend to **philosophers** and scientists. These things made people whisper. The Church disliked her, and the court feared her connections to dangerous thinking. And so, when a noblewoman dies, people are quick to point fingers—**not because they know, but because they fear**.

I do not say that Éloïse is surely innocent. I do not say she is surely guilty. But I say this: she deserved a fair trial. One based on **reason and real proof**, not class or gender. She was given no lawyer. Was she tortured to confess? That is not justice—it is cruelty dressed up in legal robes.

A maid said something under pressure? A jar had her initials? When did the jar even arrive? That is not enough. A scientist said the symptoms don't match arsenic poisoning. Still, the court chose punishment.

Why? Perhaps to silence her. Perhaps to please the nobles. Perhaps to send a message: "**Do not challenge the old ways.**"

But the people are watching. They read the pamphlets. They whisper in cafés. They know something is wrong—even if they don't know exactly what. That is the power of public opinion. When truth is silenced in court, it often finds its voice in the street.

Is it justice to spare her life or lock her away forever? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But I believe history will remember not just what happened, but **how** it happened.

Let this case remind us: we must always speak against injustice, especially when it hides behind tradition or religion. If we do not, who will speak when it comes for us?

- **Prejudice:** A strong dislike or unfair opinion about someone based on who they are (like gender or class), not what they've done.
- **Philosophers:** Thinkers who ask big questions about truth, justice, and society.
- **Reason:** Clear and logical thinking based on evidence.
- **Cruelty:** Causing pain or suffering without fairness or kindness.
- **Arsenic:** A deadly poison.
- **Public opinion:** What many people in society believe or feel.
- **Pamphlets:** Small booklets or papers used to share ideas or opinions quickly.

## Primary Source Quotes

**Source:** Project Gutenberg: Toleration and Other Essays

1. **Quote (Chapter 1):**

"It does not require any great art or studied elocution to prove that Christians ought to tolerate one another. I will go further, and say that we ought to look upon all men as our brothers."

- **Relevance:** Voltaire's call for tolerance would lead him to condemn the prosecution's framing of Éloïse as a "dangerous woman of letters." He would argue that her intellectual pursuits and associations with Encyclopédistes do not justify persecution, advocating for a just treatment free from prejudice.

2. **Quote (Chapter 22):**

"The more we reason, the less we shall find to condemn in others; and the more we accustom ourselves to judge men by their actions, and not by their words, the more we shall be inclined to tolerate them."

- **Relevance:** This emphasizes Voltaire's demand for evidence-based justice. He would criticize the reliance on the jar as insufficient proof and the prosecution's focus on Éloïse's beliefs rather than her actions, pushing for a rational trial process.

**Connection to Éloïse's Case:** Voltaire would denounce the trial as a prejudiced attack on Éloïse's intellectual freedom, urging a fair, evidence-driven process. Students can use these quotes to highlight the need for tolerance and reason in legal proceedings.