

1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer, Geoffrey (1343-1400) - English poet, known as the most important writer of Middle English. His *Canterbury Tales* (~1380) are told by traveling pilgrims who meet at a tavern and have a storytelling contest to pass the time. Each tale is preceded by an introductory prologue. *The Physician's Tale* - The story of a judge who tells his daughter, Virginia, she must be killed by him or shamed by her lover.

THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE

There was, as tells us Titus Livius,
A knight whose name was called Virginius,
Fulfilled of honour and of worthiness,
Who many friends and much wealth did possess.
This knight had had a daughter by his wife,
Nor children more had he in all his life.
Fair was this maid, in excellent beauty
Above all others that a man may see;
For Nature had, with sovereign diligence,
Moulded her to so great an excellence
She seemed to say: "Behold now, I, Nature,
Thus can I form and paint a creature pure
When I desire. Who can it counterfeit?
Pygmalion? Nay, not though he forge and beat,
Or curve, or paint; and I dare say again,
Apelles, Zeuxis too, should work in vain,
Either to carve or paint, or forge or beat,
If they presumed my work to counterfeit.
For He Who is Creator Principal

Has made of me His Vicar General
To form and colour earthly creatures all,
Just as I like, for they're mine, great and small
Under the moon, the which may wax and wane;
And for my work I ask no payment vain;
My Lord and I are of one sole accord;
I made her in the worship of my Lord.
So do I other fair or foul creatures,
What colours though they have, or what figures."
It seems to me that Nature thus would say.
This maid was fourteen years of age, this may
In whom Dame Nature had so great delight.
For just as she can paint a lily white
Or redden rose, even with such a stroke
She did this creature by her art evoke
Ere she was born, painting her sweet limbs free
In such true colours as they'd come to be;
And Phoebus dyed her long hair with such gold
As have his burning streamers manifold.
But if right excellent was her beauty,
A thousand-fold more virtuous was she.
In her there lacked not one condition known

That's praiseworthy when by discretion shown.
As well in soul as body chaste was she;
For which she flowered in virginity
With all humility and abstinence,
And with all temperance and with patience,
And with a modest bearing and array.
Discreet in her replies she was alway;
Though she was wise as Pallas, and not vain,
Her speech was always womanly and plain,
No highfalutin pretty words had she
To ape deep knowledge; after her degree
She spoke, and all her words, greater and less,
Tended to virtue and to gentleness.
Modest she was, with maiden bashfulness,
Constant of heart, and full of busyness
To keep her from all idle sluggardry.
Bacchus had of her mouth no mastery;
For wine and youth help Venus to increase,
As when on fire is scattered oil or grease.
And of her virtue, free and unconstrained,
She had ofttimes some little illness feigned
In order to avoid a company

Which likely was to do some great folly,
As people do at revels and at dances,
Which are occasions when young folk take chances.
Such things but make young men and maidens be
Too ripe and bold, as everyone may see,
Which is right dangerous, as 'twas of yore.
For all too soon a virgin learns the lore
Of wantonness when she becomes a wife.
You governesses, who in older life
Have great lords' daughters in your governance,
Take from my words no foolish petulance;
Remember you've been set to governings
Of lords' daughters for but one of two things:
Either that you have kept your honesty,
Or else that you've succumbed to your frailty,
And having learned the measures of love's dance,
Have now forsaken such ways of mischance
For evermore; therefore, for Jesus' sake,
See that you teach them virtue, nor mistake.
A poacher of the deer, who has reformed,
Left wicked ways and been by goodness warmed,
Can guard a forest best of any man.

So guard them well, for if you will you can;
Look that to no vice do you give assent,
Lest you be damned for your so vile intent;
For who does thus is traitor, that's certain.
And take good care that I speak not in vain;
Of treacheries all, the sovereign pestilence
Is when adults betray young innocence.
You fathers and you mothers fond, also,
If you have children, be it one or two,
Yours is the burden of their wise guidance
The while they are within your governance.
Beware that not from your own lax living,
Or by your negligence in chastening
They fall and perish; for I dare well say,
If that should chance you'll dearly have to pay.
Under a shepherd soft and negligent
Full many a sheep and lamb by wolf is rent.
Suffice one instance, as I give it here,
For I must in my story persevere.
This maid, of whom I do this praise express,
Guarded herself, nor needed governess;
For in her daily life all maids might read,

As in a book, every good word or deed
That might become a maiden virtuous;
She was so prudent and so bounteous.
From all this grew the fame on every side
Of both her beauty and her goodness wide;
Throughout that land they praised her, every one
That virtue loved; and Envy stood alone,
That sorry is when others live in weal
And for their woe will ever gladness feel.
(Doctor Augustine's are these words, I own).
This maid, upon a day, went into town
Unto a temple, with her mother dear,
As the wont is of young maids everywhere.
Now there was then a justice in that town
Was governor of all the region known.
And so befell, this judge his two eyes cast
Upon this maid, noting her beauty fast,
As she went by the place wherein he stood.
Swiftly his heart was altered, and his mood,
He was so caught by beauty of the maid,
And to his own dark secret heart he said:
"She shall be mine in spite of any man!"

