


# THE LANGUAGE OF DISSENT: THE DEFENSE OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH Dissent in the works and sermons of James Peirce.



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## Date

2011-01-05

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## Abstract

This biographical dissertation argues that the thought of James Peirce (1674-1726), the Presbyterian minister whose controversial theology was the catalyst for the division of Dissent in 1719, must be considered in relation to his hermeneutic of history. For Peirce, history was the telling of truth or events, but an inherently rhetorical recounting, fashioned by the historian to express the "sense" of the "original" in the language necessary to convince the audience. In this way, history proved to be malleable and increasingly corrupted the more it was distanced from the original. Peirce's understanding of the past was linked closely to his identification of the authority and proper explication of Scripture, the integral interpretive role of reason, and the definition of the Dissenting community. In his early career, Peirce applied his theory of history to the classics and the traditions of the Church—both being subject to the sullyng emendations of human invention. Late in his life, however, Peirce was convinced that this same hermeneutic of history was applicable to Scripture, which he previously considered inviolate. Despite the assertions of friends and antagonists, Peirce did not 'convert', but rather he logically followed his earlier commitment to a traditional hermeneutic of history. This thesis asserts that although James Peirce was primarily a polemicist, he was also a Nonconformist historian who posited definitions of Christianity and Dissent which evolved with his changing ideas. In his late works, Peirce proposed a positive definition of Dissent, delineated by its primary emphasis on religious toleration. This study demonstrates that Peirce's *The Western Inquisition* (1720) should be considered the first major history of Nonconformity to define the movement according to religious toleration, thus supplanting Daniel Neal's *The History of the Puritans* (1732-1738) which commonly has been thought to be the first major history to promulgate such a position. Historically employed as either heretic or hero (or something in between), Peirce has defied careful classification. He was a man in transition: a man of his times, a man in philosophical, social, and economic change, and his changing perspectives on truth were integrally tied to his own historical formation.

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English lexicography made outstanding progress in the 18th c. Works concerned primarily with the explanation of "hard words" continued to be brought out in great numbers, e.g. DICTIONARY OF HARD WORDS by E. Coles in 1676. In 1730 Nathaniel Bailey compiled DICTIONARIUM BRITANNICUM, A MORE COMPLETE UNIVERSAL ETYMOLOGICAL ENGLISH DICTIONARY THAN ANY EXTANT, which was a distinct improvement on its predecessors. Bailey's dictionary contained about 48,000 items, which is more than Samuel Johnson included in his famous work. Codification of norms of usage by means of conscious effort on the part of man helped in standardising the language and in fixing its Written and Spoken Standards. Pre-romanticism Another trend in the English literature of the second half of the 18th century was the so-called pre-romanticism. It originated among the conservative groups of men of letters' as a reaction against Enlightenment. The mysterious element plays a great role in the works of pre-romanticists. One of pre-romanticists was William Blake (1757—1827), who in spite of his mysticism, wrote poems full of human feelings and sympathy for the oppressed people. He spoke passionately in defense of the Luddites. He blamed the government for the unbearable conditions of workers' life. In his parliament speech Byron showed himself a staunch champion of the people's cause, and that made the reactionary circles hate him.