



**A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public  
Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut  
(Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early  
American History and Culture, Williamsburg,  
Virginia)**

*Christopher Grasso*

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As cultural authority was reconstituted in the Revolutionary era, knowledge reconceived in the age of Enlightenment, and the means of communication radically altered by the proliferation of print, speakers and writers in eighteenth-century America began to describe themselves and their world in new ways. Drawing on hundreds of sermons, essays, speeches, letters, journals, plays, poems, and newspaper articles, Christopher Grasso explores how intellectuals, preachers, and polemicists transformed both the forms and the substance of public discussion in eighteenth-century Connecticut.

In New England through the first half of the century, only learned clergymen regularly addressed the public. After midcentury, however, newspapers, essays, and eventually lay orations introduced new rhetorical strategies to persuade or instruct an audience. With the rise of a print culture in the early Republic, the intellectual elite had to compete with other voices and address multiple audiences. By the end of the century, concludes Grasso, public discourse came to be understood not as the words of an authoritative few *to* the people but rather as a civic conversation *of* the people.

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