

The Physician, his Prologue and his Tale

Here is the description of the physician from the General Prologue

*The medical **Doctor** is the best in his profession. His practice sounds to us more like astrology and magic than medicine, but it was typical of the period*

	With us there was a DOCTOR of PHYSIC.	<i>medicine</i>
	In all this world ne was there none him like	
	To speak of physic and of surgery,	
	For he was grounded in astronomy: ¹	<i>astrology</i>
415	He kept his patient a full great deal	
	In hours, by his magic natural. ²	
	Well could he fórtunen the áscendent	
	Of his imáges for his patient.	
	He knew the cause of every malady	
420	Were it of hot or cold or moist or dry	
	And where engendered and of what humor.	<i>See Endpapers</i>
	He was a very perfect practiser.	
	The cause y-know, and of his harm the root, ³	<i>known / source</i>
	Anon he gave the sickè man his boote.	<i>medicine, cure</i>
425	Full ready had he his apothecaries	<i>druggists</i>
	To send him drugs and his letuaries,	<i>medicines</i>
	For each of them made other for to win;	<i>to profit</i>
	Their friendship was not newè to begin. ⁴	

He knows all the medical authorities

Well knew he the old Esculapius

¹ 414: *Astronomy* = astrology. Medieval medicine was less the practice of an applied science than of *magic natural* (white magic) including astrology.

² 415-18: These four lines are hard to render except by paraphrase: he treated his patient by "white magic" and he knew how to cast horoscopes and calculate astronomically the best hours to treat his patient.

³ 423: "When the cause and root of his illness were diagnosed".

⁴ 428: They were old colleagues.

For some reason, the tale, derived from the Roman historian Livy, was popular in the Middle ages, having been told in one form or another in the **Romance of the Rose**, by Boccaccio, and by Chaucer's contemporary John Gower. This popularity is as inexplicable to us as that of the tale of patient Griselda told by the Clerk or the tale of Constance as told by the Man of Law.

Impossibly virtuous women like these and like Virginia in this present tale belong, for our taste, in a collection of saints' lives like the **Golden Legend** or in an exemplum for a sermon about virginity.

Because of its thin plot, absence of characterization, and inappropriate or moralizing digressions from the narrative, it is not surprising that some scholars think that the tale was not written for the **Canterbury Tales** but rescued from something earlier and pressed into service without much-needed revision which would not require lines like this:

. *Sufficeth this example now as here,*
 For I must turn again to my mattér. (103-4)

As Tatlock early remarked, it would fit well enough as a draft for part of the **Legend of Good Women**, another of Chaucer's unfinished works.

When the narrator finally gets to the gist of his tale (118 ff), it moves with some narrative speed, and even attains some affecting pathos. But then the ending is *too* speedy, and we are summarily told that everyone who was "consentant" to the crime was hanged, although we have never been told of anyone "consentant" except the two perpetrators, providing the final moral confusion in a confused and confusing story.

It is not surprising that the end of the tale, like much of the earlier part, is another dreary bit of moralizing that does not even follow from the narrative.

Small wonder that Harry Bailly, perhaps standing in for Chaucer's better judgement, finds the story, though affecting in part, finally depressing. See his response at the end, leading to his invitation to the Pardoner to tell some "mirth or japes". Instead, the Pardoner tells a moral tale too, but in a class totally above the Physician's, showing how an exemplary tale *could* be told.

THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE.

