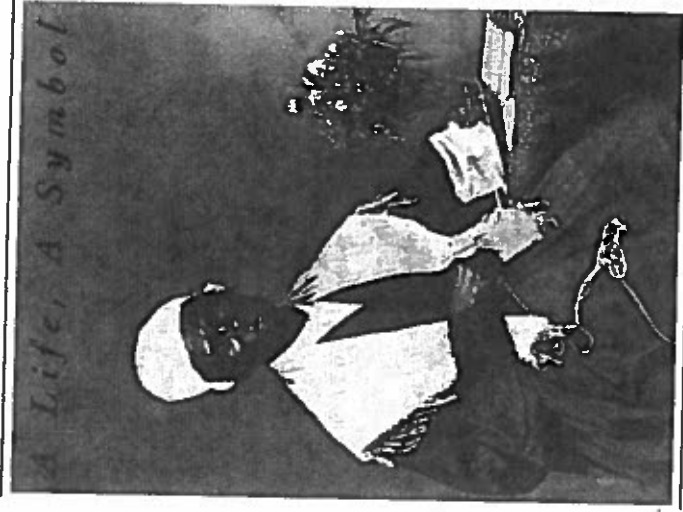


Sojourner Truth



Nell Irvin Painter



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For Glenn
love of my life

15

Vengeance and Womanhood

Even before President Millard Fillmore signed the act into law in the fall of 1850, blacks throughout the North assembled to discuss their response. In Boston, the fugitive abolitionist Samuel Ringgold Ward announced that blacks no longer owed allegiance to their country—it was time to exercise the “right of Revolution.” In New York City and Elmira, New York, crowded meetings denounced the federal government and vowed defiance. In Philadelphia, the free-born black abolitionist Robert Purvis, long a Garrisonian stalwart, swore that if “any wretch enter my dwelling, any pale-faced spectre among ye, to execute this law on me or mine, I’ll seek his life, I’ll shed his blood.” Douglass’s abolitionist colleague in Pittsburgh, Martin Delany, now a physician, amplified Purvis:

If any man approached [my] house in search of a slave—I care not who he may be, whether constable, or sheriff, magistrate or even judge of the Supreme Court—nay let it be President Millard Fillmore surrounded by his cabinet and his bodyguard, with the Declaration of Independence waving above his head as his banner, and the constitution of his country upon his breast as his shield—if he crosses the threshold of my door, and I do not lay him a lifeless corpse at my feet, I hope the grave may refuse my body a resting place, and righteous heaven my spirit a home. O, no! He cannot enter that house and we both live.

Again in Boston, even the great and prudent black statesman Frederick Douglass uttered sanguinary threats: “We must be prepared . . . to see the streets of Boston running with blood. . . .”

Beyond anguished talk, blacks in Ohio and Pennsylvania organized vigilante groups, as in Christiana, Pennsylvania, where a slaveholder attempting to recapture several fugitives paid with his life, and U.S. Marines tried in vain to enforce the law. In these frightful circumstances, blacks warned their fellows to keep firearms close at hand.

Successful and failed efforts to foil the recapture of blacks claimed as fugitives occurred with awful regularity. When a fugitive called Shadrach was rescued in Boston in 1851, his liberators were put on trial. In the famous “Jerry rescue,” Jerry McHenry was saved in Syracuse. New York, and again his rescuers were tried but

THE DESPERATE decade of the 1850s saw “the Slave Power” everywhere ascendant. The fearsome proof—the punitive, massively cruel Fugitive Slave Act—turned the whole country into the enemy of black people. Danger was palpable, humiliation officially sanctioned, the threat of abduction real. Each fugitive recaptured was literally a person who, they knew, “could be me.”

Daniel Webster, the engineer of the Compromise of 1850, a man anathema to abolitionists, had included a strengthening of the eighteenth-century federal fugitive slave law to garner the support of southern representatives in Congress. Tailored to the interests of powerful southerners, the Fugitive Slave Act meant to do black people harm. A slaveholder needed only to swear that a particular black person was his slave, and federally appointed commissioners and marshals would seize the purported fugitive. Marshals could draft any citizen into the capture of the designated runaway, and whoever did not cooperate was liable to incarceration and thousands of dollars in fines.

