

"The 'Pons Asinorum' Again. Mr. Peirce sets forth the History of the Phrase from the Times of Duns Scotus's Followers."

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This is a response to several earlier articles which were critical of Peirce's account of this phrase in the Century Dictionary. Those earlier articles are in the same newspaper at: Friday 19 December 1890, p. 10, c. 2; Tuesday 23 December 1890, p. 16, cc. 5-6; Friday 2 January 1891, p. 5, c. 5.
Fisch, First Supplement.

THE "PONS ASINORUM" AGAIN.

MR. PEIRCE SETS FORTH THE HISTORY OF THE PHRASE FROM THE TIMES OF DUNS SCOTUS'S FOLLOWERS.

To the Editor of The Tribune.

Sir: Euclid not having been taught in this country for two generations, the traditional nomenclature of his propositions has become confused with us. The phrase pons asinorum, as applied to a geometrical theorem, has been generally considered as appertaining to the college dialect of Cambridge, England, where Euclid has been almost deified for 300 years and more. In that university, I understand, there is no doubt the term is uniformly applied to the Fifth Proposition of the First Book of the Elements, that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal. That this proposition affords a criterion of a student's aptitude for geometry has been held, rightly or wrongly, since the thirteenth century, when Roger Bacon so alluded to it. As far as I am aware, every recognized authority, without exception, gives this as the proposition named "pons asinorum." It is true that passages in literature decisive of the point are not easily found; but Mr. B. H. Hall, in his excellent "Collection of College Words and Customs," gives the following:

After Mr. Brown had passed us over the "Asses' Bridge" without serious accident, and conducted us a few steps further into the first book, he dismissed us with many compliments.--Alma Mater, I, 146.

Here the designation is plainly that of a proposition early enough in the book to be passed at the first lesson. Now, Proposition 5 is the first theorem but one (that one being excessively simple), while Proposition 47 is the last but one, and cannot possibly have been intended. I think the consensus of the entire body of lexicographers and other authors will outweigh A. B. C.'s impression that "every college or university man knows" the pons

asinorum is the forty-seventh proposition, as well as W. L. S.'s appeal to eight unnamed authorities of Jersey City. By the way, what is the use of a dictionary, with Jersey City so near. The inappropriateness of making the Forty-seventh, or Pythagorean, proposition, which is one of the most abstruse in Euclid, the test of a boy's being an ass or otherwise, will be remarked by the discriminating reader. The word ass is quite too harsh an appellation even for a boy who does not at once comprehend the fifth proposition. It has accordingly met with some just retorts. Thus, the "Gradus ad Cantabrigiam," after defining the phrase in the usual way, adds: "By an ass is always understood at Cambridge a dull animal who has no taste for that enlivening study, the mathematics." So, the epigram of 1780 given by Murray runs:

If this be rightly called the bridge of asses,
He's not the fool that sticks, but he that passes.

But the true explanation of the phrase is to be sought in its much older application in logic, concerning which the curious may consult Boyle under Buridan, and Rabelais, Book II, chapter xxviii, last paragraph. Almost all terms of mediaeval logic are to be explained by passages of Aristotle. Now Aristotle (I Anal. post. 34) defines sagacity as a certain power of aiming well at middle terms of demonstrations; and this definition we find alleged as justification for assigning to a certain diagram designed to enable the fatuous, stupid and slow to place a middle term between two given extremes the name of pons asinorum. Only Scotist treatises give this diagram; and after the Scotistic teaching had been forbidden in Cambridge by the royal injunctions of 1535, and Euclid had been prescribed as the initiatory study in 1549, the name pons asinorum (the original signification having been forgotten) became transferred to the geometrical theorem. It happens that the figure of the Fifth Proposition has some resemblance to a part of the logical diagram, but whether this really influenced the application of the phrase is mere matter of surmise. It is said that there is a difficulty in making donkeys cross a bridge. This would render the geometrical signification still more apt. The phrase pont aux anes, in French, meaning a difficulty at which we are apt to halt, but which readily yields to a determined effort, accords with this. On the other hand, the German word eselbrücke, if I mistake not, means something to aid the uneducated.

I observe that one of my critics intimates that in my definition in the Century Dictionary I do not mention that the phrase is sometimes applied to the Forty-seventh Proposition. But I do mention this, distinctly.

New-York, Jan. 2, 1890.

C. S. PEIRCE.