

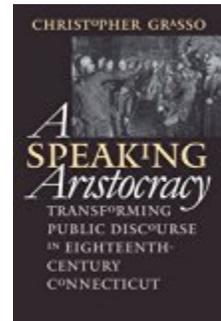
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Grasso. *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. viii + 511 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4772-5; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2471-9.

Reviewed by Gaspare J. Saladino (Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution, University of Wisconsin–Madison)

Published on H-Law (June, 1999)



Connecticut's Speaking Aristocracy: Ministers, Lawyers, Pamphleteers, and Polemicists

In *A Speaking Aristocracy*, Christopher Grasso, associate professor of history at St. Olaf College, demonstrates how the learned men of eighteenth-century Connecticut transformed public discourse and established their authority through dominating the production of formal speech and writing directed to the multitude. Focusing on the intellectual culture of Yale College and the world of public speech, writing, and print, Grasso uses case studies of individual speakers and writers and specific public debates to show 1) how publications and speeches fashioned (and were fashioned in) their cultural and rhetorical contexts; 2) how involvement in public discourse helped to establish the learned man's social function, and 3) how ideas about the moral order changed over time in the face of profound social, economic, and political developments.

"Meaning and Moral Order," Part One of the three parts into which this book falls, covers the years 1700 to 1750. Congregational ministers, seeking to create a moral order, were the primary public speakers and writers, instructing the multitude on religion and politics to support the corporate charter government and established Congregational church. Yale College educated both ministers and political leaders. Thus, state, church, and college cooperated to perpetuate the moral order.

Chapter One examines "The Power of the Public Covenant." In 1708, the legislature adopted the Saybrook Platform, "a state-sanctioned profession of faith

and a state-enforced system of church discipline" (p. 41). In sermons, the mainstay of the colony's few printers, ministers instructed people to obey the magistrates, or else God's wrath would descend upon the community. People listened—without contributing to the conversation. When the Great Awakening's evangelical itinerant preachers weakened this public covenant's power, ministers demanded that the state enforce orthodoxy. In 1742, the legislature enacted an anti-itinerancy law, prompting former minister Elisha Williams to publish *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants* (1744), a plea for separation of church and state. Civil government, argued Williams, was instituted to protect property and individual rights (including liberty of conscience), not to resolve ecclesiastical disorders; because the Saybrook Platform violated English laws, he concluded, it was invalid. By 1750, covenant language was ineffective in legitimating "church-state coercion in the name of the moral order" (p. 67).

Chapter Two, "Only a Great Awakening: Jonathan Edwards and the Regulation of Religious Discourse," focuses on perhaps the greatest mind of the colonial era. Reacting to the Awakening's upheaval, Reverend Edwards attempted to make the Congregational church purer. Edwards believed and argued that Puritan moral order could be revived by controlling the terms of public religion; in his vision, ministers would fix the meanings of words used in religious public discourse. Unhappy with church membership's lax standards, Edwards

wanted to limit membership by having pastors instruct parishioners about the meaning of terms used in their professions of faith before accepting them as “God’s People.” In response, critics denounced Edwards as a tyrant.

Chapter Three, “Legalism and Orthodoxy: Thomas Clap and the Transformation of Legal Culture,” concentrates on the leader of a vital Connecticut institution. Reverend Clap, the president of Yale College (1740-1766), believed that “a harmonious moral order had to be grounded in orthodox belief, and orthodoxy had to be defended by the law” (p. 148). An admirer of New England’s Puritan founders, Clap sought to maintain and transmit to posterity “the purity of doctrine, discipline, and worship” (p. 178). Central to Clap’s purpose, Yale (“a school of prophets”) would propagate the faith and instruct ministers. At a time when the legal profession and the power of legal discourse were both growing rapidly, Clap educated himself in criminal, common, and ecclesiastical law. He encouraged the legislature to adopt laws ensuring religious orthodoxy—and, using the law, he strove to establish Yale as a religious society, imposing on it orthodoxy and harsh discipline. Defending their natural rights of conscience, Yale students petitioned the legislature for redress. In 1763, arguing against the colony’s best lawyers in the legislature, Clap used a common-law defense to protect Yale’s rights and powers against both legislative intrusion and the students’ right of redress. He carried the day, but his victory was Pyrrhic; increasing student disruptions forced his resignation. Clap’s insistence on Yale’s religious character had prompted his opponents to emphasize the college’s other roles—especially training prospective lawyers. In fighting Clap, students had used the courts, legal language, and republican political theory. Consequently, “public discourse’s center of gravity began to shift from sermons and sola scriptura to a republic of letters dominated by learned lawyers” (p. 184).

