CANONS FOR ETYMOLOGY.

The Rev. Walter W. Skeat gives us the following excellent synopsis of this important subject, in his "Etymological Dictionary of the English Language":

"In the course of the work, I have been led to adopt the following canons, which merely express well-known principles, and are nothing new. Still, in the form of definite statements, they are worth giving:

"1. Before attempting an etymology, ascertain the earliest form and use of the word; and observe chronology.

"2. Observe history and geography; borrowings are due to actual contact.

"3. Observe phonetic laws, especially those which regulate the mutual relation of consonants in the various Aryan languages, at the same time comparing the vowel-sounds.

"4. In comparing two words, A and B, belonging to the same language, of which A contains the lesser number of syllables, A must be taken to be the more original word, unless we have evidence of contraction or other corruption.

"5. In comparing two words, A and B, belonging to the same language and consisting of the same number of syllables, the older form can usually be distinguished by observing the sound of the principal vowel.

"6. Strong verbs, in the Teutonic languages, and the so-called 'irregular verbs' in Latin, are commonly to be considered as primary, other related forms being taken from them.

"7. The whole of a word, and not a portion only, ought to be reasonably accounted for; and, in tracing changes of form, any infringement of phonetic laws is to be regarded with suspicion.

"8. Mere resemblances of form and apparent connection in sense between languages which have different phonetic laws or no necessary connection are commonly a delusion, and are not to be regarded.

"9. When words in two different languages are more nearly alike than the ordinary phonetic laws would allow, there is a strong probability that one language has borrowed the word from the other. Truly cognate words ought not to be *too much* alike.

"10. It is useless to offer an explanation of an English word which will not *also* explain all the cognate forms.

"These principles, and other similar ones well known to comparative philologists, I have tried to observe. Where I have not done so, there is a chance of a mistake. Corrections can only be made by a more strict observance of the above canons.

"A few examples will make the matter clearer.

"1. The word *surloin*, or *sirloin*, is often said to be derived from the fact that the *loin* was knighted as *Sir Loin* by Charles II., or (according to Richardson) by James I. Chronology makes short work of this statement, the word being in use long before James I. was born. It is one of those unscrupulous inventions with which English 'etymology' abounds, and which many people admire because they are 'so clever.' The number of those who literally prefer a story about a word to a more prosaic account of it is only too large.

"As to the necessity for ascertaining the oldest form and use of a word there cannot be two opinions. Yet this primary and all-important rule is continually disregarded, and men are found to rush into 'etymologies' without the slightest attempt at investigation or any knowledge of the history of the language, and think nothing of deriving words which exist in Anglo-Saxon from German or Italian. They merely 'think it over,' and take up with the first fancy that comes to hand, which they expect to be 'obvious' to others because they were themselves incapable of doing better; which is a poor argument, indeed. It would be easy to cite some specimens which I have noted (with a view to the possibility of making a small collection of such philological curiosities), but it is hardly necessary. I will rather relate my experience—viz.: that I have frequently set out to find the etymology of a word without any preconceived ideas about it, and usually found that, by the time its earliest use and sense had been fairly traced, the etymology presented itself unasked.

"2. The history of a nation generally accounts for the constituent parts of its language. When an early English word is compared with Hebrew or Coptic, as used to be done in the *old* editions of "Webster's Dictionary," history is set at defiance; and it was a good deed to clear the later editions of all such rubbish. As to geography, there must always be an intelligible geographical contact between races that are supposed to have borrowed words from one another; and this is particularly true of olden times, when travelling was less common. Old French did not borrow words from Portugal, nor did Old English borrow words from Prussia, much less from Finnish or Esthonian or Coptic, etc., etc. Yet there are people who still remain persuaded that *Whitsunday* is derived, of all things, from the German *Pfingsten*.

"3. Few delusions are more common than the comparison of L. *cura* with E. *care*, of Gr. ὅλος with E. *whole*, and of Gr. χάρις with E. *charity*. I daresay I myself believed in these things for many years, owing to that utter want of any approach to any philological training, for which England in general has long been so remarkable. Yet a very slight (but honest) attempt at understanding the English, the Latin and the Greek alphabets soon shows these notions to be untenable. The E. *care*, A. S. *cearu*, meant, originally, sorrow, which is only a secondary meaning of the Latin word; it never meant, originally, attention or painstaking. But this is not the point at present under consideration. Phonetically, the A.S. *c* and the L. *c*, when used initially, do not correspond; for where Latin writes *c* at the beginning of a word, A. S. has *h*, as in L. *cel-are*—A. S. *hel-an*, to hide. Again, the A. S. *ea*, before *r* following, stands for original *a*, *cearu* answering to an older *caru*. But

