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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE DOCTOR'S TALE

THE PROLOGUE. <1>

["YEA, let that passe," quoth our Host, "as now.
Sir Doctor of Physik, I praye you,
Tell us a tale of some honest mattere."
"It shall be done, if that ye will it hear,"
Said this Doctor; and his tale gan anon.
"Now, good men," quoth he, "hearken everyone."]

Notes to the Prologue to the Doctor's Tale

1. The authenticity of the prologue is questionable. It is found in one manuscript only; other manuscripts give other prologues, more plainly not Chaucer's than this; and some manuscripts have merely a colophon to the effect that "Here endeth the Franklin's Tale and beginneth the Physician's Tale without a prologue." The Tale itself is the well-known story of Virginia, with several departures from the text of Livy. Chaucer probably followed the "Romance of the Rose" and Gower's "Confessio Amantis," in both of which the story is found.

THE TALE.

There was, as telleth Titus Livius, <1>
A knight, that called was Virginius,
Full filled of honour and worthiness,
And strong of friendes, and of great richess.
This knight one daughter hadde by his wife;
No children had he more in all his life.
Fair was this maid in excellent beauty
Aboven ev'ry wight that man may see:
For nature had with sov'reign diligence
Y-formed her in so great excellence,
As though she woulde say, "Lo, I, Nature,
Thus can I form and paint a creature,
When that me list; who can me counterfeit?
Pygmalion? not though he aye forge and beat,
Or grave or painte: for I dare well sayn,
Apelles, Zeuxis, shoulde work in vain,
Either to grave, or paint, or forge, or beat,
If they presumed me to counterfeit.
For he that is the former principal,
Hath made me his vicar-general
To form and painten earthly creatures
Right as me list, and all thing in my cure* is, *care

Under the moone, that may wane and wax.
And for my work right nothing will I ax* *ask
My lord and I be full of one accord.
I made her to the worship* of my lord;
So do I all mine other creatures,
What colour that they have, or what figures."
Thus seemeth me that Nature woulde say.
This maiden was of age twelve year and tway,* *two
In which that Nature hadde such delight.
For right as she can paint a lily white,
And red a rose, right with such painture
She painted had this noble creature,
Ere she was born, upon her limbes free,
Where as by right such colours shoulde be:
And Phoebus dyed had her tresses great,
Like to the streames* of his burned heat. *beams, rays
And if that excellent was her beauty,
A thousand-fold more virtuous was she.
In her there lacked no condition,
That is to praise, as by discretion.
As well in ghost* as body chaste was she: *mind, spirit
For which she flower'd in virginity,
With all humility and abstinence,
With alle temperance and patience,
With measure* eke of bearing and array. *moderation
Discreet she was in answering alway,
Though she were wise as Pallas, dare I sayn;
Her faconde* eke full womanly and plain, *speech <2>
No counterfeited termes hadde she
To seeme wise; but after her degree
She spake, and all her worde's more and less
Sounding in virtue and in gentleness.
Shamefast she was in maiden's shamefastness,
Constant in heart, and ever *in business* *diligent, eager*
To drive her out of idle sluggardy:
Bacchus had of her mouth right no mast'ry.
For wine and slothe <3> do Venus increase,
As men in fire will casten oil and grease.
And of her owen virtue, unconstrain'd,
She had herself full often sick y-feign'd,
For that she woulde 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 thinges make children for to be
Too soone ripe and bold, as men may see,
Which is full perilous, and hath been yore;* *of old
For all too soone may she learne lore
Of boldeness, when that she is a wife.
And ye mistresses,* in your olde life *governesses, duennas
That lordes' daughters have in governance,
Take not of my wordes displeasance
Thinke that ye be set in governings
Of lordes' daughters only for two things;
Either for ye have kept your honesty,
Or else for ye have fallen in frailty
And knowe well enough the olde dance,
And have forsaken fully such meschance* *wickedness <4>
For evermore; therefore, for Christe's sake,
To teach them virtue look that ye not slake.* *be slack, fail
A thief of venison, that hath forlaft* *forsaken, left
His lik'rousness,* and all his olde craft, *gluttony
Can keep a forest best of any man;
Now keep them well, for if ye will ye can.
Look well, that ye unto no vice assent,
Lest ye be damned for your wick'* intent, *wicked, evil
For whoso doth, a traitor is certain;
And take keep* of that I shall you sayn; *heed
Of alle treason, sov'reign pestilence
Is when a wight betrayeth innocence.
Ye fathers, and ye mothers eke also,
Though ye have children, be it one or mo',
Yours is the charge of all their surveyance,* *supervision
While that they be under your governance.
Beware, that by example of your living,
Or by your negligence in chastising,
That they not perish for I dare well say,
If that they do, ye shall it dear abeye.* *pay for, suffer for
Under a shepherd soft and negligent
The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb to-rent.
Suffice this example now as here,
For I must turn again to my mattere.
This maid, of which I tell my tale express,
She kept herself, her needed no mistress;
For in her living maidens mighte read,
As in a book, ev'ry good word and deed
That longeth to a maiden virtuous;
She was so prudent and so bounteous.