A Roman patrician has a daughter favored by Nature with great beauty

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| THERE was, as telleth Titus Livius, | <i>Roman historian</i> |
| A knight, that clepèd was Virginius, | <i>was called</i> |
| Fulfillèd of honoúr and worthiness, | <i>wealth</i> |
| And strong of friendès, and of great richesse. | <i>wealth</i> |
| This knight a daughter haddè by his wife, | <i>every person</i> |
| No children had he more in all his life. | <i>every person</i> |
| Fair was this maid in excellent beauty | <i>every person</i> |
| Aboven every wight that man may see: | <i>every person</i> |
| For Nature hath with sovereign diligence | <i>every person</i> |
| 10 Y-formèd her in so great excellence, | <i>every person</i> |
| As though she wouldè say, “Lo, I, Natúre, | <i>every person</i> |
| Thus can I form and paint a creätúre, | <i>every person</i> |
| When that me list. Who can me counterfeit? | <i>when I please / can copy</i> |
| Pygmalion? Not though he aye forge and beat, | <i>sculptor / constantly forge</i> |
| Or grave, or paintè, for I dare well sayn, | <i>engrave</i> |
| Apelles, Xeuxis, shoulde work in vain, | <i>sculptor & artist</i> |
| Either to grave or paint or forge or beat, | <i>sculptor & artist</i> |
| If they presumèd me to counterfeit. | <i>me = Nature</i> |
| For he that is the former principal, | <i>principal creator</i> |
| 20 Hath maked me his vicar-general | <i>deputy</i> |
| To form and painten earthly creätúrès | <i>deputy</i> |
| Right as me list, and each thing in my cure is | <i>Just as I wish; care</i> |
| Under the moonè, that may wane and wax. | <i>fade & grow</i> |
| And for my work right nothing will I axe; | <i>ask</i> |
| My Lord and I be full of one accord. | <i>ask</i> |
| I made her to the worship of my Lord; | <i>are totally</i> |
| So do I all mine other creätúres, | <i>to honor my Lord</i> |
| What colour that they have, or what figúres.” | <i>to honor my Lord</i> |
| Thus seemeth me that Nature wouldè say. | <i>to honor my Lord</i> |
| 30 This maid of agè twelve year was and tway, | <i>12 & 2, i.e. 14</i> |
| In which that Nature haddè such delight. | <i>12 & 2, i.e. 14</i> |
| For right as she can paint a lily white | <i>12 & 2, i.e. 14</i> |
| And red a rose, right with such paintúre | <i>12 & 2, i.e. 14</i> |
| She painted hath this noble creätúre | <i>12 & 2, i.e. 14</i> |

Ere she was born, upon her limbès free,
Whereas, by right, such colours shoulden be;
And Phoebus dyed hath her tresses great,
Like to the streamès of his burnèd heat.

where

She is also virtuous

40 And if that excellent were her beauty,
A thousand-fold more virtuous was she.
In her ne lackèd no condition,
That. is to praise, as by discretion.
As well in ghost as body chaste was she:
For which she flowered in virginity,
With all humility and abstinence,
With all attemperance and patience,
With measure, eke, of bearing and array.
Discreet she was in answering alway,
50 Though she were wise as Pallas, dare I sayn,
Her facond eke full womanly and plain.
No counterfeited termès haddè she
To seemen wise; but after her degree
She spoke, and all her wordès more and less
Souning in virtue and in gentleness.
Shamefast she was in maiden's shamefastness,
Constant in heart, and ever in busyness
To drive her out of idle sluggardy:
Bacchus had of her mouth right no mastery.
For wine and youthè do Venus increase,
60 As men in fire will casten oil and grease.
And of her ownè virtue, unconstrained,
She hath herself full often sick y-feigned
For that she wouldè flee the company,
Where likely was to treaten of folly,
As is at feasts, at revels, and at dances,
That be occasions of dalliances.
Such thingès maken children for to be
Too soonè ripe and bold, as men may see,
Which is full perilous, and has been yore,
70 For all too soonè may she learnen lore
Of boldness, when she waxèd is a wife.

in spirit

restraint

discretion in conduct & dress

Her speech

*No pretentious phrases
according to her rank (or age)*

In accord with

Modest

sloth

B = god of wine

V = sexual desire

unforced

pretended to be sick

Because she wanted

where impropriety was likely

flirting

precocious & brazen

always

habit

brazenness / grown up to be

A word of advice to governesses

- And you mistresses in your oldè life, *governesses*
 That lordès' daughters have in governance, *in your care*
 Ne taketh of my words no displeasánce:
 Thinketh that you be set in governings
 Of lordès' daughters, only for two things:
 Either for you have kept your honesty, *good reputation*
 Or else for you have fallen in frailty,
 And knowen well enough the oldè dance, *old game of love*
 80 And have forsaken fully such mischance *misbehavior*
 For evermore. Therefore for Christès sake
 To teach them virtue look that ye ne slake. *don't tire*
- A thief of venison, that hath for-left *left off*
 His likerousness, and all his oldè craft, *bad habit & old game*
 Can keep a forest best of any man:
 Now keepeth well, for if you will you can.
 Look well, that you unto no vice assent,
 Lest you be damnéd for your wick' intent, *wicked*
 For whoso doth a traitor is certáin: *whoever does (so)*
 90 And taketh keep of that I shall you sayn; *take heed*
 Of allè treason, sovereign pestilence *worst crime*
 Is when a wight betrayeth innocence. *a person corrupts*

Advice to parents

- You fathers, and you mothers eke also, *eke = also*
 Though you have children, be it one or mo',
 Yours is the charge of all their surveillánce,
 While that they be under your governance.
 Beware, that by example of your living,
 Or by your negligence in chastising,
 That they ne perish: for I dare well say,
 100 If that they do, you shall it dear abeye. *pay for*
 Under a shepherd soft and negligent,
 The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb to-rent. *torn apart*
 Sufficeth this example now as here,
 For I must turn again to my mattér.

