

# Canterbury Tales

## Physician's tale

*Geoffrey Chaucer*

*fourteenth century Middle English verse*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose**

**by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This Canterbury tale has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

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# Physician's Tale

*Here folweth the Phisiciens Tale*

There was, as telleth Titus Livius, a knight that called was Virginius, fulfild of honour and of worthinesse, and strong of freendes and of greet richesse. This knight a doghter hadde by his wyf – There was once, as the Roman historian Livy tells us, a very worthy and honourable knight whose name was Virginius. He was rich and had many friends but only one child, a daughter, who was exceptionally beautiful. Nature had done a fine job on her, as though she had wished to say: ‘Look! I, Nature, can do this when I put my mind to it. I can fashion a creature as beautiful as this when I wish to. Who can equal my work? Not Pygmalion, that’s for sure! He might forge and hammer, sculpt and paint forever and still fall woefully short. Even Apelles and Zeuxis would be wasting their time if they tried to match my colouring and my skill. The Principal Creator has given me responsibility for performing his work, to form and fashion earthly creatures just as I like, and everything under the moon, which wanes and waxes, is in my care. I ask for nothing in return. My Lord and I are completely in accord and I have made this young lady in praise of him, as I do all my creatures.’ This is what I think Nature would have said.

This young maiden, whom Nature had obviously taken such a pride in creating, was fourteen years old; and just as Nature can colour a matchless white lily or a perfect red rose while it is still a tiny bud, so she must have formed this girl in her mother’s womb in exactly the right way. Phoebus had dyed her hair the colour of his glorious sunbeams, and if her beauty was remarkable, then her virtue was a thousand times more so, for her nature lacked nothing that was praiseworthy. She was as virginal in spirit as she was in body, the very flower of humility and abstinence, moderation and patience, and she had more than her fair share of poise and good dress sense as well. She was modest in her opinions, although she was as wise as Pallas I dare say, but her conversation was always eloquent, feminine and simple; she had no need for convoluted phrases to make her words sound important. She spoke with the sensible fluency of a fourteen year old girl, and her conversation brimmed over with courtesy and virtue.

*Like the tales from the knight and the franklin, this one from the physician places a high sense of right and wrong in an ancient, pagan setting, in this case the classical Roman world. A despicable and lecherous judge contrives that the teenage daughter of a knight should be made available to him to assault and rape. A fraudulent accusation is manufactured, an accomplice given his lines to say, but rather than suffer this dishonour, the girl refuses to submit to immorality and courageously allows her father to cut off her head with a sword. Her head is presented to the court in compliance with the judge’s order that she be handed over, the people rise up and the true villains, the judge and his perjuring accomplice, are harshly dealt with; although even now with a plea for compassion from the girl’s father towards one of those involved.*

*This tale from the physician follows the tale from the franklin in the Ellesmere MS, the canon’s yeoman in the Harley MS and the nuns’ priest in Walter Skeat’s ordering of the Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.*

She was coy and modest like other girls of her age but not prone to tantrums in any way, always good-humoured, busy and eager never to give the impression that she was not gainfully occupied. Bacchus had not taken control of her mouth, for wine and youth make for a volatile combination, often to Venus's delight – it's like throwing oil onto a fire! – and often, of her own volition and without any prompting, she would pretend to be ill if any wild party or festival might otherwise prove difficult for her to refuse to attend. Such wine-lubricated and amorous liaisons cause the young to grow up too quickly, which is a dangerous thing, now, as it was then. There is plenty of time for this young lady to learn about adult ways, when she is a wife.



You governesses, given the responsibility of educating the daughters of the nobility, don't take offence but be aware that you've been employed for one of two reasons: either you are old maids, or you are frail and decrepit, although you knew the old dance once, but have said goodbye to that way of life forever. So, for Christ's sake, make sure that you spare no effort to instill virtue into your wards. A former poacher who has renounced all his previous wrongdoing can look after a forest better than anyone else alive – so keep these young ladies well. If you have a mind to, you can, and make sure that you don't allow them to fall prey to any of the vices, for you will be damned as traitors if you do. The most egregious treason takes place when the damaging of the innocent is involved.

And all you fathers and mothers, know that if you have children, then the full responsibility for them lies with you. Make sure that they don't perish because you have set them a bad example or let them get away with too much unpunished; although you will certainly pay for it in the long run, I dare say. The wolf has ripped to pieces many a lamb because of a weak and negligent shepherd. But enough. I shall continue with the story.