the L. *cara*, Old Latin *coira*, is spelt with a long *ā*, originally a diphthong, which cannot answer exactly to an original *a*. It remains that these words both contain the letter *r* in common, which is not denied; but this is a slight ground for the supposed equivalence of words of which the primary senses were different. The fact of the equivalence of L. *c* to A. S. *h* is commonly known as being due to Grimm's Law. The popular notions about Grimm's Law are extremely vague. Many imagine that Grimm *made* the law not many years ago, since which time Latin and Anglo-Saxon have been bound to obey it. But the word *law* is then strangely misapprehended; it is only a law in the sense of *an observed fact*. Latin and Anglo-Saxon were thus differentiated in times preceding the earliest record of the latter, and the difference might have been observed in the eighth century if anyone had had the wits to observe it. When the difference has once been perceived, and all other A. S. and Latin equivalent words are seen to follow it, we cannot consent to *establish an exception* to the rule in order to compare a single (supposed) pair of words which do not agree in the vowel-sound, and did not originally mean the same thing.

"As to the Gr. ὅλος, the aspirate (as usual) represents an original *s*, so that ὅλος answers to Sans. *sarva*, all, Old Lat. *sollus*, whilst it means 'whole' in the sense of entire or total. But the A. S. *hál* (which is the old spelling of *whole*) has for its initial letter an *h*, answering to Gr. κ, and the original sense is 'in sound health,' or 'hale and hearty.' It may much more reasonably be compared with the Gr. καλός; as to which see Curtius, i. 172. As to χάρις, the initial letter is χ, a guttural sound answering to Lat. *h* or *g*, and it is, in fact, allied to L. *gratia*. But in *charity*, the *ch* is French, due to a peculiar pronunciation of the Lat. *c*, and the Fr. *charité* is, of course, due to the L. acc. *caritatem*, whence also Ital. *caritate* or *carità*, Span. *caridad*, all from L. *cārus*, with long *ā*. When we put χάρις and *cārus* side by side, we find that the initial letters are different, that the vowels are different, and that, just as in the case of *cearu* and *cura*, the sole resemblance is that they both contain the letter *r*! It is not worth while to pursue the subject further. Those who are confirmed in their prejudices and have no guide but the ear (which they neglect to train), will remain of the same opinion still; but some beginners may perhaps take heed, and if they do, will see matters in a new light. To all who have acquired any philological knowledge, these things are wearisome.

"4. Suppose we take two Latin words such as *caritas* and *carus*. The former has a stem *car-i-tat-*; the latter has a stem *car-o-*, which may very easily turn into *car-i-*. We are perfectly confident that the adjective came first into existence, and that the sb. was made out of it by adding a suffix; and this we can tell by a glance at the words, by the very form of them. It is a rule in all Aryan languages that words started from monosyllabic roots or bases, and were built up by supplying new suffixes at the end; and, the greater the number of suffixes, the later the formation. When apparent exceptions to this law present themselves, they require especial attention: but as long as the law is followed, it is all in the natural course of things. Simple as this canon seems, it is frequently not observed; the consequence being that a word A is said to be derived from B, whereas B is its own offspring. The result is a reasoning in a circle, as it is called; we go round and round, but there is no progress upward and backward, which is the direction in which we should travel. Thus Richardson derives *chine* from 'Fr. *echine*,' and this from 'Fr. *echiner*, to chine, divide, or break the back of (Cotgrave), probably from the A. S. *cinan*, to chine, chink or rive.' From the absurdity of deriving the 'Fr. *echiner*' from the 'A. S. *cinan*' he might have been saved at the outset, by remembering that, instead of *echine* being derived from the verb *echiner*, it is obvious that *echiner*, to break the back of, is derived from *echine*, the back, as Cotgrave certainly meant us to understand; see *eschine*, *eschiner* in 'Cotgrave's Dictionary.' Putting *eschine* and *eschiner* side by side, the shorter form is the more original.

"5. This canon, requiring us to compare vowel-sounds, is a little more difficult, but it is extremely important. In many dictionaries it is utterly neglected, whereas the information to be obtained from vowels is often extremely certain; and few things are more beautifully regular than the occasionally complex, yet often decisive manner in which, especially in the Teutonic languages, one vowel-sound is educed from another. The very fact that the A. S. *é* is a modification of *ó* tells us at once that *fédan*, to feed, is a derivative of *fód*, food; and that to derive *food* from *feed* is simply impossible. In the same way the vowel *e* in the verb to *set* owes its very existence to the vowel *a* in the past tense of the verb to *sit*; and so on in countless instances.

"The other canons require no particular comment."