For which the fame out sprang on every side
Both of her beauty and her bounte* wide: *goodness
That through the land they praised her each one
That loved virtue, save envy alone,
That sorry is of other manne's weal,
And glad is of his sorrow and unheal* — *misfortune
The Doctor maketh this descriptioun. — <5>
This maiden on a day went in the town
Toward a temple, with her mother dear,
As is of younge maidens the mannere.
Now was there then a justice in that town,
That governor was of that regioun:
And so befell, this judge his eyen cast
Upon this maid, avising* her full fast, *observing
As she came forth by where this judge stood;
Anon his hearte changed and his mood,
So was he caught with beauty of this maid
And to himself full privily he said,
"This maiden shall be mine *for any man."* *despite what any
Anon the fiend into his hearte ran, man may do*
And taught him suddenly, that he by sleight
This maiden to his purpose winne might.
For certes, by no force, nor by no meed,* *bribe, reward
Him thought he was not able for to speed;
For she was strong of friendes, and eke she
Confirmed was in such sov'reign bounte,
That well he wist he might her never win,
As for to make her with her body sin.
For which, with great deliberatioun,
He sent after a clerk <6> was in the town,
The which he knew for subtle and for bold.
This judge unto this clerk his tale told
In secret wise, and made him to assure
He shoulde tell it to no creature,
And if he did, he shoulde lose his head.
And when assented was this cursed rede,* *counsel, plot
Glad was the judge, and made him greate cheer,
And gave him giftes precious and dear.
When shapen* was all their conspiracy *arranged
From point to point, how that his lechery
Performed shoulde be full subtilly,
As ye shall hear it after openly,
Home went this clerk, that highte Claudius.
This false judge, that highte Appius, —

(So was his name, for it is no fable,
But knowen for a storial* thing notable; *historical, authentic
The sentence* of it sooth** is out of doubt); — *account **true
This false judge went now fast about
To hasten his delight all that he may.
And so befell, soon after on a day,
This false judge, as telleth us the story,
As he was wont, sat in his consistory,
And gave his doomes* upon sundry case'; *judgments
This false clerk came forth *a full great pace,* *in haste
And saide; Lord, if that it be your will,
As do me right upon this piteous bill,* *petition
In which I plain upon Virginius.
And if that he will say it is not thus,
I will it prove, and finde good witness,
That sooth is what my bille will express."
The judge answer'd, "Of this, in his absence,
I may not give definitive sentence.
Let do* him call, and I will gladly hear; *cause
Thou shalt have alle right, and no wrong here."
Virginius came to weet* the judge's will, *know, learn
And right anon was read this cursed bill;
The sentence of it was as ye shall hear
"To you, my lord, Sir Appius so clear,
Sheweth your poore servant Claudius,
How that a knight called Virginius,
Against the law, against all equity,
Holdeth, express against the will of me,
My servant, which that is my thrall* by right, *slave
Which from my 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;* *be not displeasing*
She is his daughter not, what so he say.
Wherefore to you, my lord the judge, I pray,
Yield me my thrall, if that it be your will."
Lo, this was all the sentence of the bill.
Virginius gan upon the clerk behold;
But hastily, ere he his tale told,
And would have proved it, as should a knight,
And eke by witnessing of many a wight,
That all was false that said his adversary,
This cursed judge would no longer tarry,
Nor hear a word more of Virginius,
But gave his judgement, and saide thus:

"I deem* anon this clerk his servant have; *pronounce, determine
Thou shalt no longer in thy house her save.
Go, bring her forth, and put her in our ward
The clerk shall have his thrall: thus I award."
And when this worthy knight, Virginius,
Through sentence of this justice Appius,
Muste by force his deare daughter give
Unto the judge, in lechery to live,
He went him home, and sat him in his hall,
And let anon his deare daughter call;
And with a face dead as ashes cold
Upon her humble face he gan behold,
With father's pity sticking* through his heart, *piercing
All* would he from his purpose not convert.** *although **turn aside
"Daughter," quoth he, "Virginia by name,
There be two wayes, either death or shame,
That thou must suffer, — alas that I was bore!* *born
For never thou deservedest wherefore
To dien with a sword or with a knife,
O deare daughter, ender of my life,
Whom I have foster'd up with such pleasance
That thou were ne'er out of my remembrance;
O daughter, which that art my laste woe,
And in this 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 say!* *saw
Thus hath he falsely judged thee to-day."
And told her all the case, as ye before
Have heard; it needeth not to tell it more.
"O mercy, deare father," quoth the maid.
And with that word she both her armes laid
About his neck, as she was wont to do,
(The teares burst out of her eyen two),
And said, "O goode father, shall I die?
Is there no grace? is there no remedy?"
"No, certes, deare daughter mine," quoth he.
"Then give me leisure, father mine, quoth she,
"My death for to complain* a little space *bewail
For, pardie, Jephthah gave his daughter grace
For to complain, ere he her slew, alas! <7>
And, God it wot, nothing was her trespass,* *offence

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 y-gone,
She rose up, and unto her father said:
"Blessed be God, that I shall die a maid.
Give me my death, ere that I have shame;
Do with your child your will, in Godde's name."
And with that word she prayed him full oft
That with his sword he woulde smite her soft;
And with that word, a-swoon again she fell.
Her father, with full sorrowful heart and fell,* *stern, cruel
Her head off smote, and by the top it hent,* *took
And to the judge he went it to present,
As he sat yet in doom* in consistory. *judgment
And when the judge it saw, as saith the story,
He bade to take him, and to hang him fast.
But right anon a thousand people *in thrast* *rushed in*
To save the knight, for ruth and for pity
For knowen was the false iniquity.
The people anon had suspect* in this thing, *suspicion
By manner of the clerke's challenging,
That it was by th'assent of Appius;
They wiste well that he was lecherous.
For which unto this Appius they gon,
And cast him in a prison right anon,
Where as he slew himself: and Claudius,
That servant was unto this Appius,
Was doomed for to hang upon a tree;
But that Virginius, of his pity,
So prayed for him, that he was exil'd;
And elles certes had he been beguil'd;* *see note <8>
The remenant were hanged, more and less,
That were consenting to this cursedness.* *villainy
Here men may see how sin hath his merite:* *deserts
Beware, for no man knows how God will smite
In no degree, nor in which manner wise
The worm of conscience may agrise* frighten, horrify
Of wicked life, though it so privy be,
That no man knows thereof, save God and he;
For be he lewed* man or elles lear'd,** *ignorant **learned
He knows not how soon he shall be afear'd;
Therefore I rede* you this counsel take, *advise
Forsake sin, ere sinne you forsake.

Notes to the Doctor's Tale

1. Livy, Book iii. cap. 44, et seqq.
2. Faconde: utterance, speech; from Latin, "facundia," eloquence.
3. Slothe: other readings are "thought" and "youth."
4. Meschance: wickedness; French, "mechancete."
5. This line seems to be a kind of aside thrown in by Chaucer himself.
6. The various readings of this word are "churl," or "cherl," in the best manuscripts; "client" in the common editions, and "clerk" supported by two important manuscripts. "Client" would perhaps be the best reading, if it were not awkward for the metre; but between "churl" and ''clerk" there can be little doubt that Mr Wright chose wisely when he preferred the second.
7. Judges xi. 37, 38. "And she said unto her father, Let . . . me alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows. And he said, go."
8. Beguiled: "cast into gaol," according to Urry's explanation; though we should probably understand that, if Claudius had not been sent out of the country, his death would have been secretly contrived through private detestation.