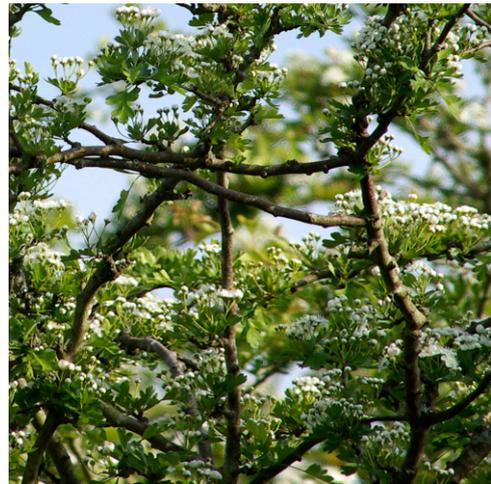
This young lady, whom my tale is about, was so virtuous that she needed no governess to look after her, and in fact she was a model to all the other young ladies around her, a walking exemplar, a paragon of generosity and prudence. Word of this girl's beauty and goodness began to spread until the whole land knew of it and rejoiced in it, except in one place where envy had been allowed to fester untreated, which despises any good and rejoices in sorrow and grief. (This is the physician's diagnosis.)

One day, this maiden went into the town with her mother to visit a temple, as was the custom in those days. Now it happened that in this town there was a magistrate who was the governor of the region. This judge caught sight of the young lady as she walked past him and his heart stood still. He thought that she was so beautiful that he whispered quietly to himself: 'This maiden shall be mine, whatever any other man may say.' At once, the devil entered his heart and convinced him that there were devious ways in which he could bring this about and have the girl to himself. Certainly, he knew that no

money would obtain her, and he could not take her by force, she had many friends, and she was so confirmed in goodness and virtue that he would never be able to persuade her willingly to have sex with him. So having reflected upon all this, he sent for a rough fellow, who was known to be cunning and to have no scruples, and told him how matters stood, in confidence, and added that if he breathed a word about it to anybody he would have his head cut off. When this had been understood and agreed to, the judge was delighted, made a fuss of the man and gave him some expensive gifts.

When all their plans had been made, this ruffian, whose name was Claudius, went home and this dishonourable judge Apius – for that was his name, Apius, and this is no fiction but historical fact, a notoriously true story – but this despicable judge Apius swiftly made all the necessary arrangements to bring about a successful conclusion to this conspiracy, that through dishonesty and by a subtle ploy he would be able to force himself upon this girl.

Not long afterwards, as the story tells us, Apius sat in his court of law, as was his habit, dispensing justice as he saw fit, when this hateful ruffian Claudius came running in shouting: ‘Lord, if it pleases you, give me justice in a claim that I make upon Virginius; and if he denies it, I can prove that it is true, for I have witnesses who will back me up.’



‘In Virginius’s absence I cannot give a definitive judgement,’ replied Apius. ‘Call him, and I will gladly hear the case. Justice, I can assure you, will be done.’

Virginius was called for and arrived to hear what the judge had to say. Straight away he was read this cursed indictment, whose contents were as follows: ‘My dear lord Apius, I, your humble servant Claudius, bring to your attention that a knight named Virginius, against all law and fair-dealing, holds, against my wishes, my servant, who is my menial by right and who was stolen from me when she was a young girl. This I can prove by witnesses, to your full satisfaction. She is not his daughter, however much he may swear that she is. Therefore I ask you, lord, to restore to me my servant, if this should be pleasing to you.’

Lo! That was their plan!

Virginius looked sternly at the ruffian and considered his reply; but before he could properly fashion incontrovertible arguments in his defence and summon the numerous witnesses that as a knight he would certainly be able to, to testify on his behalf that what this man was saying was a complete pack of lies, this cursed judge insisted upon bringing the whole case to a swift conclusion.

‘I order that this man shall have his servant back,’ he said promptly. ‘Virginius, you cannot keep her in your house any more. Go and fetch her and bring her into my custody.’

This man shall have back what is his. This is my judgement.'

When this worthy knight Virginius realised that he had no other choice but to hand his dear daughter over to this judge, and guessed what probably lay behind it, he went home and sat in his hall, then called his daughter to him and, with a face as pale as ashes, looked lovingly into her gentle eyes with a father's pity. What he knew that he must do was tearing his heart in two. But he was resolute in what he had decided.