The fugitive’s redress was circumscribed. His or her testimony was not admissible in court, and he or she lacked the right to trial by jury. When the captive was sent into slavery, the commissioner received \$10; when the captive was set free, the commissioner received only \$5.

acquitted. Harriet Tubman led the successful rescue in Troy, New York, of a fugitive about to be returned to southern slavery in 1860.² The rescues went down in history, but the legions of kidnappings were not the stuff of legend.

Rescues were not enough to make the United States feel safe for black people. Martin Delany called a convention in 1854 on black emigration out of the United States. A women's rights man, Delany invited women as well as men. For the first time in a Negro convention, women represented one-third of the delegates in 1854, having hitherto been barred or only barely tolerated. The convention advocated flight.

Thousands of fugitives, including Harriet Tubman, escaped to Canada. Even Delany, who was free, retreated north for safety's sake. He advocated emigration out of hopelessness: Blacks were too completely oppressed in the United States to remain secure within its boundaries, even within North America. In 1859, he and a colleague traveled to what is now Nigeria to arrange for African-American settlement.³

IN THESE agitated times, when fear and anger dogged her people, Sojourner Truth's itinerary did not include the Negro conventions so dominated by men. Her lecture circuit usually took her from nearly all-white antislavery meetings to nearly all-white women's rights meetings and back. Yet in tandem with her fellow blacks, her message grew broader, deeper, and sharper. She moved from a recitation of her own experience in slavery—now a quarter century and more behind her—to a condemnation of American slavery as an institution and of white people as a whole. She grew increasingly angry, and while contriving not to alienate her audiences, she let her anger show.

Her audiences preferred not to grapple with all she had to say. Speaking in biblical code and lacing her remarks with humor, she made it easy for them to gloss over her wrath and millenarian conviction that a day of reckoning was at hand. Yet her words were angry in the 1850s, as she anticipated the time when black people would take their revenge against white people generally. She said

"white people"—not "slaveholders" or "white southerners," or any narrower subset of the guilty.

As this decade of crisis opened, Truth was still relatively obscure, known only to black and white radicals. Among them she appeared frequently. On 8 September 1853, Truth spoke at a women's rights convention in New York City, on the heels of a temperance gathering of the very same people. As usual with feminist or anti-slavery meetings in New York City, the audience included a good number of hostile rowdies, people Truth knew to handle in the language of the Prophet Matthias: "It is not good for me to come and draw forth a spirit, to see what kind of spirit people are of? I see that some of you have got the spirit of a goose, and some have got the spirit of a snake."

She said she felt at home in the city and described herself as a "citizen" of New York, a term that became inappropriate in a few years, when the United States Supreme Court, in the Dred Scott decision of 1857, declared Americans of African descent ineligible for citizenship. But now, in 1853, she said that she knew "a little mite" about women's rights and wanted "to throw in my little mite, to keep the scales a-movin'."⁴

Weighing the federal government's meanness, Truth compared Congress unfavorably to the king in the Old Testament Book of Esther. Truth's metaphor works on two levels. She speaks of Esther as a woman, but Esther is not merely a woman, she is also a Jew. Threatened as a group, the Jews stand in for Truth's own oppressed people.

Most Americans of Truth's generation—including William Lloyd Garrison and Abraham Lincoln—so often reread their Bibles that they knew them practically by heart. They would recall the whole story when Truth mentioned its main character, Esther; they would know that Esther became queen when the Persian king Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I, ruled 486-465 BCE) dismissed his previous queen, Vashti, for refusing to exhibit her charms to his carousing men. Truth knew, and her audience knew, that the Book of Esther begins with an alarming feminine challenge to patriarchy.⁵

They would know, too, that Esther was a beautiful Jewish woman passing for Gentile who learns that the king's favorite courtier, Haman, wanted to have all the Jews killed and their

property plundered, because the Jew Mordecai would not bow down to him. Esther screws up her courage and risks her life when she speaks to the king without being summoned. The king, luckily, is well disposed to hear her request. Twice he says to her: "What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given to thee to the half of the kingdom" (Esther 5:3, 7:2). Truth contrasted Ahasuerus' generosity with Congress's niggardliness toward women.

