

The Student Advising Scene

from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1808, Faust I, part of Scene IV
translated in the original meters by Bayard Taylor 1870.

Taken from the Project Gutenberg Website.

Some lines are omitted and indicated thus ...

Lines that can serve as independent sayings are highlighted in yellow.

Setting of this excerpt:

The tragedy of "Faust" plays in medieval times and this particular scene at a university where Faust is a professor.

After Faust has made an agreement with the Devil (Mephistopheles or Mephisto) he does not feel inclined to advise a student but Mephistopheles takes over. In this way Goethe could express more radical and unorthodox ideas. The scene is both funny and deep. It should be remembered that Goethe had a law degree and had worked at the highest court of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation before that nation ceased to exist.

MEPHISTOPHELES

...

I hear one's footsteps, hither steering.

FAUST

To see him now I have no heart.

MEPHISTOPHELES

So long the poor boy waits a hearing,

He must not unconsoled depart.

Thy cap and mantle straightway lend me!

I'll play the comedy with art.

(He disguises himself.)

My wits, be certain, will befriend me.

But fifteen minutes' time is all I need;

For our fine trip, meanwhile, prepare thyself with speed!

[Exit FAUST]

MEPHISTOPHELES

(In FAUST'S long mantle.)

...

(A STUDENT *enters.*)

STUDENT

A short time, only, am I here,
And come, devoted and sincere,
To greet and know the man of fame,
Whom men to me with reverence name.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Your courtesy doth flatter me:
You see a man, as others be.
Have you, perchance, elsewhere begun?

STUDENT

Receive me now, I pray, as one
Who comes to you with courage good,
Somewhat of cash, and healthy blood:
My mother was hardly willing to let me;
But knowledge worth having I fain would get me.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Then you have reached the right place now.

STUDENT

I'd like to leave it, I must avow;
I find these walls, these vaulted spaces
Are anything but pleasant places.
Tis all so cramped and close and mean;
One sees no tree, no glimpse of green,
And when the lecture-halls receive me,
Seeing, hearing, and thinking leave me.

MEPHISTOPHELES

All that depends on habitude.
So from its mother's breasts a child
At first, reluctant, takes its food,
But soon to seek them is beguiled.
Thus, at the breasts of Wisdom clinging,
Thou'lt find each day a greater rapture bringing.

STUDENT

I'll hang thereon with joy, and freely drain them;
But tell me, pray, the proper means to gain them.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Explain, before you further speak,
The special faculty you seek.

STUDENT

I crave the highest erudition;
And fain would make my acquisition
All that there is in Earth and Heaven,
In Nature and in Science too.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Here is the genuine path for you;
Yet strict attention must be given.

STUDENT

Body and soul thereon I'll wreak;
Yet, truly, I've some inclination
On summer holidays to seek
A little freedom and recreation.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Use well your time! It flies so swiftly from us;
But time through order may be won, I promise.
So, Friend (my views to briefly sum),
First, the *collegium logicum*.
There will your mind be drilled and braced,
As if in Spanish boots 'twere laced,
And thus, to graver paces brought,
'Twill plod along the path of thought,
Instead of shooting here and there,
A will-o'-the-wisp in murky air.
Days will be spent to bid you know,
What once you did at a single blow,
Like eating and drinking, free and strong,—
That one, two, three! thereto belong.
Truly the fabric of mental fleece
Resembles a weaver's masterpiece,

Where a thousand threads one treadle throws,
Where fly the shuttles hither and thither.
Unseen the threads are knit together.
And an infinite combination grows.
Then, the philosopher steps in
And shows, no otherwise it could have been:
The first was so, the second so,
Therefore the third and fourth are so;
Were not the first and second, then
The third and fourth had never been.
The scholars are everywhere believers,
But never succeed in being weavers.
He who would study organic existence,
First drives out the soul with rigid persistence;
Then the parts in his hand he may hold and class,
But the spiritual link is lost, alas!
Encheiresin natures, this Chemistry names,
Nor knows how herself she banter and blames!

STUDENT

I cannot understand you quite.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Your mind will shortly be set aright,
When you have learned, all things reducing,
To classify them for your using.

STUDENT

I feel as stupid, from all you've said,
As if a mill-wheel whirled in my head!

MEPHISTOPHELES

And after—first and foremost duty—Of
Metaphysics learn the use and beauty!
See that you most profoundly gain
What does not suit the human brain!
A splendid word to serve, you'll find
For what goes in—or won't go in—your mind.
But first, at least this half a year,
To order rigidly adhere;
Five hours a day, you understand,

And when the clock strikes, be on hand!
Prepare beforehand for your part
With paragraphs all got by heart,
So you can better watch, and look
That naught is said but what is in the book:
Yet in thy writing as unwearied be,
As did the Holy Ghost dictate to thee!

STUDENT

No need to tell me twice to do it!
I think, how useful 'tis to write;
For what one has, in black and white,
One carries home and then goes through it.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Yet choose thyself a faculty!

STUDENT

I cannot reconcile myself to Jurisprudence.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Nor can I therefore greatly blame you students:
I know what science this has come to be.
All rights and laws are still transmitted
Like an eternal sickness of the race,—
From generation unto generation fitted,
And shifted round from place to place.
Reason becomes a sham, Beneficence a worry:
Thou art a grandchild, therefore woe to thee!
The right born with us, ours in verity,
This to consider, there's, alas! no hurry.

STUDENT

My own disgust is strengthened by your speech:
O lucky he, whom you shall teach!
I've almost for Theology decided.

MEPHISTOPHELES

I should not wish to see you here misguided:
For, as regards this science, let me hint
'Tis very hard to shun the false direction;

There's so much secret poison lurking in 't,
So like the medicine, it baffles your detection.
Hear, therefore, one alone, for that is best, in sooth,
And simply take your master's words for truth.
On *words* let your attention centre!
Then through the safest gate you'll enter
The temple-halls of Certainty.

STUDENT

Yet in the word must some idea be.

MEPHISTOPHELES

Of course! But only shun too over-sharp a tension,
For just where fails the comprehension,
A word steps promptly in as deputy.
With words 'tis excellent disputing;
Systems to words 'tis easy suiting;
On words 'tis excellent believing;
No word can ever lose a jot from thieving.

STUDENT

Pardon! With many questions I detain you.
Yet must I trouble you again.
Of Medicine I still would fain
Hear one strong word that might explain you.
Three years is but a little space.
And, God! who can the field embrace?
If one some index could be shown,
'Twere easier groping forward, truly.

MEPHISTOPHELES (*aside*)

I'm tired enough of this dry tone,—
Must play the Devil again, and fully.

(*Aloud*)

To grasp the spirit of Medicine is easy:
Learn of the great and little world your fill,
To let it go at last, so please ye,
Just as God will!
In vain that through the realms of science you may drift;
Each one learns only—just what learn he can:

...

STUDENT

That's better, now! The How and Where, one sees.

MEPHISTOPHELES

My worthy friend, gray are all theories,
And green alone Life's golden tree.

STUDENT

I swear to you, 'tis like a dream to me.
Might I again presume, with trust unbounded,
To hear your wisdom thoroughly expounded?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Most willingly, to what extent I may.

STUDENT

I cannot really go away:
Allow me that my album first I reach you,—
Grant me this favor, I beseech you!

MEPHISTOPHELES

Assuredly.

(He writes, and returns the book.)

STUDENT *(reads)*

Eritis sicut Deus, scientes bonum et malum.

(Closes the book with reverence, and withdraws)