'Virginia, my daughter,' he said. 'You have two choices before you: death or shame. Alas, that I was born! Oh my dear daughter, I have found you such a delight to bring up; you have never been out of my thoughts and my life shall end with yours. Oh daughter, the time spent with you has been my last pleasure in life and now my final sorrow, but you must take your death calmly, for it must be this way. You must die – out of love, not out of hate. My trembling hand must cut off your head. Alas, why did Apius ever set eyes upon you! You do not deserve to die with a sword or with a knife, but this is the reality of the judgement he has made today.' Then he told her everything that had happened, there is no need to go over it all again.



'Oh mercy, dear father,' Virginia cried when her father had finished speaking, and laid both her arms around his neck, as she often did. Then she exploded into tears.

'Oh good father, must I die? Is there no other way? Have I no other choice?'

'There is none, my dear daughter.'

'Then give me a little while to prepare myself, and to make my complaint. Jephthah allowed his daughter time before he killed her, alas, and God knows, she had done nothing wrong except to be the first to run to her father in welcome!'

Then she passed out.

When she had recovered, she said: 'May God be praised that I shall die a maid. Kill me, before I am forced to suffer shame. Do what you wish with your child, in God's name.' But she begged her father to cut gently with the sword, and then she fainted again. Her father, with tears streaming down his face, cut off her head and held it by the hair. He took it like this to the judge, who was still sitting in his law court, listening to petitions. When the judge saw the head, as the story tells, he ordered at once that Virginius be seized and taken away to be hanged. But immediately, a thousand people converged upon the Court of Justice to save this knight, out of pity and out of respect, for the dishonesty of these allegations had by now become widely known; in fact many people had had their suspicions from the start, from the way the ruffian had suddenly appeared, and had guessed that the whole thing was a fraud dreamed up by the judge himself, whom they knew to be a lascivious bastard.

The people seized Apius instead and threw him into prison, where he committed suicide. Claudius, Apius's accomplice, was condemned to be hanged upon a tree, but Virginius, out of compassion, persuaded them to commute his sentence to permanent exile. If he hadn't intervened the man would certainly have been executed. Everybody else who had had a hand in the affair was hanged.

See how sin earns its rewards? Beware, for nobody has any idea whom God will choose to strike, nor how the worm of conscience may finally torment a wicked life, however private the misdeeds might have been, even if no one else knows about them except for God. For whether a man is educated or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he can have no idea what horrors lie around the corner. Therefore, I advise you, take heed of this counsel: put an end to sin, before sin puts an end to you!

*The wordes of the Host to the Phisicien and the Pardoner*

**O**ur Hoste gan to swere as he were wood, 'Harrow!' quod he, 'by nayles and by blood! This was a fals churl and a fals justyse – Our host began to swear very excitedly: 'God save us! By nails and by blood! This was a dishonourable churl and a despicable judge. May death come to these dishonest judges and their evil associates, as shameful a death as can be devised!

'This poor, innocent maiden is dead, alas! She paid too much for her beauty. Every day one can see examples of how a gift of nature or good fortune can bring disaster in its wake. Gifts of nature and fortune can just as readily bring trouble as they can profit. In her case, it was beauty that was her downfall. But what a pitiful end! Truly, this was a heart-rending tale, my good sir. Nonetheless, we must let it go. It's finished.

'But may God preserve you, my dear man, and all your urinals and your bed pans, your medicines and your infusions and every boxful of your potions; God bless them, every one, and may the Lady Mary bless them as well. You are a fine man, so may I prosper! By Saint Ronan, you are like a cardinal! Am I not right? I have no erudite phrases enough but I can say that, in all honesty, you have made my heart ache so much that I imagine I must almost have suffered a coronary occlusion, by the bones of the blessed body of Christ! If I don't take a remedy at once, or at least a draught of some fine ale, and hear a merry tale very quickly, my heart will stop beating out of sympathy for this poor young maid.

'You, good friend, you pardoner,' he cried. 'Tell us a funny story or a joke or something, for goodness sake!'

'It shall be done, by Saint Ronan,' replied the pardoner. 'But first, let's stop here at this alehouse, for I need to have a drink and a piece of cake first.'

'No!' everybody exclaimed. 'We don't want to hear a dirty story from an alehouse. Tell us something uplifting, some moral tale that we can all learn from, then we will gladly listen to you.'

‘Alright,’ said the Pardoner. ‘But I shall have to think about what I will say to you while I sip a beer.’