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.  
In all this world ne was there none him like  
To speak of physic and of surgery,  
For he was grounded in astronomy:¹  
He kept his patient a full great deal  
In hours, by his magic natural.²  
Well could he fôrtunen the áscendent  
Of his imáges for his patient.  
He knew the cause of every malady  
Were it of hot or cold or moist or dry  
And where engendered and of what humor.  
He was a very perfect practiser.  
The cause y-know, and of his harm the root,³  
Anon he gave the sické man his boote.  
Full ready had he his apothecaries  
To send him drugs and his letuaries,  
For each of them made other for to win;  
Their friendship was not newé to begin.⁴

*He knows all the medical authorities*

Well knew he the old Esculapius

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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.
And Dioscorides and eke Rusus,\textsuperscript{1} also
Old Hippocras, Hali and Galen
Serapion, Rasis and Avicen,
Averrois, Damascene and Constantine,
Bernard and Gatesden and Gilbertine.

\textit{His personal habits, dietary and economic}

Of his diet measurable was he moderate
For it was of no superfluity excess
But of great nourishing and digestible.
His study was but little on the Bible.\textsuperscript{2}
In sanguine and in perse he clad was all In red & blue
Lined with taffeta and with sendall, silk
And yet he was but easy of dispense. thrifty spender
He kept what he won in pestilence. during plague
For gold in physic is a cordial, Because
Therefore he loved gold in special.\textsuperscript{3}

\textbf{Introduction to}

\textbf{The Physician's Tale.}

There is no particular reason why this strange tale should be told by the Doctor unless it is a clumsy joke about surgery. A tale about the extremely drastic measures a father takes to preserve his daughter’s honor, it could just as easily, and perhaps more appropriately, have been given to those professional celibates the Second Nun or the Clerk, since it is, if anything, a tale in praise of virginity, with even the major characters called Virginius and Virginia, like types in an allegory.

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\textsuperscript{1} 429-434: This list of classical, Arabic and other medieval authorities on medicine functions somewhat like the list of the knight’s battles, a deliberate exaggeration; here the result is mildly comic, intentionally.

\textsuperscript{2} 438: Physicians were sometimes thought to tend towards atheism. Perhaps the original rime here was meant to be comic; it could work in modern English if so regarded, with “digestible” pronounced exaggeratedly to rime fully with “Bible.”

\textsuperscript{3} 443-4: A pun. Gold was used in some medications (physic); but physic is also the \textbf{practice} of medicine at which much gold can be made, especially in time of plague (pestilence), and that is good for the heart (cordial).
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:

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Sufficeth this example now as here,
For I must turn again to my matiér.
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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,
A knight, that clepéd was Virginius,
Fulfilled of honoûr and worthiness,
And strong of friendes, and of great riches.
This knight a daughter haddè by his wife,
No children had he more in all his life.
Fair was this maid in excellent beauty
Aboven every wight that man may see:
For Nature hath with sovereign diligence
10 Y-formèd her in so great excellence,
As though she wouldè say, “Lo, I, Natúre,
Thus can I form and paint a créâtúre,
When that me list. Who can me counterfeit?
Pygmalion? Not though he aye forge and beat,
Or grave, or paintè, for I dare well sayn,
Apelles, Xeuxis, shoulden work in vain,
Either to grave or paint or forge or beat,
If they presumèd me to counterfeit.
For he that is the former principal,
20 Hath maked me his vicar-general
To form and painten earthly créâtûrè
Right as me list, and each thing in my cure is
Under the moonè, that may wane and wax.
And for my work right nothing will I axe;
My Lord and I be full of one accord.
I made her to the worship of my Lord;
So do I all mine other créâtûres,
What colour that they have, or what figúres.”
Thus seemeth me that Nature wouldè say.

30 This maid of agé twelve year was and tway,
In which that Nature haddè such delight.
For right as she can paint a lily white
And red a rose, right with such paintûre
She painted hath this noble créâtûre
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.

*She is also virtuous*

And if that excellent were her beauty,
A thousand-fold more virtuous was she.
In her ne lacked 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,
Though she were wise as Pallas, dare I sayn,

Her facond eke full womanly and plain.
No counterfeited termès hadde 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 youth do Venus increase,

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 soonë ripe and bold, as men may see,
Which is full perilous, and has been yore,

For all too soonë may she learnen lore
Of boldness, when she waxèd is a wife.

*A word of advice to governesses*
And you mistresses in your oldè life, 
That lordès’ daughters have in governance, 
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, 
Or else for you have fallen in frailty, 
And known well enough the oldé dance, 
And have forsaken fully such mischance 
For evermore. Therefore for Christès sake 
To teach them virtue look that ye ne slake.
80
A thief of venison, that hath for-left 
His likerousness, and all his oldè craft, 
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 damned for your wick’ intent, 
For whoso doth a traitor is certáin: 
And taketh keep of that I shall you sayn; 
Of allè treason, sovereign pestilence 
Is when a wight betrayeth innocence.

