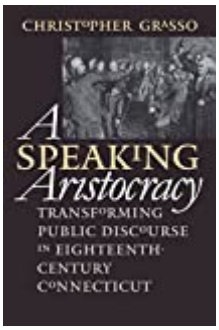
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christopher Grasso. *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. vii + 511 pp.

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 Stephen R. Grossbart (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-SHEAR (February, 2000)

In the years immediately following the American Revolution, Christopher Grasso detects a dramatic transformation in Connecticut. Public discourse, which had been dominated by learned clergy in the colonial era, became rapidly dominated by others who claimed the right to speak. In describing the role of the clergy in the seventeenth-century, one Connecticut minister saw this group of men as "a speaking *Aristocracy* in the face of a silent *Democracy*" (p. 1). After the American Revolution, that democracy was no longer silent. "Speakers, institutions, and rhetorical occasions multiplied" rapidly in what Christopher Grasso describes as a "scramble for membership in the post-Revolutionary speaking aristocracy" (p. 394).

As Grasso writes, "In the first half of the century, assumptions about social legitimacy, personal authority, and religious calling regulated who could speak or write to a general audience and anticipate its attention and respect" (p. 2). In the hierarchical society that marked colonial British America, this speaking elite functioned as an aristocracy. Their dominance of public discourse began to transform in the 1740s as the series of religious revivals known as the Great Awakening undermined the legitimacy of the clergy.

The pace at which these new voices emerged quickened in the post-Awakening decades. "After midcentury . . . newspapers, essays, and eventually lay orations began to compete with sermons for public attention, introducing new rhetorical strategies to persuade and instruct an audience. . . . Lawyers challenged the clergy's dominance in intellectual life. Learned men with the Enlightenment's faith in progress and practical knowledge encouraged a scientific attitude. Writers in the Revolutionary era cultivated literary sensibility by publishing satirical verse and epic poetry" (p. 4). What was once a tightly defined aristocracy of public speakers was now far more fluid. Who could speak in public? This question became harder to answer. By the end of the eighteenth century, it is clear that many voices and writers assumed this right. Grasso tends to focus on a narrow group of Yale trained intellectuals who, though more broadly self-defined in the 1780s and 1790s than had been the case in the early 1740s, nonetheless still conceived of themselves as a "speaking aristocracy."

Certainly, Grasso is in step with a number of cultural and intellectual historians who view the Revolution as a transforming event. In this sense, Grasso's analysis supports Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), who sees a significant shift from an aristocratic and monarchical colonial society to a bourgeois democratic one by the early nineteenth century. But Grasso does not fully argue that the transition of post-Revolutionary Connecticut society went as far as Wood contends. This is striking since the most important theoretical work that Grasso cites in Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1963, 1991). While Habermas examines the growth of bourgeois literary and political self-consciousness, Grasso never argues that the events he studies in post-Revolutionary Connecticut represent the development of a self-conscious bourgeoisie. Instead, Grasso does an exquisite job presenting evidence on how Connecticut's post-Revolutionary gentry used public discourse to fashion themselves as a natural aristocracy most fit to rule in the new Republic. But in doing so, he opts to neglect the eclipse of the gentry by a middle class that had embraced America's democratic revolution.

Grasso's provides a refreshing analysis of the transformation of Connecticut society by using the lives of six impressive literary figures – Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Clap, Jared Eliot, Ezra Stiles, John Trumbull, and Timothy Dwight – to illustrate how public discourse and writing changed.

Jonathan Edwards becomes the vehicle for understanding the Great Awakening's impact on discourse. The Awakening itself was marked by rhetorical flurries. First, George Whitfield's dramatic revival preaching and writings electrified Protestants on both sides of the Atlantic. Whitfield was mimicked by scores of other evangelists, most notably James Davenport and Gilbert Tennent. In Connecticut, this was quickly followed by sharp ideological divisions between Old Lights and New Light revivalists that in turn generated large bodies of "polemical sermons, treatises, and testimonies" from both sides of the ecclesiastical fence. Finally, the Awakening led to "institutional formation and reformation" that included anti-revival legislation and illegal church separations (p. 87).