Esther tells the king that his prickly favorite, Haman, plans to kill all the Jews, which would mean killing her as well. Outraged, the king reverses the order and invites the Jews to attack their would-be assailants. The Book of Esther culminates on a note of triumph: "Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them." Several verses enumerate the carnage, a triumph celebrated annually as the festival of Purim.⁶

Truth's message cut two ways, against whites and against men. The slaughter of the enemies of the Jews warns whites. But speaking as a woman, she underlines the gender of the enemies of the Jews: "I do not want any man to be killed, but I am sorry to see them so short minded. But we'll have our rights; see if we don't; and you can't stop us from them; see if you can. You may hiss as much as you like, but it is comin'!"⁷

KILLING one's enemies was Truth's message for whites. But to "my people, a poor, down-trodden race," she had other things to say. She preached uplift—cleanliness and economic independence—not vengeance. At a black church in New York City in December 1853, she began, as usual, with a song and a recitation of the brutality of her enslavement. Then she mocked white people's inability to keep New York City clean:

Now the white people have taken it in hand, the dirt lies in the streets till it gets too thick, and flies all around into the shops and people's eyes and then they sift water all over it, and make it into mud, and that's what they do over and over again, without ever dreaming of such an easy thing as taking it away. In the course of time it becomes too

thick, and too big a nuisance and then they go to work right straight off with picks and crow bars, and pull up the stones, above the dirt, and then go on again! (Laughter.)⁸

Convinced the Negro race had improved over the last fifty years, she demanded further improvement. New York City blacks could better themselves, not by staying in the city, but by going into the field to sharecrop for the Pennsylvania farmers who had cried out to her for "good men and women." On farms the colored people would prosper in the fullness of time and become self-reliant. Decades later escape from the city and farming as a route to independence would again engage her thought.

The Fourth of July 1854 found Truth back before white audiences, speaking at an Independence Day celebration in Framingham, Massachusetts. She spoke after a white abolitionist from Virginia described his ordeal in jail. This experience, he said, helped him appreciate the sufferings of blacks. Truth agreed. "White folks should sometimes feel the prick," she said, eliciting "laughter and cheers." Despite such merriment, her message, as recorded by the secretary of the meeting (her printer, George Brown Yerrinton), was severe and anguished:

God would yet execute his judgments upon the white people for their oppression and cruelty. She had often asked white people why God should have more mercy on Anglo-Saxons than on Africans, but they had never given her any answer; the reason was, they [white people] hadn't got it to give. (Laughter.) Why did the white people hate the blacks? Were they [white people] not as good as they were brought up? They [black people] were a great deal better than the white people had brought them up. (Cheers.) The white people owed the colored race a big debt, and if they paid it all back, they wouldn't have anything left for seed. (Laughter.) All they could do was to repent, and have the debt forgiven them.

Abolitionists were fond of implicating orthodox Christianity in the moral economy of slavery. The regular ministry and conventional churches tolerated slavers and slavery, they said, and Truth picked up this theme. The proceeds of the sale of slave children, she says, paid for the training of ministers of the gospel.

Then she returns to a question that haunts Americans still: Why did white people hate blacks so much? If whites were not able to answer her question now, she threatens, "they would have to answer it before God."

Speaking through the Bible, Truth declares that "Even the blood of one man, Abel, did not call from the ground in vain." In both the Old and New Testaments, Abel stands for the righteous who are killed for their faithfulness, and "the blood of Abel" is a call for vengeance. In Genesis 4:12, the Lord curses Cain: "When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth."

