I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and man a quart-why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, -for we cant take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and don’t know what to do. Why children, if you have woman’s rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble (125).

History will never know the exact words used by Sojourner Truth in her speech to the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention of 1851. Marius Robinson and Frances Gage produced drastically different interpretations of what Truth said that day and each includes the author’s biases. Some of the facts are indisputable. Truth did speak at the convention, men were present, and most of the attendees were privileged white women. Nell Irvin Painter makes a convincing argument for the validity of Marius Robinson’s version of the speech and I will therefore use his account for the analysis.

The convention concerned voting rights for women and Truth understood her audience. She knew how to maneuver across the racial and gender equality lines without alienating either cause. The use of a first-person narrative gave authority to Truth’s speech and argument. The first declarative statement, “I am a woman’s rights” (125) established her multilayered identity as a woman and not as a piece of property. Truth was not just an ex-slave, but a multifaceted example of womanhood. She believed that women’s rights should come to all no matter their race or class and therefore included herself in the right to women’s equality. This inclusive view was not shared by all women’s rights activists and Truth was likely aware of the division. Truth’s interwoven identity, that she was a woman, a black-woman, a working-woman, and an intellectual woman, predates the modern-day feminist term, “intersectionality” that was first used by UCLA Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Crenshaw argued that the discrimination experience of African American women differed from white women because their race, gender and class interacted together and not as separate entities. Truth’s simple and determined assertion of this complex identity sets up the rest of her argument.

Sojourner Truth’s physical presence on the stage was noteworthy and she uses it as a silent, yet effective rhetorical device, “I have as much muscle as any man” (125). This point would have been obvious from her stature. She celebrates this strength with examples of the physical labor that both her race and gender required of her. She earned her equality through tough work, “I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed” (125). The list she gives works rhetorically in two ways. First, the repetitive nature and parallel structure of the action verbs allow for stressing the “and” between each verb and the verbs themselves. The list also highlights the types of farming labor normally associated with lower, working class men that would have been outside the lifestyle of the white women in the audience. Truth treats her personal experience as proof that women have the strength of men, but there is also a non-verbal reality that this physical labor is the result of her race and class. She manipulates this experience to her advantage within the equality argument.

Truth’s captivating wit and intelligence then come together to dispute the patriarchal structure. She claims to be able to eat as much as a man, which contradicts feminine social norms, but by jokingly adding, “if I can get it” (125), she diffuses the serious nature behind the statement. The explanation refers to her poor class and inability to afford food. The use of humor helps to alleviate any stress or discomfort the men in the audience, or men in general, might be feeling while providing an intimate connection with the audience. When she teases men to “not be afraid to give up your rights” she is also satirizing the valued masculine characteristic of bravery. She continues with comical condescension while recognizing men’s uncertainty, “[t]he poor men seem to be all in confusion, and don’t know what to do” (125). By acknowledging men’s anxiety in a comical way, she helps uncover and contest social norms. She refers to the men as “children” (125) in a familiar and motherly tone to remind them that rights do not have limits. Truth might also have used the phrase “children” (125) to reference the stereotypical role of “the mammy” that the white audience would likely associate with some female slaves. Sojourner confronts men but also offers assurance that rights are not a limited commodity, noting that “[y]ou will have your own rights” (125) and that those rights will not be diminished by providing equal rights for women.