Parts Two and Three of *A Speaking Aristocracy* cover the years from 1750 to 1800. Several groups, especially lawyers, challenged ministers’ hegemony as the speaking aristocracy, and public discourse became more secularized. This transformation flowed from the Awakening’s evangelical preaching, the Enlightenment’s literary sensibility and enlightened science, the American Revolution’s republican ideology and legal reasoning, the popular press’s spectacular growth, and ideas of liberal capitalism associated with economic expansion. Ministers still linked religion and politics, but the multitude increasingly heeded other voices, some from their own ranks. Politics became the rage. More than ever, the

speaking aristocracy appealed to the emotions. A burgeoning print culture turned the multitude into an informed citizenry; books, newspapers, broadsides, and pamphlets covering a myriad of topics proliferated.

Part Two, “Cultivation and Enlightenment,” focuses on how the explosion of knowledge reshaped the community and ways in which learned men disseminated knowledge. For example, Chapter Four, “The Experimental Philosophy of Farming: Jared Eliot and the Cultivation of Connecticut,” examines a learned Congregational minister’s venture into a different field of inquiry. Eliot hoped that his published essays on experimental agriculture, by promoting economic prosperity and moral regeneration, would establish “a single moral and economic order” (p. 191). Agricultural communities, especially New England’s nucleated villages and middling family farms, would be linked through cooperation. To create a dialogue across class lines, Eliot used a plain, conversational writing style, laced with Biblical allusions and homely proverbs. Blending classical republicanism and liberal capitalism, he encouraged common and gentleman farmers to cooperate with one another and work for themselves and the community. Eliot’s inexpensive publications were circulated by America’s greatest printer, Benjamin Franklin. Eliot also promoted cooperation between the colonies and Britain, but his accommodating approach to the mother country put him out of step with most Americans, who in the 1760s resisted what they deemed British tyranny.

In Chapter Five, “Christian Knowledge and Revolutionary New England: The Education of Ezra Stiles,” Grasso considers one of Eliot’s colleagues. In 1765 Stiles, a Congregational minister and former Christian philosophe, became an evangelical Puritan, as he recoiled from the turmoil of the Stamp Act Crisis. A student of New England history proud of his region’s English heritage, Stiles saw its settlement as a stage of the story of the struggle for religious and civil liberty. Seeing the Stamp Act as the beginning of the end of Anglo-American cooperation, Stiles preached that the act’s repeal was an example of God’s mercy. During the Revolution, he argued that Americans should rely on God, who would guide them to independence. Shaken by the Revolution’s disruptive forces, Stiles believed that churches needed revitalization; Americans were a free people, he thought, but not yet a holy people. Yale’s president from 1778 to 1795, Stiles thought that Yale’s primary role was to educate ministers who, as zealous Calvinist preachers, would work for church revitalization, spreading Christianity’s eternal truths. From state-supported churches,

ministers also would educate all social classes about politics. Education, Stiles taught, was critical to America's rising glory; ministers and religious officeholders ("The Standing Order") would shape the public mind. Because he wanted officeholders to be religious men, Stiles attacked officeholding deists (many of them lawyers) during and after the Revolution.