Advice to parents

You fathers, and you mothers 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, 
If that they do, you shall it dear abeye. 
Under a shepherd soft and negligent, 
The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb to-rent. 
Sufficeth this example now as here, 
For I must turn again to my mattér.
100

This virtuous maiden needed no governess

This maid, of which I tell my tale express, 
She kept herself; her needed no mistréss; 
For in her living, maidens mighten read,
As in a book, every good word and deed
That ’longeth to a maiden virtuous:
She was so prudent and so bounteous.
For which the fame out sprung on every side
Both of her beauty and her bounty wide:
That through the land they praised her each one,
That lovèd virtue, save Envy alone,
And glad is of his sorrow and his unheal.
(The Doctor maketh this description).

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,
As is of young maidens the manner.
Now was there then a justice in that town,
That governor was of that region:
And so befell, this judge his eye cast
Upon this maid, avising her full fast,
As she came forth by there this judge stood.
Anon his heart 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.”

Anon the Fiend into his heartè ran,
And taught him suddenly that he by sleight
This maiden to his purpose winnen might.
For certès, by no force, nor by no meed,
Him thought he was not able for to speed;
For she was strong of friendès, and eke she
Confirmed was in such sovereign bountý,
That well he wist he might her never win,
As for to make her with her body sin.

He forms a plot to achieve his ignoble goal

For which with great deliberation
He sent after a churl was in the town,
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
He shouldé tell it to no creâtúre,
And if he did, he shouldè lose his head.
When that assented was this cursèd redd,
Glad was the judge, and makèd him great cheer,
And gave him giftès precious and dear.
When shapen was all their conspiracy
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 hight Claudius.
This falsè judge, that hight Appius,
(So was his namè, for it is no fable,
But known for an historial thing notáble;
The sentence of it sooth is out of doubt;) 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;
His falsè churl came forth a full great pace,
And saidè: “Lord, if that it be your will,
As do me right upon this piteous bill,
In which I  ’plain upon Virginius.
And if that he will say it is not thus,
I will it prove, and finde good witnéss,
170 That sooth is that my billè will express.”
The judge answered: “Of this in his absénce
I may not give definitive senténce.
Let do him call, and I will gladly hear;
Thou shalt have all right, and no wrong here.”

Virginius came to wit the judge’s will,
And right anon was read this cursèd bill;
The sentence of it was as you shall hear:
“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 slave
My servant, which that is my thrall by right,  prove
Which from mine house was stolen on a night
While that she was full young, I will it preve if you please
By witness, lord, so that it you not grieve.
She n’is his daughter not, whatsoe he say.
Wherefore to you, my lord the judge, I pray;
Yield me my thrall, if that it be your will.” Give me back

The judge issues a summary decree against Virginius, the father

Virginius ’gan upon the churl behold; he = Virginius
But hastily, ere he his talè told
And would have provéd it, as should a knight, many a person
And eke by witnessing of many a wight,
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
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, has her called
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:
And with a facè dead as ashes cold,  Although / not turn
210 Upon her humble face he ’gan behold,
With father’s pity sticking through his heart, Although / not turn
Al’ would he from his purpose not convert.
“Daughter,” quod he, “Virginia by thy name, Whom I have reared
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 deare daughter, ender of my life,
Which I have fostered up with such pleasânce
220 That thou were never out of my rémembrance
O daughter, which that art my laste woe,
And in my life my laste joy also,
O gem of chastity, in patience
Take thou thy death, for this is my sentence:
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 judged 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, deare father," quod this maid.
And with that word she both her armes laid
About his neck, as she was wont to do,
(The tearés burst out of her eyen two),
And said: ?Goode father, shall I die?
Is there no grace? Is there no remedy?"
"No certes, deare daughter mine," quod he.
Then give me leisure, father mine," quod she,
My death for to complain a little space,
240 For, pardee Jephtah gave his daughter grace
For to complain, ere he her slew, alas!
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:
?Blessed 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 God?s name."
And with that word she prayed him full oft,
That with his sword he woulde smite soft;
And with that word, a-swoonè down she fell.
Her father, with full sorrowful heart and will,

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1 240: The Old Testament tells the story of Jephta 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,
And to the judge he ’gan it to present,
As he sat yet in doom in consistory.

The outcome

And when the judge it saw, as saith the story,
He bade to take him, and anhang him fast.

260 But right anon a thousand people in thrust
To save the knight, for ruth and for pity,
For knownen was the false iniquity.
The people anon had suspect in this thing
By manner of the churlès challenging,
That it was by th’ assent of Appius.
They wisten well that he was lecherous.
For which unto this Appius they gon.
And cast him in a prison right anon,
Whereas he slew himself. And Claudius,

270 That servant was unto this Appius,
Was doomèd for to hang upon a tree;
But that Virginius of his pity
So prayèd for him, that he was exiled,
And elsè, certès, he had been beguiled:
The remnant were anhangèd, more and less,
That were consentant of this cursedness.

A moral of sorts

Here men may see how sin hath his merit:
Beware, for no man wot whom God will smite
In no degree, nor in which manner wise

280 The worm of consciencè may agrise
Of wicked life, though it so privy be.
That no man wot thereof save God and he:
For be he lewed man or elsè lered,
He n’ot how soon that he shall be afeared,
Therefore I reddè you this counsel take,
Forsaketh sin, ere sinnè you forsake.