In reviewing the revival itself, and the ideological divisions it spawned, Grasso shows how Jonathan Edwards attempted to "regulate public religious discourse" in the aftermath of the Great Awakening (p. 88). Edwards's attempts, however, proved unsuccessful as New England in general, and Connecticut in particular, turned to repressive legislation in the face of church schism and separation. Writing in the 1740s and 1750s, Edwards's attempt at regulating public religious discourse entailed "control [over] the meaning of signs *in* a community and to redefine the language *of* Christian community." Regulation for Edwards meant that the "minister, not the parishioners, set the terms of debate (p. 110)." This included the important question of how the church membership would be defined. In his rhetorical thrusts, Edwards staked out the middle ground between Old Lights and Separate-Baptist New Lights, laying the foundation for the conservative New Divinity theology that would dominate Congregational theological discourse (and little else) within the religious establishment during the Revolutionary era. Edwards (and the New Divinity's) approach to control discourse and definitions of key points of debate, "fueled" rather than ended "antagonisms between laity and clergy" (p. 143).

His chapter on Yale President Thomas Clap addresses the growth of legal rhetoric. Clap, an Old turned New Light Calvinist, adopted legalist language to defend Yale's special privileges. Though an ordained minister, Clap's arguments in the face of a concerted Old Light efforts to strip Yale of its privileges "signaled the growing power of legal discourse," as the "law became more formal and technical" between 1740 and 1763 (p. 146). Clap, thus signaled the "the growing rhetorical power of lawyerly language" (p. 145). His rhetoric represents the passing of the intellectual "baton" from the clergy to the legal profession (p. 147). His defense of Yale was in response to Old Light attacks on the institution, but Grasso notes with irony that the number of graduates who went on to become ordained Congregational ministers declined under Clap's presidency. Though, the law had not yet become the dominant profession for Yale graduates the movement in that direction was clear. Clap, motivated first by his attempt to curb the excesses of the Awakening, then to protect Yale from Old Light attacks on his authority, ultimately paved the way for "a period of new enthusiasms for politics and law" (p. 184).

Jared Elliot, a physician and clergyman, wrote extensively about agricultural practices in the late 1740s and 1750s. Elliot's writings, which attempted to "produce and disseminate practical knowledge" represent "the social, intellectual, and ideological transformations that redefined mid-eighteenth-century America" (p. 191). Elliot's work introduced the drill plow to New England farmers. Though not widely adopted until the nineteenth century,

Elliot attempted to reach a wide audience–essentially the "readers of almanacs," which were essentially "farmer's handbooks" (p. 209). This chapter, which will certainly appeal to agricultural historians, argues that Elliot and other writers who focused on scientific and practical knowledge foreshadowed "the shifting relationship between learned writers and the audiences they addressed . . . when the authoritative ministerial voice was challenged by plain speakers exploring new genres" (p. 228).

One of the most fascinating men in eighteenth-century New England had to be Ezra Stiles. In his chapter on this Yale President, Grasso provides an important supplement to Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (New Haven, 1962). Stiles, the son of a New Haven Old Light, gained the reputation for promoting "harmony" among Congregational ministers torn apart by the Great Awakening. After settling in Newport, and having flirted with the thought of becoming an Anglican, this Old Light moderate preached at the installation of the New Divinity theologian Samuel Hopkins. Stiles is, for Grasso, "a case study of the webs of ideas and cultural styles know as 'Puritanism' and the 'Enlightenment' " (pp. 231, 233). Stiles focused his early life and writing on his attempt "to mediate between what polemicists of his day set up as dichotomies: Arminianism versus Calvinism, intellect versus the affections, and deism versus scriptural faith" (p. 234). Stiles worked hard to discount the extreme positions in the theological debate between Old and New Lights. Having flirted with both deism and Arminianism after the Great Awakening, Stiles returned to the Puritan faith he had been raised into.