Part Three, "Revolution and Steady Habits," examines the relationships among publication, politics, religion, and literature. In Chapter Six, "Print, Poetry, and Politics: John Trumbull and the Transformation of the Public Sphere," Grasso uses lawyer Trumbull's literary career (1770-1782) to illustrate the changes that occurred in public writing, focusing on how Trumbull, a poet-satirist, adapted and commented on four overlapping and competing models of discourse: 1) In the "social world of polite letters," Trumbull believed that conversation and writing among ladies and gentlemen cultivated genteel sociability and refined their tastes for literature, though he also tried to balance aristocratic politeness with civic virtue; 2) in "building a civic forum in the Connecticut press," Trumbull sought to develop newspapers as "a republican civic forum," reaching all classes and unifying the community (his anonymous contributions attacked ministers as lazy, pedantic, incompetent, and intolerant); 3) in "satirizing the community of speakers," Trumbull lampooned speech in his notable *M'Fingal: A Modern Epic Poem* (Writing anonymously, Trumbull ridiculed town-meeting speeches as the work of demagogues; town meetings were not truly democratic. He also satirized religious enthusiasts and prophets who preyed on people's fears and superstitions); 4) in "competing in the literary marketplace," a mundane Trumbull anticipated the literary marketplace and campaigned for copyright protection for authors, whose writings were their property.

In Chapter Seven, "Reawakening the Public Mind: Timothy Dwight and the Rhetoric of New England," Grasso turns back to another Congregational minister who also was a prolific epic poet. In seeking to create a moral order, Dwight, who succeeded Stiles as president of Yale College (1795-1817), emphasized the myth of America as the site of God's millennial kingdom and the superiority of New England's churches, schools, villages, and middling farms. Because New England society was the clergy's creation and because the Protestant church was the principal corporation in God's moral government, Dwight gave the clergy the primary role in establishing the moral order. Representing state-supported churches, a Yale-educated clergy—steeped in the Holy Bible, Augustan literature, and republican theory—would

enlighten people whose happiness was based on being virtuous and accumulating knowledge. Calling for a millennial Christian republic, Dwight made Christian public virtue—the love of doing good—the central issue of public discourse. Dwight did not use newspapers because, by encouraging public debate, they validated differing opinions. Dwight praised the sovereign multitude, but he demanded that it defer to "The Standing Order," which included the majority Federalist Party. Connecticut's Democratic-Republicans assailed "Pope" Dwight as part of their challenge to the hated church-state alliance.

In Chapter Eight, "Political Characters and Public Words," Grasso assesses the relationships among language, character, and public life. In the 1780s and 1790s, politics dominated the public mind, and public discourse, "more than ever before, became wedded to the exercise of political and cultural power" (p. 284). As the opportunities and forums for speaking and publishing multiplied, the speaking aristocracy expanded to encompass lawyer-orators, pamphleteers, and other polemicists who spoke and wrote about party politics and political theory. At Yale, an altered curriculum and student organizations cultivated rhetorical arts to improve students' chances of enhancing their reputations following graduation. The "school of prophets" became "a school of orators and politicians." Although the learned elite still dominated public discourse, the common man spoke out more, especially in newspapers. Once considered vehicles to enlighten and inform a rational citizenry, newspapers became partial and partisan vehicles, in which words became weapons used to censure political opponents. When, as during the Revolution, the aggrieved common man resorted for redress to town meetings, special conventions, and committees of correspondence, "The Standing Order" declared that, since the Revolution was over, freemen again should defer to the governance of benign magistrates. Lawyers controlled politics, but hostility to them grew, making them the *betes noires* of Connecticut politics. Since lawyers displaced clergymen as the state's principal leaders, tension developed between the two groups. Lawyers were described as competitive, selfish, devious, and intriguing villains who used their eloquence and learning to exploit people. Clergymen were labeled essentially irrelevant, intellectually pretentious, and excessively somber.

In his conclusion, "The New Politics of Revolution and Steady Habits," Grasso shows that by the 1790s, Connecticut, although still strongly linked to its Puritan past, had undergone significant changes. Competing religious denominations had multiplied; the state's

economy had been integrated into the national and international economies; and people defined themselves ideologically as either Federalists or Republicans. Bitter partisan politics dominated conversation and print. Spearheaded by Dwight, Federalists criticized the democratic and secular changes wrought by the Revolution and infidel philosophers and called for a return to the laws, institutions, customs, and faith of the Puritan fathers. Federalists dismissed Republicans as sinful, vulgar, and drunken Jacobins. Led by lawyer Abraham Bishop, Republicans accused Federalists of using their learning and control of speech and print to manipulate and fool the multitude. Seeking widespread political participation, Republicans reached people in taverns and coffee houses and by traveling about distributing campaign literature. Although Republican leaders criticized Federalist leaders, they also were learned men, and they too stifled public discourse when the multitude grew skeptical or recalcitrant.

