

Mary Wollstonecraft's View

"It is justice—not kindness—that the world truly needs."

The trial of **Éloïse Mercier** makes us think about what it means to be fair—especially to women who speak up, think for themselves, and don't follow society's usual rules.

Éloïse is not a noblewoman. She is a **widow** and a **midwife**—someone who helps women give birth. She also spent time with thinkers who believed in science and reason, not just tradition and religion. Because of that, many people already disliked or feared her. Was she arrested because of real evidence—or because she was a woman who dared to live differently?

Parts of her trial were clearly unfair. She wasn't given a lawyer. She was hurt during questioning to force a confession. Her gender, class, and ideas were all used against her. This shows how **women are often not treated equally under the law**. If women are truly **rational**—able to think and make choices for themselves—they must be treated with the same fairness as men.

But we must be careful not to say Éloïse is innocent just because she is a woman. That would be **sentimental**—driven by feelings instead of facts. True equality means women should be held to the same standards as men, whether that leads to freedom or punishment.

The **evidence** in her case is unclear. A jar with her initials. A maid's story, told under pressure. A scientist said the symptoms didn't match arsenic poisoning. So—was this a crime? A mistake? Or something in between?

Her final words were brave and emotional. She said she was being punished not for guilt, but because powerful men feared "free women and freer ideas." Maybe that's true. But even powerful words don't prove someone's innocence.

In the end, the court didn't kill her—they gave her life in prison instead. Was that a sign of progress? Or just a way to quiet the people without changing the system?

I don't know for certain if Éloïse is guilty. But I do know that if women must be **perfect** to be treated fairly, then the justice system is broken. Women are not angels or monsters—we are people. We deserve laws based on truth, not fear.

- **Widow:** A woman whose husband has died.
- **Midwife:** A person (often a woman) who helps deliver babies.
- **Rational:** Able to think clearly and logically.
- **Sentimental:** Based mostly on feelings or emotions instead of reason.
- **Evidence:** Facts or information used to decide if someone is guilty or innocent.
- **Equality:** Being treated the same, no matter your gender, class, or background.
- **Perfect:** Flawless or without any mistake—something no one can truly be.

Primary Source Quotes

Source: Project Gutenberg: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

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

"I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness."

- **Relevance:** Wollstonecraft would see Éloïse's intellectual strength and association with radical thinkers as virtues, not crimes. She would argue that the prosecution's misogynistic framing punishes Éloïse for defying gender norms, advocating for equal treatment under the law.

2. **Quote (Chapter 4):**

"Women are supposed to be so attentive to their persons, that they have little time to cultivate their minds... Yet, because they are made slaves to their persons, they are sent to the grave without having had an opportunity of exerting their faculties."

- **Relevance:** This connects to Éloïse's prior imprisonment and loss of livelihood, which limited her ability to practice her Ascendancy her intellectual pursuits, Wollstonecraft would argue that Éloïse deserves a fair chance to defend herself, free from societal biases against educated women.

3. **Quote (Chapter 9):**

"If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reasoning, must equally do so."

- **Relevance:** Wollstonecraft's call for equal rights applies directly to Éloïse's trial, where her gender and intellectualism are used against her. She would demand a legal process that treats Éloïse as an equal, rational individual.

Connection to Éloïse's Case: Wollstonecraft would frame Éloïse's trial as a gendered injustice, advocating for a fair process that respects her rationality and rights. Students can use these quotes to argue against discriminatory treatment of accused women.