

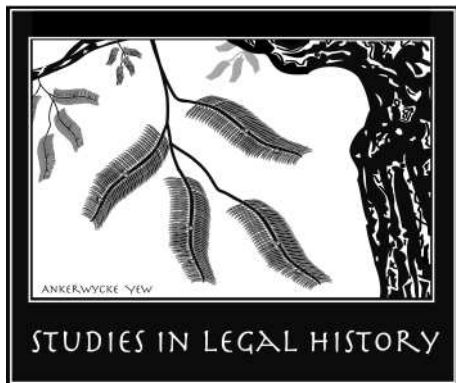
Cambridge University Press
978-1-009-09890-8 — The Dreadful Word
Speech Crime and Polite Gentlemen in Massachusetts, 1690–1776
Kristin A. Olbertson
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The Dreadful Word

This book, the first comprehensive study of criminal speech in eighteenth-century New England, traces how the criminalization, prosecution, and punishment of speech offenses in Massachusetts helped to establish and legitimate a social and cultural regime of politeness. Analyzing provincial statutes and hundreds of criminal prosecutions, Kristin A. Olbertson argues that colonists transformed their understanding of speech offenses, from fundamentally ungodly to primarily impolite. As white male gentility emerged as the pre-eminent model of authority, records of criminal prosecution and punishment show a distinct cadre of politely pious men defining themselves largely in contrast to the vulgar, the impious, and the unmanly. “Law,” as manifested in statutes as well as in local courts and communities, promoted and legitimized a particular, polite vision of the king’s peace and helped effectuate the British Empire. In this unique and fascinating work, Olbertson reveals how ordinary people interacted with and shaped legal institutions.

Kristin A. Olbertson is Associate Professor in the Department of History at Alma College. She was previously a fellow at the Hurst Summer Institute.

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*To Sharon Hull Olbertson,
who also has seen the other side of the mountain*

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Acknowledgments

This book has been part of my life, in one way or another, for many years. One of the best aspects of finally publishing it is the opportunity to express my appreciation for all the friends, colleagues, and connections that were instrumental to the researching and writing process. It was born at the University of Michigan, where the Dual Degree Program in Law and History offered unique opportunities for interdisciplinary study. At the Law School, coursework with Don Herzog, Bill Miller, and Catharine MacKinnon provided analytic frameworks for thinking about the regulation of speech, about trials and society, and about the construction of gender (respectively) from legal perspectives. At Rackham Graduate School, Sue Juster and Carol Karlsen were superb teachers and mentors for a recovering medievalist venturing into colonial America. Fellow graduate students Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, Ruth Hartman, and Anna Lawrence furnished great insight, encouragement, and levity.

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Conducting the research for this project meant spending so much time with a particular microfilm reader that I began to think of it as my own. It wasn't, of course, but one of several graciously made available for use by the local Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The LDS also shipped many rolls of microfilm from Utah to Michigan, and their local research library staff was endlessly helpful and welcoming. Research also meant time in Boston, where staff at the Harvard Law Library and

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