Connecticut Federalists retained power in 1800, but Thomas Jefferson's election as President demonstrated that public discourse was forever altered. Citizens now conceived of "public discourse not just as the speech and writing of learned elites to the people but the expression of the opinions and desires of the people through representative voices chosen from among them" (p. 282). But, if Connecticut was no longer a "Puritan aristocracy," it was not yet a "Yankee democracy."

Even though *A Speaking Aristocracy* is intellectual history first and foremost, Grasso's putting of ideas in historical context has produced one of the best all-round studies of eighteenth-century Connecticut. Some quibbles come to mind, however. First, the book lacks a bibliography, which is unfortunate as Grasso mines an array of manuscript and printed primary sources—sermons, essays, speeches, letters, journals, newspaper articles, and poems. His familiarity with many of the 3,500 Connecticut imprints is staggering. The lack of a bibliography is ameliorated, however, an appendix of election sermons (1710-1800) and numerous historiographical footnotes on the vast secondary literature. A note on the literature of the Awakening, too long for a footnote, appears as another appendix.

For the most part, the first five chapters—largely traversing the colonial period—are understandably case studies of the writings and speeches of Congregational ministers. Even so, case studies of such prominent lawyers as Jared Ingersoll and William Samuel Johnson (both of whom argued against Clap in the Connecticut

legislature in 1763) might have provided some more balance. To have chosen only Clap, a minister, and Elisha Williams, a former minister, is hardly fair to lawyers, even though they both were learned in the law, reflecting the growing importance of legal discourse.

Although Chapter Six is a superb case study of John Trumbull, a literary man who became a lawyer during his most productive literary years, Grasso does not sufficiently engage how Trumbull's legal training influenced his writings. When in 1782 Trumbull expanded *M'Fingal*, what had been Revolutionary propaganda emerged as conservative American literature, in which Trumbull, who in 1780 launched a full-time law practice, denounced weak government, paper money, and vulgar democracy. Was the lawyer speaking? Nor do the remaining chapters use case studies of lawyers, except Abraham Bishop, who practiced little law. Yet, by 1800, lawyer-orators were the senior partners of the speaking aristocracy.

In Chapter Eight, Grasso asserts that the United States Constitution was the most important issue submitted to the people after 1787, but, because no significant debate on it occurred in Connecticut, he dismisses its ratification in a paragraph. Perhaps he should have examined the rhetorical strategies of the advocates of a strong national government, before and during the Constitution's drafting and during its ratification. In particular, it would have been illuminating to have turned a spotlight on Oliver Ellsworth and Roger Sherman. A lawyer educated at Yale and Princeton, Ellsworth rose to political prominence as a young man after the Revolution, in defiance of Connecticut's system of political seniority. Ellsworth was a delegate to the Federal Convention of 1787; he published thirteen newspaper essays (signed "A Landholder") supporting the Constitution; and he was the dominant speaker in Connecticut's ratifying convention. Moreover, his essays and speeches circulated widely. Self-educated, a former shoemaker and a delegate to the Federal Convention, the redoubtable Sherman also defended the Constitution in newspaper articles (signed "A Countryman" and "A Citizen of New Haven") and also spoke in the state's ratifying convention. Sherman's long and varied political career exemplified the manner in which Connecticut's system of political seniority operated.

Finally, in his conclusion's last paragraph, Grasso raises a series of questions, such as this one: "Is the transformation of public discourse in eighteenth-century New England a story about democratization or the reconstitution of patriarchal hegemony?" He calls upon readers

to answer this and other questions themselves, stating in conclusion that “The moral and political judgment we pass upon the eighteenth century ... may ultimately have less to do with that century than with our own.” This statement rings true, but one wishes that Grasso, a most thoughtful historian, had provided his own judgments in light of his prodigious effort. Nevertheless, Grasso’s readers will be convinced (as he probably is) that life in

Connecticut in 1800 was fuller and more varied than it had been in 1700. Similarly, readers of this engrossing, superlative, and stylishly written study will be definitely the richer for having perused it.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: Gaspare J. Saladino. Review of Grasso, Christopher, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3181>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.