His battle with deism, both personal and public, increasingly shaped Stiles's preaching after 1765. So did the colonists' struggle with Britain. Stiles's preaching style became increasingly evangelical, using outlines rather than written texts while speaking from the pulpit. He, thus, adopted a rhetoric that Grasso characterizes as "Puritan (not New Light) evangelicalism" (p. 247). This shift coincided with Stiles's embrace of the patriot cause in 1765 and his growing belief that Anglicanism posed a threat to American religion.

After the war began, Stiles was forced to leave British-occupied Newport and accepted the Yale presidency in 1777. At Yale, Stiles became involved in "struggles to realign church and state, to redefine the power of clergymen and 'civilians' over higher education, and to recast the relationship between religious and political life in the young Republic" (p. 264). Stiles used Yale to promote his belief that "a scholarly elite needed to do useful work and help promote practical knowledge and social progress . . . while keeping more speculative matters to itself. Yet, Stiles came to understand that the enlightened republic of letters could not broaden to become the public sphere of the American Republic without institutional safeguards protecting religious orthodoxy and church tradition." Stiles used his position at Yale to promote "state support of the church and clerical control of higher education" to "ensure that learned and Christian [read Congregational] men would continue to guide the public toward wisdom." This philosophy would be Stiles's legacy. Grasso, while acknowledging that the theological traditions of the Congregational "Second Great Awakening" were tied to the Edwardsean New Divinity men, owed its "sober revivalism and social control" as much to Stiles as to the New Divinity (p. 277). Few other historians have credited the Yale president with this role.

Grasso examines the literary life of the poet John Trumbull, and yet another Yale President, Timothy Dwight, to understand the Revolutionary era. Trumbull, most famous for his patriotic poem *M'Fingal* (1776, 1782) is representative of "the rise of the local press and the development of a new Connecticut literary culture" (p. 282). Dwight, on the other hand, provides for Grasso answers to "the place of the learned man in the new Republic, the relationship between religion, politics, literature, and intellectual life" (p. 283).

Trumbull wrote at a time when Connecticut's public sphere evolved rapidly. Three important transformations are represented in Trumbull's literary life. First, his famous *M'Fingal* poem – a dispute between Whig and Tory set in a New England town meeting –satirized the "traditional conceptions of face-to-face communication." His series of "Correspondent" essays in the late 1760s promoted the "ideals of republican print" and helped "establish a civic forum in the local press." Finally, Trumbull worked actively to create copyright laws and helped lay the foundation for "the liberal literary marketplace" of post-war Connecticut (p. 323).

Timothy Dwight, much like Jonathan Edwards and Ezra Stiles, believed it was the role of learned and pious men "to instruct the 'public mind.' " But unlike Edwards and Stiles who often found themselves attempting to bridge theological (and political) gaps within Connecticut society, Dwight, as Grasso reluctantly labels him, was "a representative Federalist crank." Dwight hoped "to restore a more coherent moral order" in the face of political assaults from democrats and religious assaults from

Baptist and Methodist dissenters, as well as imagined threats from Deists (pp. 328-329). Dwight invested much of his literary energy into attacking religious toleration and repelling threats of infidelity. Yet unlike his predecessors, Dwight's writings led to vigorous public challenges. Reponses appearing in the local press reflected the new encouragement offered within the public sphere for the "people to answer the speaking aristocracy of clergymen." Dwight seems to be a throwback to a different era when he objected to the "open debate" within the press that "legitimized the existence of diverse opinions" (p. 340). On the one hand, Grasso demonstrates how this prominent Federalist speaker attempted to cling to old notions about deference and hierarchy. But in the aftermath of a democratic revolution, it is hard to view the speaking aristocracy's attempts to retain its dominant voice as anything but futile. His political opponents held out Dwight for ridicule and criticism.