Anon the Fiend into his bosom ran
And taught him swiftly how, by treachery,
The maiden to his purpose might win he.
For truly not to bribery or force
Would it avail, he thought, to have recourse,
Since she had many friends, and was so good,
So strong in virtue, that he never could
By any subtle means her favour win
And make her give her body unto sin.
Therefore, and with great scheming up and down,
He sent to find a fellow of the town,
Which man, he knew, was cunning and was bold.
And unto this man, when the judge had told
His secret, then he made himself right sure
That it should come to ears of no creature,
For if it did the fellow'd lose his head.
And when assent to this crime had been said,
Glad was the judge, and then he made great cheer
And gave the fellow precious gifts and dear.
When plotted out was their conspiracy,
From point to point, how all his lechery
Should have its will, performing craftily,

As you shall hear it now told openly,
Home went the churl, whose name was Claudius.
This false judge, who was known as Appius
(Such was his name, for this is no fable,
But an historical event I tell,
At least the gist is true, beyond a doubt)-
This false judge goes now busily about
To hasten his delight in all he may.
And so befell soon after, on a day,
This false judge, as recounts the ancient story,
As he was wont, sat in his auditory
And gave his judgment upon every case.
Forthwith the wicked churl advanced a pace,
And said: "Your honour, if it be your will,
Then give me justice prayed for in this bill,
Of my complaint against Virginius.
And if he claim the matter stands not thus,
I will so prove, by many a good witness,
That truth is what my bill does here express."
The judge replied: "On this, in his absence,
I may not give definitive sentence.
Let him be called and I will gladly hear;

You shall have all your right, and no wrong, here."
Virginius came to learn the judge's will,
And then was read to him this wicked bill,
The substance of it being as you shall hear.
"To you, Judge Appius, may it so appear
That comes and says your servant Claudius,
How that a knight, by name Virginius,
Against the law, against all equity,
Holds, expressly against the will of me,
My servant who is slave to me by right,
Who from my house was stolen, on a night,
While yet she was but young; this will I prove,
My lord, by witness competent thereof.
She's not his child, whatever he may say;
Wherefore to you, my lord the judge, I pray,
Yield me my slave, if that it be your will."
Lo, this was all the substance of his bill.
Virginius' eyes the churl's began to hold,
But hastily, before his tale he'd told,
Ready to prove it, as befits a knight,
And by the evidence of many a wight,
That false was this charge of his adversary.

The wicked judge, he would no moment tarry,
Nor hear a word more from Virginius,
But gave his judgment then and there, as thus:
“I do decree in favour of the churl:
No longer shall you hold this servant girl.
Go bring her here and leave her as my ward.
This man shall have his slave, as my award.”
And when this noble knight Virginius,
By judgment of this Justice Appius,
Must now, perforce, his darling daughter give
Unto the judge, in lechery to live,
He did go home and sat down in his hall,
And gave command his daughter there to call;
And, with a face dead white and ashen cold,
Her modest mien his eyes did then behold,
With father’s pity striking through his heart,
Though from his purpose he would not depart.
“Daughter,” said he, “Virginia by your name,
There are two ways, for either death or shame
You now must suffer. Ah, that I was born!
For you have not deserved to be thus lorn,
To die by means of sword or any knife.

O my dear daughter, ender of my life,
Whom I have bred up with so deep pleasance
That you were never from my remembrance!
O daughter who are now my final woe,
Aye, and in life my final joy also,
O gem of chastity, in brave patience
Receive your death, for that is my sentence.
For love and not for hate you must be dead;
My pitying hand must strike your innocent head.
Alas! That ever Appius saw you! Nay,
Thus has he falsely judged of you today."-
And told her all the case, as you before
Have heard; there is no need to tell it more.
"O mercy, my dear father," said this maid,
And with that word both of her arms she laid
About his neck, as she was wont to do;
Then broke the bitter tears from her eyes two.
She said: "O my good father, must I die?
Is there no grace? Is there no remedy?"
"No, truly, darling daughter mine," said he.
"Then give me leisure, father mine," quoth she,
"But to lament my death a little space;

For even Jephtha gave his daughter grace
To weep a little ere he slew, alas!
And God knows that in naught did she trespass,
Save that she ran to be the first to see
And welcome him with greetings, merrily."
And with that word she fell into a swoon,
And after, when the faint was past and gone,
She rose up and unto her father said:
"Praise be to God that I shall die a maid.
Give me my death before I come to shame;
Do with your child your will, and in God's name!"
And then she prayed him, as he was expert,
He'd strike her swiftly, lest the blow should hurt,
Whereon again a-swooning down she fell.
Her father, with a heavy heart and will,
Struck off her head, and bore it by the hair
Straight to the judge and did present it there
While yet he sat on bench in auditory.
And when the judge saw this, so says the story,
He bade them take him out and swiftly hang.
But then a thousand people rose and sprang
To save the knight, for ruth and for pity,

For known was now the false iniquity.
The people had suspected some such thing,
By the churl's manner in his challenging,
That it was done to please this Appius;
They knew right well that he was lecherous.
Wherefore they ran this Appius upon
And cast him into prison cell anon,
Wherein he slew himself; and Claudius,
Who had been creature of this Appius,
Was sentenced to be hanged upon a tree;
But then Virginius, of his great pity,
So pleaded for him that he was exiled,
For, after all, the judge had him beguiled.
The rest were hanged, the greater and the less,
Who had been parties to this wickedness.
Here may men see how sin has its desert!
Beware, for no man knows whom God will hurt,
Nor how profoundly, no, nor in what wise
The hidden worm of conscience terrifies
The wicked soul, though secret its deeds be
And no one knows thereof but God and he.
For be he ignorant or learned, yet

He cannot know when fear will make him sweat
Therefore I counsel you, this counsel take:
Forsake your sin ere sin shall you forsake.

HERE ENDS THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE