

Sojourner Truth

The fourth National Woman's Rights Convention, held in New York City in September 1853, provided an "overt exhibition of that public sentiment woman was then combating," according to Stanton's *History of Woman Suffrage* (547). Young men bent on disrupting the proceedings paid for admission to the hall, then heaped abuse upon the women speakers. But no speaker at the "Mob Convention" received more demeaning and abusive treatment than Sojourner Truth, who by virtue of being both black and female combined "the two most hated elements of humanity" (567). Moreover, no speaker proved more capable of turning the hecklers' insults against them.

When Truth rose to speak in the afternoon session on September 7, the convention's second day, she was greeted with "a perfect storm of applause, hisses, groans and undignified ejaculations," according to the reporter for the *New York Times*.

One lad, with red hair, whose education had evidently been grievously neglected, insinuated that the colored lady was not then acting in her accustomed sphere, by calling for "an oyster stew with plenty of crackers." Another scape-grace called vociferously for a "sixpenny plate of clam soup."

Undeterred, Truth "came forward to the desk, rolled up her eyeballs in scorn, and raised her hand and voice in wrath." Her remarks compare the taunts and hisses of the hecklers to the calls of snakes and geese and make clear that the movement for women's rights will not be delayed by such disruptions: "You may hiss as much as you like, like any other lot of geese, but you can't stop it; it's bound to come." Truth likens her audience to the biblical King Haman, persecutor of Jews, who was himself hanged on the gallows he had prepared for his victims.

Dressed in a blue gown and black pinafore, with a white cotton kerchief on her head, Truth spoke with anger and force at a volume sufficient to be heard over the interjections of her tormenters. According to the astonished Times reporter:

Ye who have not heard the roar of the cataract can form but a meagre idea of the volume of sound that gushed forth upon the devoted audience. Imagine Trinity Church organ . . . with its low bass and trumpet stops pulled out, all the keys down, and two men and a boy working for dear life at the bellows, and you have a gentle specimen of the angry voice of Sojourner Truth.

Below is the text of Truth's speech, as published in the *New York Times* of September 8, 1853, complete with the reporter's transcription of some of the audience comments—for and against Truth—shouted out during her speech. For further information, see Erlene Stetson and Linda David, *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994)*; and Nell Irvin Painter, "Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic," *Gender and History* (1990), 3–16.

It is good for me to come forth for to see what kind of spirit you are made of.* I see some of you have got the spirit of a goose, and a good many of you have got the spirit of snakes. [Great applause and cries of "Go on"—"That's the style"—"Show your pluck"—"Give it to them;" during which that young scrape-grace in the gallery called for a "small fry."] I feel at home here. [A venerable old gentleman occupying a front seat, said, "So you ought."] I was born in this State. I've been a slave in this State, and now I'm a good citizen of this State. [Vociferous demonstrations of applause.] I was born here, and I can tell you I feel to home here. [Queer man under the gallery: That's right. Make yourself at home, you're welcome; take a chair.] I've been looking round and watching things, and I know a little might 'bout Woman's Rights, too. [Applause, and cries of "Go it lively; you'll have a fair show."] I know it feels funny, kinder funny and tickling to see a colored woman get up and tell you about things and woman's rights, when we've all been trampled down so't nobody thought we'd ever git up again. But we have come up, and I'm here. There was a king in old times in the Scriptiters that said he'd give away half of his kingdom, and hang some body as Haman. Now, he was more liberaler than the present King of the United State, 'cause he wouldn't do that for the women. [Roars of laughter, on the conclusion of which, a middle-aged gentleman, with a florid countenance, short hair and old fashioned shirt collar, ventured to correct the lady as to the title of our present Chief Magistrate, but the lady would not change the name, and continued.] But we don't want him to kill the men, nor we don't want half of his kingdom; we only want half of our rights, and we don't get them neither. But we'll have them, see'f we don't and you can't stop us, neither; see'f you can! [Applause, and some hissing.] Oh, you may hiss as much as you please, like any other lot of geese, but you can't stop it; it's bound to come. [That young rascal, with the dirty shirt and face—"Hurry up that stew; its bilin'."] You see the women don't get half as much rights as they ought to get. We want more, and will have it [Loud laughter.] Then you see the Bible says,

*In the version of the speech published in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Frances Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1 (Rochester, N.Y.: Fowler and Wells, 1881), 567–68, the opening line is: "Is it not good for me to come and draw forth a spirit?" Carla Peterson has argued that this beginning reflects central African ceremonial practice; see *Doers of the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 54.

sons and daughters ought to behave themselves before their mothers; but they don't; I'm watching, and I can see them a snickering, and pinting and laughing at their mothers up here on the stage. [That young scape-grace again—"My mother ain't up there, an' I don't believe anybody's mother is." Applause.] They ought to be ashamed. They ought to know better, an' if they'd been brought up proper they would. [Queer man under the gallery—"They ought to be spanked." Roars of laughter.] Woman's sphere ought to rise—rise as high as hanged Haman, and spread out all over. [Great applause, and that queer man under the gallery insinuated that that might be done by the least possible extension of their bustles.] I'm round watching things, and I wanted to come up and say these few things to you, and I'm much obliged for your listening. I wanted to tell you a little might about Woman's Rights, and so I come out and said so. I'll be around agin sometime. I'm watching things, and I'll git up agin, an' tell you what time o'night it is. [Great applause.] And, with another request from the young rascals to "hurry up them stews and things," the lady took a seat on the steps, which lead to the platform.■