Many of Dwight's religious-political views became clear during the heated debates over toleration during the 1790s in Connecticut. In 1793, when religious dissenters and liberal rationalists challenged recent legislation that called for appropriating proceeds from western land sales to support clerical salaries, Dwight rose to defend the state supported church. Over a two-year period, Connecticut's press aired numerous essays on both sides of the issue. When it appeared that supporters of religious toleration would not only succeed at repealing the legislation, but also drive several of the established church's staunchest supporters from high office, Dwight published a three-piece essay defending his political allies and the parish preacher from anti-clerical assaults. He focused much of his attack on the "morally lax 'enemies of Christianity' " whom he believed were the driving force behind the attack on Connecticut's established ministers (p. 348). Grasso is probably correct that Dwight believed he could appeal to religious dissenters and drive a wedge between the Baptists and the state's anticlerical liberals – Deists and Masons– all of whom opposed the Appropriation Act. Yet Dwight's political tack instead drew some of those anticlerical liberals back into the Federalist mainstream while failing to unite the state's New Lights.

Grasso, though correctly noting that Dwight became convinced that the real threat to the establishment came "with infidelity [rather] than with radical pietism" (p. 350), gives Dwight's own warped sense of reality too much weight in evaluating political conflict in the 1790s. A careful analysis of the political developments of this period reveals a far more pronounced political role for dissenters. One has to wonder why men like Dwight did not recognize the threat from the rapidly growing Baptist and Methodist denominations? Here Grasso seems as elitist as Dwight himself: "Libertine legislators and Yale students duped by Denis Diderot were more dangerous than backwoods farmers who weeped with semiliterate itinerant Methodists." For Grasso the exciting (and literate) group was "a new breed of learned men." They were "infiltrating Connecticut's natural aristocracy, and their hands were reaching for the levers of power" (p. 350). While Grasso finds this group of Yale graduates intellectually intriguing, Dwight was horrified by their rhetoric.

We can attribute Dwight's failure to perceive the greater threat from religious dissenters to the fact that he was a "crank." Surely, Dwight could have noticed the increasingly large number of Baptists arriving to vote at the semi-annual election day meeting, or the growing number of dissenters elected to the legislature who never voted on his side. But why does Grasso largely sidestep key work that demonstrates the importance of religious dissent in post-Revolutionary America? For Grasso's argument to stand, he really needs to deal more fully with such works as Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989) and Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

Religious dissenters in Connecticut, and throughout the nation, would play an essential role in forging a strong and viable Republican Party. Grasso, I believe, misreads Dwight's opposition when he argues that "anticlerical liberals were more vocal and politically engaged; they not Baptists and Methodists, were the most vigorous spokesmen" against the Appropriation Act. Here Grasso's reliance on literary sources undermines his interpretation. The newspapers did not identify the religious affiliations of those opposed to the act. Nor did the papers give a running tally of the proportion of Baptists, Methodists, or Episcopalians who voted Republican. Only by digging into church and association records, could Grasso learn that many of the men he cites as attacking Dwight's views were religious dissenters–not "anticlerical liberals." Baptists and Separates, such as Elisha Hyde, Moses Cleaveland, and Elisha Paine were key actors in the attack on the clergy. Another group Grasso neglects is Episcopalians. Ephraim Kirby was one of the most outspoken and published opponents of the clergy, and his religious views certainly help explain his political positions. Another key (and often overlapping) group is members of the Mason Order. The importance

of Masons (many who were also either Baptist or Episcopalian), in attacking the Appropriation Act, may also explain Dwight's insane attack on the Bavarian Illuminati. Grasso would have benefited in this discussion of Connecticut politics by citing a few neglected works including James R. Beasley, "Emerging Republicanism and the Standing Order: The Appropriation Act Controversy in Connecticut, 1793-1795," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 29 (Oct. 1972), 587-610 and Dorothy Ann Lipson, *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut* (Princeton, 1977).