This virtuous maiden needed no governess

- This maid, of which I tell my tale express, *in particular*
 She kept herself; her needed no mistréss; *no governess was needed for her*
 For in her living, maidens mighten read,

As in a book, every good word and deed
 That 'longeth to a maiden virtuous: *that belongs*
 110 She was so prudent and so bounteous. *so good*
 For which the fame out sprung on every side
 Both of her beauty and her bounty wide: *goodness > Fr. bonté*
 That through the land they praised her each one,
 That lovèd virtue, save Envy alone,
 That sorry is of other mennè's weal, *success*
 And glad is of his sorrow and his unheal. *misfortune*
 (The Doctor maketh this description). *diagnosis (?)*

Back to the story. A judge conceives a base passion for the girl.

This maiden on a day went in the town
 Toward a temple, with her mother dear,¹
 120 As is of youngè maidens the mannér.
 Now was there then a justice in that town,
 That governor was of that regiõn:
 And so befell, this judge his eyen cast
 Upon this maid, avising her full fast, *eyeing her intently*
 As she came forth by there this judgè stood.
 Anon his heartè changèd and his mood,
 So was he caught with beauty of this maid,
 And to himself full privily he said:
 "This maiden shall he mine for any man."
 130 Anon the Fiend into his heartè ran,
 And taught him suddenly that he by sleight
 This maiden to his purpose winnen might. *secretly*
 For certès, by no force, nor by no meed, *despite any*
 Him thought he was not able for to speed; *the devil*
 For she was strong of friendès, and eke she *by trickery*
 Confirmed was in such sovereign bountý,
 That well he wist he might her never win, *by no bribery*
 As for to make her with her body sin. *to succeed*
well he knew

He forms a plot to achieve his ignoble goal

For which with great deliberation
 140 He sent after a churl was in the town, *a low fellow*
 Which that he knew for subtle and for bold.
 This judge unto this churl his tale hath told

¹ 119: The mother never appears again, even to have some say in her daughter's fate.

In secret wise, and made him to insure *to promise*
 He shouldè tell it to no creätüre,
 And if he did, he shouldè lose his head.
 When that assented was this cursèd redd, *this cursed plan*
 Glad was the judge, and makèd him great cheer, *made great fuss of him*
 And gave him giftès precious and dear.
 When shapen was all their conspiracy *fully planned was*
 150 From point to point, how that his lechery
 Performèd shouldè be full subtly,
 (As you shall hear it after openly),
 Home goes this churl, that hightè Claudius. *who was called*
 This falsè judge, that hightè Appius,
 (So was his namè, for it is no fable,
 But known for an historial thing notàble; *well known historical*
 The sentence of it sooth is out of doubt;) *the substance*
 This falsè judgè goes now fast about
 To hasten his delight all that he may.

The plot is put into action

160 And so befell, soon after on a day
 This falsè judge, as telleth us the story,
 As he was wont, sat in his consistóry,
 And gave his doomès upon sundry case; *in his court*
 His falsè churl came forth a full great pace, *his judgements*
 And saidè: “Lord, if that it be your will, *came up suddenly*
 As do me right upon this piteous bill, *plea*
 In which I ’plain upon Virginius. *bring charge against*
 And if that he will say it is not thus,
 I will it prove, and finden good witnèss,
 170 That sooth is that my billè will express.” *that my charge is true*
 The judge answered: “Of this in his absénce
 I may not give definitive senténce.
 Let do him call, and I will gladly hear; *Have him called*
 Thou shalt have all right, and no wrong here.”

Virginius came to wit the judge’s will, *to find out*
 And right anon was read this cursèd bill; *right away*
 The sentence of it was as you shall hear: *The substance*
 “To you, my lord, Sir Appius so dear,
 Showeth your poorè servant Claudius,
 180 How that a knight callèd Virginius,
 Against the law, against all equity,

Holdeth, express against the will of me,
 My servant, which that is my thrall by right, *my slave*
 Which from mine house was stolen on a night
 While that she was full young, I will it preve *prove*
 By witness, lord, so that it you not grieve. *if you please*
 She n'is his daughter not, whatso he say. *whatever*
 Wherefore to you, my lord the judge, I pray;
 Yield me my thrall, if that it be your will."
 190 Lo, this was all the sentence of his bill. *Give me back
the substance / plea*

The judge issues a summary decree against Virginius, the father

Virginius 'gan upon the churl behold;
 But hastily, ere he his talè told *he = Virginius*
 And would have provèd it, as should a knight,
 And eke by witnessing of many a wight, *many a person*
 That all was false that said his adversary,
 This cursed judgè wouldè nothing tarry, *would not wait*
 Nor hear a word more of Virginius,
 But gave his judgèment, and saidè thus:
 "I deem anon this churl his servant have *I decree*
 200 Thou shalt no longer in thine house her save. *keep her*
 Go, bring her forth, and put her in our ward;
 The churl shall have his thrall; thus I award." *my custody*