Truth calls down the curse of Cain on white Americans. She imagines a day when whites shall cry, like Cain, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (4:13). She speaks straightforwardly: "The promises of Scripture were all for the black people, and God would recompense them for all their sufferings in this world." To the masses of Americans who carried their Bibles in their heads, "recompense" plainly conveyed vengeance as well as salvation.⁹

Delivered straight, these lines would never have elicited cheers and applause from her mostly white audiences. She spoke of sinful whites and vengeful blacks, but her humor let her listeners exempt themselves. They did not hear wrath against whites, but against the advocates of slavery. It is understandable, no doubt, that Truth's audiences, who wanted so much to love this old black woman who had been a slave, found it difficult to fathom the depths of her bitterness.

BY THE late 1850s, Truth was a big enough draw to convene a series of meetings on her own in Indiana. After the third of these meetings in 1858, a group of Democrats (i.e., men soft on slavery) led by one T. W. Strain, challenged her authenticity as a woman, knowing that much of her appeal lay in her uniqueness as a former slavewoman condemning the evils of slavery.¹⁰ According to the report, which neglects the content of Truth's speech, the pro-slavery sympathizers made no attempt to break up the meeting during her remarks. At the close, however, they prevented adjournment, claiming her voice was that of a man. The charge was

irrelevant to the issue of slavery. Her opponents were hoping to subvert her performance by exposing her as a sexual impostor.

Denying the womanliness of women speaking in public was a familiar ploy. Hostile audiences questioned the sexual identity of American women preachers like Harriet Livermore, of lecturers like the antislavery poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and of actresses like Rachel, the great French tragedian.¹¹ The challenge was to the woman's authenticity. A similar challenge, to his authenticity as a former slave, prompted well-spoken Frederick Douglass to write his first autobiography. Truth had long understood the worth of her authenticity as a former slave and used testimonies from Garrison and Stowe as advertisements. She claimed special insight into slavery for having herself been enslaved.

The charge that Truth was a man polarized the meeting between pro- and antislavery factions. The pro-slavery band insisted that Truth step aside and show her breast to the women in the audience, who would report on her sex. The antislavery faction was "surprised and indignant at such ruffianly surmise and treatment." The result was "confusion and uproar." Americans were obsessed with sexual identity, with manhood in particular.

When a boisterous voice vote corroborated the doubt over her sex, Truth responded with a tongue-lashing that shamed her questioners and impugned their manhood:

Sojourner told them that her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to man's estate; that, although they had suckled her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be; and she quickly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck! In vindication of her truthfulness, she told them that she would show her breast to the whole congregation; that it was not to her shame that she uncovered her breast before them, but to their shame.¹²

Truth's counterattack turned on the tensions between infancy and adulthood, black motherhood and white motherhood, and the madonna-whore imagery of the bare female breast. The potency of her assault depended on the mingling of all those elements. Although black motherhood was discounted, she claimed that the

slaveowning babies she had suckled had grown into better men—be they slaveholders or not—than those before her whose masculinity she maligned. To bare a mother's breast, no matter what its color, was not shameful, she insisted, exhibiting her own to men as well as to women. By inviting her critics to suck, she infantilized them. She unmanned them.

Truth had turned the challenge upside down. Her skillful remark employed the all-too-common exhibition of an undressed black body, with its resonance of the slave auction that undressed women for sale. What had been intended as degradation became a triumph of embodied rhetoric. This speech act (together with "ar'n't I a woman?") is at the heart of the current symbolism of Sojourner Truth. In it, the image of her older woman's black body, a body that transcends shame through hardship, defeats the juvenile pricks of philistines.¹³

The display of a sensitive part of Truth's body raises the paradox of her sexuality: On the one hand, black women over the centuries have been considered degraded and unclean, as oversexed Jezebels, or at least sexualized objects. Even among abolitionist friends, the sexual vulnerability of slavewomen was a main theme. For friend or foe, in racist stereotype and antislavery ideology, rampant sexuality clings to the figure of the black woman.