Maybe Dwight's greatest significance lies in how his writing represented the Federalist belief that they were a natural aristocracy privileged to rule and lead the republic of Connecticut. Dwight's writings emphasized the need "for a republic of Christian virtue" (p. 357). During the 1790s, Dwight's attempt to move political "debate away from constitution making and back toward a Christian public virtue was also an attempt to reclaim control over the public agenda, to recast political arguments as social and moral problems and give ministers rather than magistrates the stronger voice" (p. 358). By tying this development in Dwight's writings to political events, Grasso has uncovered a significant trend in late eighteenth-century Federalist politics. The clergy's defeat over the Appropriation Act can be attributed to a temporary anticlerical political coalition. Opponents of the Appropriation Act included Masons and Episcopalians who would split between the Federalist and Republican parties during the Quasi-War with France. Dwight's efforts may have driven anticlerical Federalists away from their more radical Republican counterparts. Prominent anticlerical Federalists included men such as Zephaniah Swift, David Daggett, Joshua Coit, and Jonathan Ingersoll, but after 1797 they would not openly challenge the religious Standing Order. (Only Ingersoll, an Episcopalian, would break with the Federalists as the party began to collapse upon itself after the War of 1812.) The anticlerical coalition also included religious dissenters, Episcopalians, and Masons who would unite to form the state's Republican Party. This group included such men as Kirby, Pierpont Edwards, Asa Spalding, and Gideon Granger. As divisions over foreign policy issues hardened, few pro-toleration Federalists were willing to speak out against Dwight on social issues. Preserving power from the threat posed by Republicans was too great for Federalists to venture into this arena again. In Connecticut, and elsewhere, as both Lipson and Steven C. Bullock *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill, 1996), demonstrate, Masons became far more constrained in their political behavior. In Connecticut, the pro-toleration wing of the Federalist Party quieted down and let men like Dwight lead on social-religious issues. Their own attempts to define themselves a natural aristocracy were merged with those efforts by the established clergy.

Grasso's last chapter departs from the biographical focus of the book's preceding six chapters and provides, in broad strokes, a picture of Connecticut political life in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. This chapter is by far the book's strongest, but it also suggests some fundamental weaknesses in Grasso's approach. Entitled "Political Characters and Public Words," the chapter might have been better titled, "Democracy shouting down the Aristocracy." After six orderly chapters outlining how the speaking aristocracy defined and defended itself, Grasso's final chapter presents a cacophony of competing voices.

Having read Grasso's dissertation, draft versions of three book chapters a few years back, and now, in reviewing the book for H-SHEAR, I still do not fully comprehend Grasso's strategy in constructing this key chapter and his brief conclusion. He writes that in post-Revolutionary Connecticut, Yale students "sensed that professional achievement and public reputation would now more than ever before depend upon mastery of the arts of oral persuasion. In the scramble for membership in the post-Revolutionary speaking aristocracy, speakers, institutions, and rhetorical occasions multiplied. Yet, the enthusiasm for rhetoric was related to more than personal ambition. Speeches, proclamations, and addresses were rooted in institutions–colleges, churches, the legislature, town governments, the courts, the militia, voluntary societies–and were given on ritualized occasions that conveyed social meanings far beyond the speaker's or writer's particular message to his audience" (p. 394). The words in this passage–ones that I suspect will be the book's most frequently quoted–sum up why Grasso's work is so important for understanding the transforming effects of the Revolution. The multiplication of rhetorical occasions was driven by and helped drive the revolutionary transformation of American society. Yet the chapter represents less the continued dominance of the speaking aristocracy, than the transformation of the public sphere that had now led to the creation of a self-conscious bourgeoisie. Many of the men Grasso cites, in particular Abraham Bishop, do not represent an aristocracy, as he seems to argue, but the emerging middle-class culture that would grow to dominate Connecticut politics by the second decade of the nineteenth century. (For a dif-

ferent interpretation of post-Revolutionary Connecticut politics and Abraham Bishop, see David Waldstreicher and Stephen R. Grossbart, "Abraham Bishop's Vocation; or, The Mediation of Jeffersonian Politics," *Journal of the Early Republic* (Winter 1998), 617-657.)