Virginius goes home & tells his daughter the judge's decree and his own terrible decision

And when this worthy knight Virginius,
 Through sentence of this justice Appius,
 Must by force his dearè daughter give
 Unto the judge, in lechery to live,
 He goes him home, and sets him in his hall,
 And let anon his dearè daughter call: *has her called*
 And with a facè dead as ashes cold,
 210 Upon her humble face he 'gan behold,
 With father's pity sticking through his heart,
 Al' would he from his purpose not convert. *Although / not turn*
 "Daughter," quod he, "Virginia by thy name,
 There be two ways -- either death or shame --
 That thou must suffer, alas that I was bore!
 For never thou deservedest wherefore
 To dien with a sword or with a knife.
 O dearè daughter, ender of my life,
 Which I have fostered up with such pleasánce *Whom I have reared*

220 That thou were never out of my rémembrance
 O daughter, which that art my lastè woe,
 And in my life my lastè joy also,
 O gem of chastity, in patience
 Take thou thy death, for this is my senténce:
 For love and not for hate thou must be dead,
 My piteous hand must smiten off thine head.
 Alas that ever Appius thee saw!
 Thus hath he falsely judgèd thee today.”
 And told her all the case, as you before
 230 Have heard, not needeth for to tell it more.

She asks for a short reprieve & then for a quick dispatch

“O mercy, dearè father,” quod this maid. *said this girl*
 And with that word she both her armès laid
 About his neck, as she was wont to do,
 (The tearès burst out of her eyen two),
 And saidè: ?Goodè father, shall I die?
 Is there no grace? Is there no remedy? ”
 “No certès, dearè daughter mine,” quod he.
 ?Then give me leisure, father mine,” quod she,
 My death for to complain a little space,
 240 For, pardee Jephthah gave his daughter grace
 For to complain, ere he her slew, alas ! ¹
 And, God it wot, nothing was her trespass,
 But for she ran her father first to see,
 To welcome him with great solemnity.”
 And with that word she fell a-swoon anon,
 And after, when her swooning was a-gone,
 She riseth up, and to her father said:
 ?Blessèd be God, that I shall die a maid.
 Give me my death, ere that I have a shame.
 250 Do with your child your will, a Godè’s name.” *in God’s n.*
 And with that word she prayed him full oft,
 That with his sword he wouldè smitè soft; *strike gently*
 And with that word, a-swoonè down she fell.
 Her father, with full sorrowful heart and will,

¹ 240 : The Old Testament tells the story of Jephthah who vows if he is victorious to sacrifice whatever first comes out of his house on his return. The first to run out is his only daughter welcoming him home. (Judges: 11.32 ff). That Virginia in pagan Roman times should quote the Hebrew Old Testament is only one of the confusions of this tale.

Her head off smote, and by the top it hent, *seized it*
 And to the judge he 'gan it to present,
 As he sat yet in doom in consistóry. *judging in court*

The outcome

And when the judge it saw, as saith the story,
 He bade to take him, and anhang him fast. *ordered him to be taken & hanged*
 260 But right anon a thousand people in thrust
 To save the knight, for ruth and for pity, *for compassion*
 For knowen was the false iniquity.
 The people anon had suspect in this thing
 By manner of the churlés challenging, *claim*
 That it was by th' assent of Appius.
 They wisten well that he was lecherous. *they knew well*
 For which unto this Appius they gon. *they go*
 And cast him in a prison right anon,
 Whereas he slew himself. And Claudius, *Where he*
 270 That servant was unto this Appius,
 Was doomèd for to hang upon a tree; *was sentenced*
 But that Virginius of his pity
 So prayèd for him, that he was exiled,
 And elsè, certès, he had been beguiled: *besides / certainly / misled*
 The remnant were anhangèd, more and less,
 That were consentant of this cursedness. *consenting*

A moral of sorts

Here men may see how sin hath his merit: *reward*
 Beware, for no man wot whom God will smite *no one knows / strike*
 In no degree, nor in which manner wise
 280 The worm of consciencè may agrise *make one tremble*
 Of wicked life, though it so privy be. *For a wicked / secret*
 That no man wot thereof save God and he: *knows*
 For be he lewèd man or elsè lered, *ignorant or learned*
 He n'ot how soon that he shall be afeared, *He knows not*
 Therefore I reddè you this counsel take, *I advise*
 Forsaketh sin, ere sinnè you forsake. *before*