

Professor MacGregor's Astronomy Lesson

by Edward Gleason, Manager of the Southworth Planetarium at the University of Southern Maine

Professor MacGregor's nodded toward Row 8, Seat 1, whose occupant cleared her throat, lifted her paper, and spoke initially in low tones. "Many astronomical observations supported...."

"Louder please! We don't want the gentlemen in the back row to be deprived of your artistry."

After a ripple of giggles and her despairing sigh, she spoke again, this time more forcibly, but no less nervously. "Many astronomical observations supported Galileo's heliocentric theory. Among these were his observation of Jupiter's moons and the phases of Venus..."

At this point, Professor MacGregor dropped his chalk before taking two steps forward, his expression suddenly grave and his stare locked on the student who spoke behind the quivering paper. "Galileo realized that Jupiter's moons were revolving around that planet, and thereby established that not all celestial bodies revolved around Earth."

Professor MacGregor moved toward the stairs at the amphitheater classroom's left side, his stern eyes transfixed on this poor student. Many other students looked frightened, startled by their professor's obvious anger. The young woman didn't shift her gaze away from the paper and continued to recite the answer. "Also, Galileo knew that Venus shouldn't have phases if it were moving around Earth. Only if Venus were revolving around the Sun would it appear as a crescent in a teles..."

The student stopped speaking, as she was then aware that all 6 feet 8 inches of her professor was presently less than a foot from her chair. She looked up onto a countenance rendered even more ghastly than usual by an expression of rage.

"Why have you stopped speaking?!"

She gulped, but said nothing.

"Is that answer your own? Did you write that yourself?"

She nodded quickly. "Yeah, I promise. I didn't copy it."

"Know what my opinion is of it?"

She shook her head.

"Balderdash!" he answered, pressing his fist onto the desk. "Drek. Spittle. Filth. Muck. Mulch. Heresy. Delusion. Claptrap. In short, a preposterous notion conceived by a deranged mind under the influence of either Satanic agencies or illicit chemicals."

The student dropped the paper. "You didn't like it?"

"No, I didn't like it!" he shouted, rudely snatching the paper off the desk. "In all my long years of teaching the highest science to generations of the mind-numbered and apathetic, I have never been subjected to such a torrent of absurdities."

He ripped the paper in half.

About half of the students gasped. Others were numbed into stunned silence. The young woman, herself, looked as though she were about to weep. She somehow found the wherewithal to speak. "Why did you do that?!"

"No lighter."

"Was my answer wrong?!"

Professor MacGregor tone softened. "I don't know. Was it?"

"It must have been."

"But, were you wrong?"

"Yes."

He ripped the halves into half. "Try again!"

"Was I right?"

"Were you?"

"Obviously not!"

Now he ripped it into eighths. "I would like you to answer me properly soon. This ripping is getting harder."

After a tensely silent moment, the harassed student blurted out. "Okay, I guess I was right!"

"You guess?"

"I was!"

"You sure?"

"Yes!"

"Fine," Professor MacGregor answered, his voice soothing and uncharacteristically pleasant. He pressed the paper pieces in his hand and transformed it into a full, unripped sheet, which he handed back to the student. "Here. I believe this is yours."

He smiled as she gazed with confused astonishment at the sheet. "I went to school to be a world class carnival magician just in case my lofty aspiration of becoming an astronomy teacher didn't pan out."

The professor then hopped down to the front of the classroom. "Ladies and gentlemen, you have come to the wrong class if you wanted to learn astronomical facts. Any half-decent astronomy book and eighty percent of the indecent ones will give you a plethora of facts, figures, and statistics. You can sit at home trying to read such a book amidst the array of more interesting distractions if you just want a droll numbers. That is not what my astronomy course is about..."

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