Grasso examines the multiplication of rhetorical occasions by focusing on new schools for rhetoric, and public societies such as Yale's Phi Beta Kappa and the Linonia Society that appeared in post-Revolutionary Connecticut. But the increase in occasions for public speaking also affected rhetoric and writing in ways that the speaking aristocracy could not have approved. Here I am confused by Grasso's argument. He writes that in the early 1780s, though "theoretically open to all members of the body public, in practice formal public discourse in Connecticut after the Revolution remained thoroughly dominated by a speaking aristocracy of propertied white men" (p. 415). Yet, Grasso cites numerous examples of the post-Revolutionary speaking democracy. The most studied example is the Painite rhetoric of mechanic Walter Brewster in the early 1790s. Brewster's radical attack on the privileges enjoyed by the state's aristocracy was soon joined by others. "By century's end . . . other common men were beginning to speak out and answer for themselves in print" (p. 418). If so, then why does Grasso keep coming back to Yale-trained voices to understand public discourse? Grasso's study needs to focus more on the growth of a speaking democracy. There was more give and take between Connecticut's gentry and popular speakers and writers than Grasso is willing to concede.

Grasso's conclusion draws a quick comparison between two very different residents of New Haven, Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, and the prominent Republican orator Abraham Bishop, the protege of Edwards's non-religious son Pierpont. Grasso readily recognizes that by the end of the century "a sovereign people had demanded that government heed the public voice. Opposition leaders had their own rhetorical occasions. Political character appeared to be built less on local reputation and deference to long experience than upon speech making and a masterly of legal jargon" (p. 479). But Grasso does not reach the conclusion that Connecticut's speaking aristocracy if not silenced was increasingly irrelevant. Instead, despite the expansion of non-aristocratic voices, Grasso maintains that "in 1800, those able to exploit the power of public discourse were still, for the most part, elite men like Dwight and Bishop" (p. 481)."

Grasso concludes his story with a series of rhetorical questions. He wonders and writes openly about the meaning of his work. Was the transformation of public discourse about "intellectual freedom and democratic revolution" or the reformulation of "patriarchal power"? Was this "a story about democratization or the reconstitution of elite hegemony"? Then he concedes that "the moral and political judgement we pass upon the eighteenth century, however, may ultimately have less to do with that century than with our own" (p. 485).

I do not find Grasso's concluding rhetorical questions gratifying. By conflating the rhetoric of a fading aristocrat like Dwight with a self-conscious democratic spokesman, like Bishop, Grasso leaves this reader just a bit perplexed. The problem is that our aristocratic gentry endured too long for us historians. As David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997) demonstrates, Federalists, especially in New England, were adept at claiming popular occasions–such as Fourth of July celebrations–as their own. And nowhere were they more adept at holding onto power than in Connecticut. Grasso's story is thus about both democratization and elite hegemony. Maybe more clearly, it is about how a democratic revolution changed the public sphere. Grasso's story tells us about one critical part of this transformation. By focusing on Yale-trained writers and orators, he demonstrates how learned men weathered and contributed to this rapidly transforming public sphere.

Grasso's book will stand out for a number of reasons. It is an important contribution to the growing list of studies that examine how culture transformed during a revolutionary age. This book will also stand out as probably the most important study of eighteenth-century Connecticut since the publication of Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967). In a field dominated by simplistic studies that emphasize how different Connecticut was from other states, Grasso has demonstrated how profoundly literary culture, education, religion, and politics, here as elsewhere, were affected by the Revolution.

Citation: Stephen R. Grossbart. Review of Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* and Grasso, Christopher, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3863