

KVSA VERTAALPRYS / CASA TRANSLATION PRIZE

The CASA translation competition is sponsored annually for the best student translation from, or into, either Latin or Classical Greek.

‘AIN’T I A WOMAN?’ — SOJOURNER TRUTH [29TH MAY 1851]

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Introduction

I first began work on this translation of Sojourner Truth’s ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ in May of 2016. Several weeks before, Rhodes University had been the scene of vehement protest action conducted largely by women of the student body against an alleged culture of misogyny and sexual violence on the university’s campus. Since the Fees Must Fall protests at the end of 2015, I had been interested in the rhetoric of student protest movements, much of which lends itself to translation into Latin and Greek, and the similarities between this speech and several of the impassioned calls for change I had heard in April were immediately apparent. While Truth delivered ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ more than a hundred and fifty years ago, her argument in support of the emancipation of women and African-Americans exposes the same irony inherent in misogynistic discourse which protestors at Rhodes attempted to draw to public attention: namely that the fragility of women is a platitude only upheld when it is to the advantage of the beneficiaries of a patriarchal society. From her own brutal experiences as a slave, Truth recalls the complete lack of any male concern for her ‘feminine fragility’ at that time. Similarly, many protestors at Rhodes spoke of the irony they observed in April, when a bare-chested demonstration aroused public outrage, supposedly because of the need to protect the female body from indecency, while the man-handling of many female students by police officers, their being tear-gassed or shot with rubber bullets, met very little condemnation. Thus, it is for the continued relevance of this speech, both at our universities and in our country in general, that it was chosen.

In terms of the technicalities of the translation, it was originally set as an exercise in Latin rhetoric, particularly in the style of Cicero, and was therefore written with certain rhetorical devices in mind.¹ These include examples of alliteration, anaphora and asyndeton. Another important factor in the translation was my decision to translate Truth’s speech both in language and in context. In other words, my intention was to translate ‘Ain’t I a woman’ in such a way that a Roman reader might understand it without too much difficulty with anachronistic

¹ von Albrecht 2003:16.

references. It was this decision which led me to translate the use of a derogatory term for African-Americans simply as *servi*, both because the extent of a Roman understanding of strictly racial prejudice is highly debateable, and because Truth's advocacy of African-American rights here is indubitably interconnected with the abolitionist movement. In general, however, the translation of this speech was remarkably untroubled by difficulties in either sense or language. Considering the speech's main concern, which has remained relevant from Cicero's Rome, to Truth's Ohio, to my own Grahamstown, the reader may like to reflect on whether such ease of translation is something to be celebrated.

English text

- 'Wall, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin' out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout?
- 'Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and
5 lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibbs me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear de lash as well! And ain't I a woman?
- 10 I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?
- 'Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?'
'Intellect,' whispered someone.
'Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do wid womin's rights or nigger's rights?
- 15 If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?
- 'Den dat little man in back dar, he say women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wan't a woman! Whar did your Christ come from? Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him.
- 20 'If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let 'em.
- 'Bleeged to ye for hearin' on me, and now ole Sojourner han't got nothin' more to say'.

Latin text

Sojourner Truth: *Nonne Mulier Sum?*

“itaque vobis breviter dico, o pueri mei, haec omnia negotia certe auspicata magna esse. nonne illa iniustitiam in patria nostra portendunt? ego puto mox hos viros cives, hos nobiles viros valde vexatum iri, quoniam iam servi austrinae et aquiloniae provinciae mulieres postulant libertatem. sed quid dicitis?

5 “primus iste vir ‘at mulieres imbecillae sunt,’ inquit, ‘debemus eas aut in lecticam aut trans fossas tollere. oportet mulieres semper molliores esse.’ sed quis in lecticam me tollit? quis trans fossas caenosas me portat? quis curat ut ego incolumis sim? nemo. nonne mulier sum? ecce! me spectate! lacertum spectate! ego enim aravi, sevi, messui, nec quispiam erat fortior! nonne mulier sum? et ego tantundem laborare, tantundem

10 edere poteram, si hoc acquirebam; etiam verbera aequae passus sum. nonne mulier sum? tredecim pueros pepererim, paene omnes venire in servitium vidi, et quandocumque exclamavi, mota dolore matris, nemo me audiebat praeter Iesum! nonne mulier sum?

“atque volunt colloqui de rerum mentibus; quid hoc appellant?”

“intellegentia,” aliquis murmuravit.

15 “euge! ita vero. num libertas mulierum servorumque hanc intellegentiam requirit? Si poculum mihi solum sextarium vini habet, et tibi poculum plus, num crudelis es summam parvam mihi eripere?

“deinde iste homunculus, in postico stans, iste negat mulieres oportere tantam libertatem quantam viros habere, quod Christus non mulier esset! unde tuus Christus venit?

20 unde Christus tuus venit? natus est ex Deo et ex quadam muliere! homunculi nihil contulerunt.

“si mulier quam Deus primam fecit orbem terrarum confundere solum suffecit, hae mulieres sufficient simul corrigere, et eum recte vertere! certe nunc, cum eae quaerant ut id faciant, viri debent sinere.

25 “vobis gratias ago quod bene audivistis, sed Hospitilla² nihil amplius dicet.”

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² A literal translation of Truth’s first name.

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