On the other hand, sexuality never appears as part of Truth's persona. She remained spotless, with what a friend termed an "unimpeachable moral character."¹⁴ Truth's closest approach to carnal themes came with the exhibition of her breast, which entrained everything connected with sexuality without her naming it. Her words, instead, relate to motherhood and suckling. She shames the white men who taunt her by patronizing and belittling them, not by making them into rapists.

This asexual approach might threaten to turn Truth into the other stereotypical black woman figure in American culture, the mammy. Truth avoided the mammy snare through disinterest in the needs of white children and young white women. When Truth spoke to white women, she spoke as an equal, not as a mammy—no mean feat considering the strength of stereotype.

It helped that Truth was an older woman during the career that made her famous, and that she spent her time alone, with her

grown children, or with other older women. As Sojourner Truth, she lived mostly among women, as what we would now term a "woman-identified" woman. Even on the lecture circuit, she rarely traveled with men, preferring above all to travel alone.¹⁵ Given the difficulty that other black women have encountered trying to avoid Jezebel or mammy stereotypes, Truth deserves recognition for her ability (in our times and her own) to avoid completely these stereotypes of over-sexuality and public motherhood.¹⁶

Truth said that she showed her mother's breast "in vindication of her truthfulness," but this truth concerned her sexual identity, not necessarily her experience as a slave. The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* does not mention her nursing her owners' children, which is not surprising. As a young woman she lived with the Dutch, whose daughter was not much younger than she. Wet nursing by slaves was far more prevalent in the plantation South than Dutch New York, and Truth's claim that "her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring," evoked her symbolic history as a slave mother rather than her own actual experience.

Truth functioned as a former slave on the lecture circuit, and by the late 1850s this connoted a southern rather than a northern setting. As an authentic representative of slavery, Truth in performance was refashioning herself as a southerner. In her later years she tampered further with her past, routinely claiming to have been enslaved for forty, not thirty, years. This revision most likely replicated the biblical experience of the children of Israel in their forty years of bondage.

The Indiana breast-baring has been recounted compulsively since it became well known through the 1870s editions of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. The editions after 1875 reprinted an edited version of a letter that describes the incident, sent to Truth by her abolitionist friend Parker Pillsbury after the Civil War. The version in the *Narrative* includes the sentence explaining that two young men attempted to shield Truth from the audience as she showed her breast, but the sentence that follows has been excised. It reads: "One of the Democrats present cried out, 'Why, it does look like an old sow's teat.'"¹⁷

The deletion is not surprising in a book dedicated to preserv-

ing Truth's legend, for this puerile little comment undercuts the magnificent gesture that plays on the drama of the black body revealed for inspection and the hatefulness of the domestic slave trade. The need to edit Truth's history was not lost on Truth and her Battle Creek neighbor and friend, Frances Titus, as they put together the 1875 edition of the *Narrative*. A boyishly irreverent comment no longer tarnished the pathos of the symbolic slave mother's body.

16

Spiritualism

SOJOURNER TRUTH, itinerant preacher, stayed on the road in the 1850s. We have seen her in antislavery and women's rights meetings; she also embraced a new religion on the American landscape: spiritualism. Or rather, she embraced the people who were spiritualists. Alongside scores of assorted other reformers, she made the rounds of the quarterly and yearly Meetings of the newly formed, spiritualist Progressive Friends, from Longwood, Pennsylvania, to Waterloo, New York, and Battle Creek, Michigan. Truth had a very good time through the three-day founding of the Longwood Meeting of the Progressive Friends in May 1853.

A mixture of revival, picnic, sing-along, and séance, Progressive Friends' Meetings regularly reunited Truth's new extended family. Isaac and Amy Post; Ruth and Joseph Dugdale of Chester County, Pennsylvania; Giles Stebbins; and feminist abolitionists such as Frances Dana Gage, William Lloyd Garrison, and Parker Pillsbury all put in regular appearances on this circuit of spiritualism.¹

For Truth, the Posts played a vital role. At first she appreciated them more for their racial tolerance than their spiritualist beliefs—for her, a by-product rather than the central feature of their radicalism. They vindicated the slave and demanded women's rights,