Speaking Out About Equal Rights

In early American literature, almost all the writings there are for us to look back on and read are about religion or other holy topics. Seldom do we get to see any writings that address real issues or problems within society, separate from issues concerning religion. However, once increased settlement took place and things seemed to relax a bit, a major shift in writing styles and topics can clearly be seen. Writings began to make the shift from solely talking about religious issues or other religious aspects, to talking in depth about and discussing real life issues.

In Anne Bradstreet’s writings, one can see the tension between the female roles and positions within society, and the male dominance that has always taken place. Anne Bradstreet’s writings are of extreme importance because this was a time when no female dared to override male dominance or bring up the discussion of female equality. However, female equality wasn’t the only issue taking place during this time period. Samuel Sewall also writes about important issues taking place, the imprisonment of Africans and forcing them into slavery. Samuel Sewall’s writings are among the first to address slavery, an issue of rising importance and a topic needing much attention. Samuel Sewall and Anne Bradstreet are two very important writers, both deciding to change the writing era and not discuss religion, but rather discuss issues of high importance that few were brave enough to tackle.

Anne Bradstreet lived in a time where it was not expectable for women to even write, let alone write and discuss issues about female equality. Bradstreet had to be extremely careful when writing, which is why her hints about female equality are very subtle. Nevertheless, Bradstreet does bring up female equality in many different aspects. In Bradstreet’s poem, “In
Honour of the High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory”, you can clearly see passages stating that women are of equal value to men. For example, Bradstreet writes, “Nor say I more duly is her due / Millions will testify this is true. / She hath wiped off th’ aspersion of her sex, / That women wisdom lack to play the rex” (Bradstreet 284). The idea of females being equal to men was a very dangerous topic for Bradstreet to discuss, which is why she does so when talking about the queen, a female who is acceptable to discuss and praise. This passage is of such importance because Bradstreet suggests that a female could be as great, if not greater, than a king. This is of high significance because very rare was it is discussed that women can be just as good as men. For one of the first times, it is raising the idea that women should be considered of equal value to men.

Anne Bradstreet discusses the idea of female equality in more than just one of her writings. In one of Bradstreet’s poems “The Author to her Book”, we get another look at the idea that females can be just as valuable as males: “In this array ‘mongst vulgars may’st thou roam. / In critic’s hands beware thou dost not come, / And take thy way where yet thou art not known; /If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none; / And for thy mother, she alas is poor, / Which caused her thus to send thee out of door” (Bradstreet 287). This passage is one of importance because Anne Bradstreet is claiming that she wrote these poems without the input of any male figure. However, Anne Bradstreet does have to clearly note her position of being a female is submissive to men in order to not get persecuted for such writings. Bradstreet has to very carefully word her passages to have a strong and bold message, while staying out trouble with what she has to say.

Bold messages are also included in another one of Bradstreet’s poems, “The Prologue”, she writes “I am obnoxious to each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fits, / A
poet’s pen all scorn I should thus wrong, / For such despite they cast on female wits: / If what I do prove well, it won’t advance, / They’ll say it’s stol’n or else it was by chance” (283). During this passage Bradstreet is saying that her poems are so good that no one would give her, a female, the credit for writing them, and would instead say she stole them from a male. In those two passages, Bradstreet is suggesting that she, a female, can write these beautiful and intelligent poems without the help of a single male, and write them so well that people would say she had to of stolen them. Here Bradstreet is compelling because a woman is suggesting, during a time when men are always dominant, that she has value, is intelligent, doesn’t need a male, and could do things just as well as a male. Bradstreet is claiming women don’t always need men, and are actually equal to them. While making this claim, Bradstreet is careful to veil her message with compressions to motherhood and is sure to point out her weakness of being a female. Claiming something like this is of such high importance because woman during this time were not allowed to make such statements, even if they are masked, and it’s a statement that has potential to change the way people view women.

Bradstreet isn’t the only person discussing important issues, and equality among men and women wasn’t the only important issue needing attention. Samuel Sewall writes about the issue of slavery, an issue that hasn’t been talked about in this time period by many others. In Sewall’s *The Selling of Joseph, A Memorial*, Sewall makes many claims of high importance. Once claim being, “It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life” (Sewall 324). Sewall also goes onto to claim, “Yet through the Indulgence of GOD to our First Parents after the Fall, the outward Estate of all and every of their Children, remains the same, as to one another. So that Originally, and Naturally, there is no such thing as Slavery” (324). Sewall is claiming in those two passages
that men of any race are created and born equal, and have complete and total equal rights. Since all men are sons of Adam, all men are of the same value. Sewall even goes onto say “There is no such thing as Slavery” (324) which was a really bold and brave thing to say during this time. Sewall had a lot to risk by making such claims, such as his reputation, but it is extremely significant and important that he did make these claims. Someone is actually arguing for these African American individuals that unfortunately did not have the ability to fight for their own rights. Sewall, like Bradstreet, had to be very careful with such claims. Sewall had to mask his statements by arguing that although Africans deserve freedom and slavery is wrong, that Africans are certainly not equal to white men and will never be. Regardless of the masking and covering up of his claims, the statements Sewall did make addressing the wrongful acts of slavery were a huge step in the right direction.

Sewall does a great job of explaining why slavery should no longer be allowed with biblical references, but that isn’t the only important thing he does during his writings. In *The Selling of Joseph, A Memorial*, he makes another important statement. “ ‘Tis pity there should be more Caution used in buying a Horse, or a little lifeless dust; than there is in purchasing Men and Women: Whenas they are the Offspring of God”(Sewall 324). Here Sewall is stating that it’s a shame that people pay more attention when they buy animals, or even just something of such little value like dust, than they do when buying human beings. While making that statement we are also being reminded the people being purchased are the sons of God and ought to have equal rights. Sewall is claiming it is important that people need to recognize and begin to acknowledge the fact that owning people as if they are property is wrong, whether they are African American or not, because all people are equal. Sewall is making a very bold claim, which few have ever made. Sewall’s claims are significant, because like Bradstreet, he is not only fighting for people
who have been deprived certain rights, but because he makes a claim that could eventually lead to the ending of slavery, the ending of something horrible, all while putting himself at risk.

Samuel Sewall and Anne Bradstreet are two very important people in today’s society. Both of them were brave enough to write about real issues, something that not many people had successfully done during this time period. If it weren’t for Bradstreet, who knows where we would be with women rights today. Women could possible still be viewed as submissive to men, and might not have any rights at all. Bradstreet’s writing are so significant because they allowed for members of society to think about a topic they might not have thought about. Anne Bradstreet set the stage for other female writers to voice their opinions and earn the recognition they deserve. Also, if it weren’t for Sewall African Americans may not have had their rights addressed. Sewall, much like Bradstreet, gave others something to think about, and without him who knows where we would be. Bradstreet and Sewall both took a huge leap and decided to write about topics that could really put their lives in danger. They both had to work really hard to mask their claims and produce hidden statements that would not create issues within the public. This was a very challenging thing to do during this time frame, which is why many writers did not successfully attempt to do so. Both Bradstreet and Sewall deserve a lot of credit as writers because they voiced very serious ideas that others were too afraid to write about and had the potential to create a huge disturbance in society, the idea of human equality.
Works Cited


